Summary

With the help of Dirk, Dave escapes Bro by getting into a college way the fuck away from Texas, but they both know that won't be the end of it.

Dave has some baggage, but misery loves company and Sollux is a disaster. A disaster deep in rivalmance with the reigning hot mess herself, Roxy Lalonde.
Better Late Than Never

Your name is DAVE STRIDER and you are about to hock your turntables.

It's taking every ounce of self-control you possess to keep your cool and not haul ass out of this pawn shop. The clerk is giving your sweet setup the once over and making skeptical old man thinking sounds as he does it. As if your gear is anything but choice. You came to this shop specifically because of its reputation for moving audio and audio related things. You're more likely to squeeze a few extra bucks out of the guy if he can turn over your stuff quickly. He finally looks back up at you, trying to meet your gaze behind your shades. "500," he says flat and definitive. You bite back the urge to flip off the handle and instead respond back just as flatly. "These are pro grade, brand name, and nowhere near out of date. They aren't hot either." The old man's mustache jostles back and forth as he mutters to himself. "This is a pawn shop kid, ya ain't gettin top dollar." You press your mouth into a thin line and bob your head as you think and look at the stuff around you. Even if it is a pawn shop, he's still trying to rip you off in hopes that you're desperate enough to bite. You're eyes catch a digital setup that is one hell of a step down from what you have, but not the bottom of the barrel. "Throw in that and I'll take the 500." Keep it cool, Strider, you're not desperate, just cleaning house. Just keeping it real. Keep it together. You've got this. Your internal monolog is thankfully interrupted from its endless loop by the clerk abruptly jutting out his hand to seal the deal and you swear the sudden movement knocks 3 years off your life.

The second you get back to the apartment you begin frantically packing up your shit. Bro landed some big out of state gig which has made this plan HELLA easier, but still INCREDIBLY nerve-wracking. You suspect Dirk may have had a hand in securing that gig for Bro, but you can't be certain because you haven't been able to truly have a conversation with the guy in years. Since Bro kicked him out, the two of you have had to primarily communicate by passing notes through mutual friends over secure connections.

Your began hatching this plan about two years ago, which feels insane now that the day has finally come. By some miracle your community college credits transferred and you got off the waitlist for a university far away from Houston, but more importantly, far away from Bro. You're going to be a week late getting there, but that's fine by you if it means a better chance of not getting caught leaving. Maybe it's just paranoia-- which isn't in short supply, that's for sure, but it feels like Bro has been kicking your ass harder lately almost like he knows something is up. Your last strife before he took off was all hells of brutal. You don't want to think about what he would do if he caught you acting like such a coward. Your body aches with protest as you continue shoving clothes indiscriminately into one of those drawstring backpacks that seem to be bottomless and going over your mental checklist.

You have your new shitty turntables and audio gear nestled in with your camera stuff and your laptop in a duffle bag. It was a bitch to get that in a box all together like that, but you know you'll thank yourself later when it's easier to carry. Your records, however, are packed up tight in a separate box. Like hell are you leaving them behind. So that's it. Two boxes. Aside from your clothes, everything you value most fits in two boxes. Those are shipping out after you. Dirk pulled some strings with a friend of his. He didn't trust shipping your stuff to his apartment or the school, so instead you're sending them to an electronics shop nearby, Zahhak's or something like that.

Your phone buzzes. The uber to get you out of this place is here. You glance around the room one last time to make sure you aren't forgetting anything. You can't believe this is actually happening. The knock at the door makes you jump, and for a split second, you think it's Bro before remembering
that 1. Bro wouldn't knock, and 2. you're paying the driver a little extra under the table to help you carry down this stuff. In addition to that last strife, you and the stairs became very well acquainted recently and you are still very much feeling it. When you answer the door you find out your driver is a Troll and a psionic if you're not mistaken. You are no expert on their whole blood superpowers deal but, yeah no that's telekinesis happening to your stuff right there. No wonder she was so willing to agree to haul your stuff.

You drop your shit off at UPS before embarking on the world's least comfortable bus ride. Even hours into it your nerves are still wracked and you're too on edge to sleep. No one would ever guess though. You've got that expressionless cool kid thing on lock. Set it to autopilot and watch it go. You've got this. totally. 100%. Making it happen.

Your name is SOLLUX CAPTOR and you are in the zone with this project, but this is the second time you've picked up this coffee cup only to be met with disappointment.

You look at your computer screen, then back to your empty coffee cup, and then to the door of your dorm room. With a sigh, you remove yourself from your chair. When you stand up your back cracks in three places and it is amazing. You glance at the clock and realize you've worked straight through very late and right into very early. Eh, doesn't matter; time is irrelevant. Plus now you can go to the cafeteria instead of the cafe, which means less of a distance for you to walk and less time away from your project. You hadn't really been feeling it when it was first assigned, but it had grown on you when you realized you could repurpose one of your abandoned projects for it. You have a DISGUSTING amount of ABANDONED projects. It's almost on par with the backlog of games in your Steam library.

Your best friend's dorm is across the hall from you. Well, sort of. Your dorm has a DOUBLE HALLWAY because your life is plagued with duality, not that you particularly mind that. The building has dorm rooms on either outer side, and down the center at either end are staircases, with the elevator in the middle next to the RA's room. You're fairly certain this would violate a fire code if not for the recently added, yet still somehow shitty fire escape that runs down the short side of the building. The last rooms on either side of the horseshoe can see each other's doors. Karkat's is directly across and presently there is someone with a large duffle bag at his door.

"Come on, open up. I know you're in there. No one wakes up this early on a Saturday." A red zip hoodie that looks more expensive than need be, black jeans that somehow scrunch perfectly at the bottom to show off red hi-top sneakers, and Black aviator shades while indoors. He looks like a douche. Then again, no one would describe you as fashionable.

"He's not there," you say. The guy groans and leans back against the door. You narrow your eyes at him. Now that he's facing you, you think you've seen him before. "You're Karkat's roommate, right? You showed up like a week late or something" He looks up at you with a blank expression before raising an eyebrow and flashing you a charming smile.

"Yeah, Dave Strider, the pleasure's all yours I'm sure." You were right the first time, he's a douchebag. The most obnoxious ringtone goes off and he takes out his phone, his face going back to the aloof steeled expression as he reads a text message. "Hey, that's your dorm right?" he asked, gesturing with his chin at the door behind you. Before you can answer, he continues. "Could I maybe leave my shit in your room for a bit? I'm locked out and I've gotta uhh... be someplace like five minutes ago." He flashes you that fake charming grin again. What could it hurt? If he's Karkat's roommate then you're definitely going to know him better eventually. Better to let it be a surprise that you're an ass. It's more entertaining that way.
"Yeah, sure, whatever." You say with a shrug and reopen your door for him. He picks up the bag and hurries over.

"Sweet, I'll be back in a few hours. You gonna be around?" Wow, how extraordinarily specific. He's lucky you're a shut-in.

"I'm not going anywhere." He gives you a nod and says he owes you one as he disappears down the stairs, literally. The guy is fucking quick. You could swear you only saw his after image.

You relock your door and continue down the stairs on your quest for caffeine. In the entrance lobby, you spy Roxy sitting behind the check-in desk. She looks like she's still wearing last night's clothes and definitely wearing last night's eyeliner. Her hot pink laptop is in front of her and she's glaring at the screen like it has personally insulted her. You leave her too it, but on the way back, with your coffee now secured, you wander around to the other side to look over her shoulder.

"Your code is spaghetti" You comment as you watch her scroll through it presumably trying to hunt down a missing bracket. She has a particular glare reserved exclusively for that.

"Sure is a weird way to pronounce 'complex'." She grumbles back. You see the errant bracket before she does and gently swat away her hand so you can add it in. She makes a sound of offense as she looks up and back at you. "You little shit."

A smug grin is plastered on your face and is doing little to save you from her wrath. Luckily you brought a peace offering. You reveal the second cup of coffee just as she's about to go off on you, and watch as her mouth slowly closes into something resembling a pout and her eyes narrow at you.

"Three sugars?"

"Unfortunately, yes." You are a two sugars kind of guy to no one's surprise. Her expression softens as she snatches up the cup and takes a long sip.

"I'll let you live this time, Captor."

"ehheheheh."

She flips you off as you leave.

It is several hours later, not that you noticed, when you just barely hear a knock at your door through your headphones. It's not so much of a knock as it is a rhythmic beat. After nearly clotheslining yourself with the cable of your headphones, you make your way over to the door and open it to find Strider leaning against the frame. "Sup." He says with a tilt of his chin. You wordlessly step aside and open the door for him so he can get his shit and get out. You're almost offended when he unzips the bag to check that it's all still there.

"I didn't jack any of your shit," although now you're curious about what exactly his shit is if it's so worth being jacked. "What's in there that's so important that you'd think I'd steal it?" Or maybe it's not expensive; maybe it's illegal. You peer over his shoulder trying to get a look. "If it's drugs, sharing is caring." This earns you the most unemotive laugh you've ever heard in your life, the pinnacle of aloof cool kid sounds of mild amusement. Another tally on the douche counter.

"Chill, man," he says "It's electronics." Oh, well now that is something worth checking. Seeing your interest piqued, he turns to the side to show you what looks like some kind of audio equipment jumbled in with some other stuff and a laptop. Not in a case or anything, just a laptop tossed in a bag full of equal or more breakable objects.
"Jeez, who taught you how to transport your gear."

"I was in a rush," he says with a shrug. Your palm husk vibrates and you look to see that Karkat is messaging you.

carcinoGeneticist [CG] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

CG: I WOULD LIKE TO REDEEM A SOLID

This does not bode well for you.

TA: ye2?

CG: APPARENTLY MY DUMBASS OF A ROOMMATE HAS LOCKED HIMSELF OUT AFTER BEING HERE FOR A GRAND TOTAL OF 2 DAYS AND I'M NOT GOING TO BE BACK UNTIL SUNDAY AFTERNOON. SEEING AS YOU LACK A ROOMMATE, CAN SHIT FOR BRAINS CRASH IN YOUR ROOM UNTIL I GET BACK TOMORROW?

CG: I PROMISE HE ISN'T A SERIAL KILLER

You look up from your palm husk at Dave who is staring back at you expectantly as if he knows Karkat is messaging you. You don't normally just let people occupy your space, especially people who are practically strangers. And while Karkat is vouching for him, he doesn't know this guy too well either. And yet, something seems to sway you, although you can't quite place it.

TA: you owe me

CG: WHAT? NO! THIS IS A SOLID REDEMPTION. I HAVE A VOUCHER FOR ONE (1) SOLID FROM SOLLUX "GOT HIS POPTARTS STUCK IN THE VENDING MACHINE" CAPTOR. IT'S SIGNED AND NOTARIZED.

TA: thii2 ii2 clearly worth at lea2t two 2oliid2 leaviing you at -1 2oliid2

TA: you owe me a 2oliid

CG: FINE. WHATEVER.

You tuck your palm husk back in your pocket and glance back at Dave. "You owe me a solid," might as well make it a two for one deal. "The top bunk is mine. You can crash on the bottom one." You mostly use that one as a seating area. The idea of people sitting or lounging around on your bed is uncomfortable. It's not a thing you let people do. That is your sanctuary and yours alone. Although for some reason you could not give less of a fuck when it's the other way around, and in fact have been known to walk into Karkat's room like you own the joint and make yourself at home on his bed.

Dave flashes you a grin. "Sweet deal." He looks like he's about to continue or elaborate, but as he goes to stand up he's cut off by a hiss of pain and grabs his side, causing him to nearly drop his laptop. The sudden shift in the room's atmosphere catches you off your guard.

"You alright?" It is truly the most brilliant thing you've ever said. A shining monument to your social prowess and you just sort of stand there unsure how to respond to having a stranger collapse on your floor. Well, not collapse so much as fail miserably at becoming upright.

"Yeah, I'm cool. So cool. Cooler than a polar bear throwing back only the highest of high fructose soda. None of that RC cola. Name brand." Dave says from his position half crouched on the floor.
His voice is slightly strained as if he's trying not to take too deep of a breath. "Just moved wrong. I'm good." It doesn't take someone as smart as you to realize he's lying through his teeth.

"You must make a lot of money selling such high-quality bullshit." You deadpan back at him out of habit and instantly regret. It makes him laugh which only has him holding his side a little tighter. You feel a bit bad about it. With a sigh, you offer him your hand and after a moment of staring at it, he finally takes it and lets you pull him to his feet. The way he crashes into your shoulder and steadies himself with his hand on your arm does an awful thing to your stomach that you choose to ignore. "Your ribs are busted, huh?" You only half ask. Mituna had managed that twice. Once on concrete and another time on asphalt. He was a lot louder about it than Dave is being though, so maybe not.

"Nah, hella bruised, but not broken," he says as he carefully takes a seat on the bed.

You nod, unsure of where to take this fascinatingly awkward conversation. "Cool, so..." you start as you make your way back to your desk. You really need to get a new chair. There is no way to sit in this one that resembles comfortable. You settle for sitting sideways slouched halfway against the armrest and the back with one leg hanging over the opposite armrest and the other tucked beneath it. Your spine hates you. "Yeah, I'm just gonna continue working on this. You can do whatever, just don't touch my bees." You say as you slip on your headphones and prepare to get back into the zone.

Bringing your standard beehouses to the dorm is not allowed, of course, you wouldn't want to anyway, but you do have a small form factor beehouse jammed in one of the windows. It hasn't quite gotten cold enough yet that you need to bring it completely inside, so, for now, you're letting your bees roam as they please.

You've only been at it for a few minutes when you sense Dave standing close behind you. Music paused, you slowly look up and back at him. "Can I help you?" He seems completely oblivious to your mildly annoyed tone.

"Nah, just checking out your mad matrix skills." Oh boy, here we go. "My bro does some of that crazy computer stuff. My cousin too. It's all fucking magic to me, but it looks cool."

You roll your eyes. "I would have never guessed," you say with a small huff. "If they don't hate each other, I'm gonna take a stab in the dark and say that they don't do the same 'computer stuff.'" He gives a shrug and wanders back over to the bed where his laptop is open. You look back at your screen and the wall of text on it. Your groove is gone. The zone is closed. It's down for maintenance, check back later. You sigh, save your work, and close your windows. "You smash bros?" you ask in a somewhat defeated tone having resigned to being social tonight. He looks up from his computer and puts a hand to his chest.

"I'm flattered, Skinny. Really I am, but-"

"Oh my god, no, you complete fucknut. Super Smash Bros. Do you play it?" The subtle smirk on his face tells you he knew exactly what you meant. Was he just trying to get you to say that because of your lisp? Asshole. You throw your hands up in the air and let them fall in a dramatic fashion as you turn to get a controller before whipping back around. "And my name is Sollux, not Skinny." You turn on the console and press a button on the small switch box by your monitor to change the input to it instead of your computer. "If you're playing, grab a controller." You gesture to the bin of video game accessories next to your desk. You really ought to sort it out before it gets any more tangled than it is. Okay so, full disclosure, this is totally a test. It's a test that Strider fails miserably. The only way he could have failed harder was if he picked the wii mote without the nunchuck. Even that is debatable. You could chalk that up to ignorance, but this was a choice. The nunchuck wasn't connected; He sought it out. "You've gotta be kidding me." You eye his decision with blatant judgment as he goes back to the bed. The guy just shrugs and offers an innocent 'what?' in response.
You scoot your chair back and fire up the game using the only acceptable controller. Now for the second test. Time to see who this fucker selects. You pick Pikachu and fully expect to have to wait for Dave to scroll through all the characters a few times, but he's already selected and changing to an alternate skin. "Link?" you ask, one eyebrow raised up like it's trying to party with your hair.

"Yeah, bro. Don't dis my hero of time like that." He plays it so straight that you wonder if he actually mains Link and isn't just fucking with you. Whatever, his funeral.

"I'm going to destroy you."
It took a few days longer than your other stuff, but your records finally showed up at Zahhak's Electronics. You didn't stick around because the guy running the shop is kind of creepy and awkward, not to mention unusually sweaty. To his credit though, he did pass on a message to you from Dirk. God do you miss Dirk. He says it isn't safe to meet yet, and you agree, but Roxy has a new VPN for you so you'll finally get to talk to him at least. The elevator dings and you make your way out and down the hall to your room. You remembered your key this time. Balancing your box of records on your knee, you unlock the door and nudge it open with your foot. Karkat is wedged in the corner of his bed with another book and Sollux is sprawled out over the rest of it glued to a 3ds he's holding above his face. Dann that guy is gangly. What is he, like, eighty-five percent legs?

"Sup."

"Hey, Dave. Don't bother with Sollux. We've lost him. He's on his third double rematch with Roxy. He's dead to the world for at least 4 more rounds," Karkat says without looking away from what looks like one of those trashy Alternian romance novels. They've been ridiculously popular since they started reprinting them in English, Rose is completely hooked on them, but the one Karkat has looks like it's in Alternian if the cover is anything to go by. You don't know how he or anyone else can just read that stuff out in public for all to see. You are putting your records safely under your bed when you hear an explosion come from the shoddy 3ds speakers followed by a "Yes! In your face, Captor!" You whip around and cross the room in two strides.

"Roxy?"

"I literally just said he was playing against Roxy."

"Daaaave! Hey, Dirk said you were on campus now."

"Rox, You have the misfortune of knowing Dave?"

"No, she has the misfortune of being related to me."

"Dave and I are cousins."

"Human relations are so weird. What even are cousins?"

"I know you know what cousins are, but just to be clear, in case you've completely fried your think sponge since I last saw you, their guardians are littermates."

Another explosion emits from the handheld's speakers and Sollux squints hard at the screen, his fingers mashing the buttons with determined intention. He's really focused on this. Roxy is probably just as absorbed on her end. You remember her going on about her latest rivalry a few weeks back when there was that big game launch, you forget which one. Maybe that's the one they're playing. "Yo Sollux, what's your game handle?" you ask while expertly hiding the mischievous curiosity building in you. "twinArmageddons," Karkat helpfully supplies in his stead. Oh, this is gonna be good.

"So YOU'RE Tits and Ass!" you say louder than necessary.

"EXCUSE ME?!" His grip on the 3ds lapses and it crashes down to smack him right in the face.
Roxy is absolutely cackling on the other end of the game. You hear a muffled 'oooh my god, I can't breathe' come thru the speakers. Karkat is hiding behind his book, but you can tell he is barely suppressing his laughter judging by the way his shoulders are shaking. Mission a-fucking-accomplished. "Roxy, what the fuck?" There is a yellow tint spreading over his face when he picks the 3ds back up and moves to sit cross-legged. You stand there with a smirk on your face and watch the show having successfully pushed your cousin in front of the bus. Your phone buzzes.

"Roxy"

"Okay okay, so like, twinArmageddons. TA. T and A. Tits and Ass."

"Seriously? You seriously call me that?"

"And you have neither so it's even better."

"Ooooh, Roxy with the burn x2 irony combo. Captor is down. 1 hit k.o. ladies and gentlemen. No contest."

"I'm blocking both of you."

You go to your desk to go over the mountain of catch up work you don't want to do, tuning in and out of the mess you started until Karkat tells Sollux to get a room already and the guy storms off.

==> Be Dave but later

You're sitting in film appreciation 202. You took a class just like it at the community college, but it was one of the few that didn't transfer so here you are. Karkat being in the same class almost makes up for essentially having to retake it. The dude has some strong and LOUD opinions. It doesn't take much to get him to flip his shit. You are STRONGLY considering coordinating your schedules next semester to take intro to troll cinema with him. You weren't even thinking of taking it before, but how could you miss out on such primo meltdown content. At the moment, however, things are not so entertaining.

With nothing to distract you, your mind keeps wandering back to Bro. He'll be back from his gig tomorrow. Tomorrow he's going to walk into the apartment and find out you ran off like some weakling. You've agonized over his reaction again and again, but when it comes down to it, predicting what Bro is going to do is hard as fuck. He could do nothing for all you know (that's wishful thinking), or he could hunt down your ass and kick it all the way back to Houston. Or anything in between that. He might even go after Dirk again instead. You can't decide which you're more afraid of. Dirk nearly died the last time they saw each other. That you know of at least. You sincerely hope that was the last time. You're rescued from your thoughts by the flashing window of your pesterchum.

"Roxy"

"Okay okay, so like, twinArmageddons. TA. T and A. Tits and Ass."

"Seriously? You seriously call me that?"

"And you have neither so it's even better."

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You go to your desk to go over the mountain of catch up work you don't want to do, tuning in and out of the mess you started until Karkat tells Sollux to get a room already and the guy storms off.
[TG]: cant wait til we can stop bein all wikipedia brown

[TG]: teh file names can stay tho

[TG]: voldy is back at hogwarts tomorrow so i guess its good that shades mcpotter is freakin the fuck out and passing notes like valentines day is coming up do you like me circle y/n

[TG]: this is really wild

[TG]: i

[TG]: u

[TG]: dave

[TG]: daaaaaave

[TG]: uugh

[TG]: nevermind

[TG]: hows Tits and Ass

[TG]: has he returned from the burn ward yet

[TG]: omfg

[TG]: he actu ally blocked me

[TG]: well shit

[TG]: no worries he cant stay mad at me im the only one who can beat his high scores ;D

A window pops up.

twinArmageddons [TA] would like to add turntechGodhead [TG]to their chumproll.

With a shrug, you accept the request.

twinArmageddons [TA] has blocked turntechGodhead [TG]

That’s fair.

[TG]: he just added me so he could block me

[TG]: lol

[TG]: try messaging him i bet he already unblocked u

[TG]: hes rly not that bad underneither all the sass

[TG]: no ass sassassin

[TG]: sans ass sassassin
[TG]: i will give you so many dollars if you can get him to say that

[TG]: ill bug him later

[TG]: teach has figured out star student strider isnt taking notes

[TG]: peace out yo

turntechGodhead [TG] has ceased pestering tipsyGnostalgic [TG]

Without a distraction, by the time class lets out you're so wound up that you B-line it straight back to your room and lock the door behind you. You check the locks on the windows and pull the shades down. You need to calm down. You're too jumpy and that's how mistakes are made. You just need to relax, take your mind off Bro. Maybe mix some music? You haven't mixed in a while, not since you hocked your turntables. Yeah, and you haven't even tested out your new ones yet. On top of that, you can see the door from your desk, so no surprises. You get set up with your laptop and your tables, but when you plug them in nothing happens. You unplug the USB and plug it back in, but there isn't a connection 'ding'. You look back at the wall to make sure you plugged it in even though you're sure you did. Yeah, it's plugged in. It's then that you notice that none of the lights on the board are lit up. You toggle the switch, but it's still dead.

"No no no no no," You mumble to yourself as you stand up and start to pace, fingers threading up through your hair to rest at the back of your neck. This can't be happening. No wonder that shopkeep took your offer, the damn thing is broken and he knew it. You weren't exactly thrilled about this downgrade, but it was better than NOTHING. "Shit shit shit." You know you're freaking out over this more than you should, but you can't seem to reign yourself in. Dirk could have fixed this. He was so good with this sort of shit. You could wait until you see him, but god only knows when that'll be and you were gonna use this to calm down now. There's the electronics shop, maybe they could fix it, but you're not really feeling up to parting with any of that emergency cash stash, let alone leaving this room. You sink back into your chair and let your head loll back. What about Sollux?

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering twinArmageddons [TA]

[TG]: yo on a scale of youre fucked to i got you bro
[TG]: how good are you with electronics
[TG]: specifically with fixing them
[TG]: by them i mean these piece of shit turn tables i got flimflammed into buying
[TG]: straight up bamboozled

twinArmageddons [TA] is an idle chum

You pull off your shades and press the heels of your hands to your eyes. Maybe you should just try to sleep? No way, aside from doubting that you can, that will only bring the problem closer to you chronologically speaking. Pesterchum pings. You take a deep breath and put your shades back on before looking at the screen again.

[TA]: iim bu2y what do you want?

===> Be Sollux a little while ago

You've been standing here for nearly five minutes waiting for this Juggalo to show up. It takes another five before an ugly brown 2 door sedan with horns poking out the moon-roof comes to a screeching stop and honks at you. The Makara's are weird, but they do possess two things that many
of your friends don't. One of those things is a car. You hurry over to the passenger side door and try to open it, but Mituna pulls it back shut and laughs his head off. You roll your eyes and go for the door again. This time your brother isn't quick enough. He makes an indignant noise of protest as you squish his seat forward so that you can hop in the back.

The second thing they have is weed. You barely have your seatbelt on before Gamzee is passing the grass your way. Some people might say it's ill-advised given the medication you take, but you don't give a damn. Kurloz turns the music louder and starts heading away from campus. "Fuck yes," you say before taking that sweet sweet first hit that comes after a dry spell. Your brother throws his hand back toward you and blindly makes a 'gimme' gesture that you ignore until you're good and done with your turn.

Once your hands are freed up, you dig around in your pockets for a plain looking flash-grub and hand it to the clown sitting next to you. "Oh snap, thanks, brother. Man, who could have predicted a husktop wouldn't be down with the wicked elixir. It's like, alright, computers, right? What the fuck? But you got my back like a true friend. Now I'mma help you get yo chill on." It was probably the easiest money you've ever made. A lot of the time when people came to you for "data recovery" it really just meant yanking their hard drive out of their, in this case, faygo soaked husktop and popping the documents onto a flash-grub. The car comes to a stop in the parking lot of an off-name convenience store that shares a building with a laundry mat of debatable quality. Kurloz shifts into park before navigating across Mituna to get at the glovebox. After a bit of shuffling (and some suggestive shit you could have gone your whole life without hearing, but what else is new with Mituna), the older Makara came back up and tossed a small, but larger than expected bag at you. He's signing something at you, but your not fluent and are only catching the gist of it.

"Yeah, your weird clown shit is safe with me." Honestly, you don't even know what was on that hard drive. It's not like you're sitting there hand picking files. Your palm husk buzzes and you glance at it to make sure it's nothing important. Nope, just Dave. The car starts moving again and Gamzee is handing you the bowl. You hit it a little weird and a piece goes straight to the back of your throat. You're doing your best not to cough and or drop anything when your palm husk buzzes again, and again. Mituna doesn't need to be told twice to take the bowl from you and just to spite him you cough in his face. "Brat!" he hollers back at you as you laugh through smaller coughs. Your palm husk buzzes again. "Sounds like someone tryna holler at your general direction." Little coughs keep slipping out and Gamzee is trying to offer you a faygo, but you're not a complete dumbass so you shake your head and continue checking your trollian.

[TA]: iim bu2y what do you want?
[TA]: finally look man im in a real jam
[TA]: you think you can body slam the life back into this thing
[TA]: it could be all hells of dead in which case i got ripped off something fierce but there is no way im setting a single toe back in gods blind spot for a damn turntable
[TA]: its texas

"Ugh, it's Dave. He wants me to fix something. Is that all I'm good for around here?" you ask as you slouch down in your seat, starting to get too comfortable. "Yes," Mituna says and then is promptly swatted by Kurloz as if to say 'be nice'. Fat chance that's gonna happen. Dave is still typing at you. "Hey brother, it's like, your fucking gift. Your own miracle to share with the masses. gettin paid in puff puff passes, passin classes with max chillaxes in the zone helpin ya holmes with the oh no shits
broke, but you gonna let the sparks fly like its aliveree, its a fucking miracle, miracle monster--"

"Okay okay, I get it. I'm fucking hacker Jegus and I'm gonna bless this asshole with my mad skill."

[TA]: you both are kiilling me and need two be 2topped.

[TG]: who is both

[TA]: nevermind that.

[TA]: ii'm like two miinute2 out2iide of campu2 ii'll meet you there.

[TG]: right

[TG]: there is my favorite place to meet

[TG]: it only comes second to over there with an honorable mention to yonder and a shout out to behind the dennys

twinArmageddons [TA] has ceased trolling turntechGodhead [TG]

You were so close to escaping the clown car unscathed until Mituna had to open his damn mouth and Kurloz dosed you in Febreze. So now you smell like weed AND summer morning shit mist. But honestly? You can't really be too mad about it. You simply aren't capable of it right now and that is amazing. You're crazy level right now. It's been so long since you've been so balanced. Right before the start of summer, the guy who supplies the guy who Kurloz gets his shit from got arrested. Apparently, he was like the state's primary weed man. It was all over the news. Hilarious until you realize it meant there was about to be one hell of a drought. It did make some work for you though. After you wrote a script to automate the two Juggalos' foray into "mirthful botanicals", you got a couple offers from like-minded renegade botanists.

You're so content that you nearly forget that you said you'd help Dave with whatever it was he was flipping his pan about. You pull the strings of your yellow hoodie a little tighter and make a 180 to knock on his door. "What's the password?" Comes muffle from behind the heavy wooden door. "Weak, easily cracked, and generally terrible." The door opens up to reveal Dave. He seems off somehow. Maybe more rigid? "Sup." He says, flat and distant. You nod back in response before looking behind him for the wayward tech. "You uuhh, had something you wanted me to look at?" His hand goes to the back of his neck as he looks over toward his desk. You can almost catch his eyes through the side of his shades and it occurs to you that you've yet to see him without them. "Yeah, my turntables. I didn't think to test them like some kind of trusting dumbass. The thing doesn't even turn on." You nod your head and shove your hands into the pocket of your hoodie. "K. Bring it over to my room and I'll take it apart."

You kick the doorstop under your door so Dave can get in while you grab your tool bag from under the bed with your psionics. It tingles like a dryer warm static over your skin. It always does, but right now you can zone in on the feeling more easily. Dave is looking like a lost wool beast for a spot to put the turntable so you gesture to the floor. Even if you had a proper table you would probably still work on the floor. There's a feeling in your stomach and it takes your brain a moment to remember what hunger is. Your meds numb that sensation down so much that you can forget what it feels like sometimes. "You want a fruit roll-up?" You ask as you seemingly summon one from the void--actually from your closet, into your hand and start unwrapping it. He must have been lost in his own head because he looks at you like he's snapping back into focus and says "huh?" You whip the froot by the foot out like they do on the commercials and hold it out in his direction before peeling a small section of the paper back and letting the blue and red swirled snack hang out of your mouth like a
long tongue. "Fuck yeah, I haven't had one of those since..." there's a flicker in his face, just for a moment before you throw the junk food at him.

You give the turntable a once over, turning it around in your hands looking for obvious damage. It's almost surreal, and not because you're high. You're not used to handling tech so foreign to you. You have absolutely no idea what all these buttons and switches do. Nothing looks like it took a hit, so you flip it over and start looking for screws and pry points. 10 philip's head screws. You're always thankful when it's not some weird proprietary thing that you have to order special tools for. How dare anyone try to tell you that you can't take something apart. You make quick work of the screws, letting them hang in the air as you go before bringing them all together. "Here, make yourself useful and hold onto these." Dave is sitting there stock still, head turned down and slightly to the side like he's trying to listen for something out in the hallway. "Yeah, cool, I can do that." He says, holding out cupped hands to catch the bits of metal out of the air. Welcome back to earth, Dave. You riffle through your tool bag for a moment and pull out a blue anti-static band, ground it, and slip it over your wrist.

"What's that?"

"Anti-static band," you can see the next question coming and answer it before it's asked. "So I don't shock the shit out of your comp-- I mean, your DJ thing." Even if you do have wildly good control over your psionics, it still is advised for you to ground yourself when getting up close and personal with circuits. "Hey, is it cool if I put on some beats?" Dave asks. It is really starting to hit you now. Music would be pretty sweet. "Go for it. There is a line in on my computer speakers."

You get started by gently going around the edges of the casing with a thin plastic tool looking for the natural pry point. There is a soft click as it gives. After that, it's just a matter of going around the edges and pushing back the tiny hidden clips until the back pops off with ease. Now, this is more what you're used to. The familiar circuit board green greets you from beneath an array of wires, capacitors, IC chips, and other assorted bits and pieces. You dive in, losing the world around you to the steady stream of music and the careful process of checking for breaks in the wires and making sure they're plugged in snugly. You move on to inspecting the next offender, the capacitors, but none of them look bloated or otherwise awry. You don't hear the soft click of a shutter. You pick up the device and look closer, turning it this way and that way until you see it. Of course. If it didn't turn on, you probably should have check that sooner. You give the power jack a little wiggle and it comes right out.

"I could be wrong, but I'm thinking that's not supposed to come out, huh?"

"Nope."

"Shit man, thanks for trying tho. I guess I'll--"

"Dude, relax. It looks like it just came loose. I can resolder it."

"Oh." There's a pause before Dave speaks again like he's trying to find the right words while you find your soldering iron. "Hey, Sollux? You make a quiet 'hm?' sound and look up at him over your glasses, not that he could tell probably. Most people assume you don't even have pupils. "Don't take this the wrong way. No judgment, but..." he's got your attention now. You straighten up to look more directly at him. "Are you...are you high?" A snort erupts from your face as you try and fail to stifle your laughter. Good job, Captor. Way to eschew those stereotypes. "Yeah," concern suddenly claws at you and pulls away the smile that had crept over your face. "Does that bother you? Sorry, I didn't really think to ask." He had said no judgment but you find yourself oddly worried about what he thinks of you. You...don't want him to...think badly of you? Or maybe...be disappointed? Dave puts up his hands and lightly shakes his head "No, no, it's all good in the hood home sizzle, but,
okay, follow up question. Should you be soldering under the influence? Will they take away your license to solder? Are the solder police gonna break down that door and haul you off to tech prison? You're too pretty for jail, Sollux, you'll never make it. I mean, fuck, wait, no." To that, you raise your eyebrows and strongly contemplate whether to save him from his own backpedaling or fuck with him. You'll be nice today you supposed. "I'm good. Though the regular police might have something to say about this." You nearly forgot about the bag of devil lettuce just hanging out all snug in your pocket. You throw it into your syladex on an encrypted card.

While you wait for the soldering iron to heat up, you give the music playing more of your attention. You've never heard this song before. "What song is this?" Dave perks up a bit at your question. "Why? You like?" There is a cocky grin starting to creep over his face. You look at him a little warily. There is some kind of trap here; you can feel it. "Yeah, it's okay." He huffs at you. Actually huffs at you. "Just okay? I'll have you know my beats are ill as fuck. My jams are straight up contagious. They've got cholera and brought enough to share with the class." You snicker as you pick up the iron and start carefully removing what's left of the old solder. "Whatever you say, man."

It all goes pretty smoothly and when you plug it in all the little lights on the DJ panel blink as they spring to life before resetting and leaving only the green power button lit. Your ego gets a boost as you watch Strider freak out. "No way, no fucking way. You fixed it? You fixed it." He's so amped that he has to go take a walk to the other side of your room and come back. You clean up while he runs across the hall to get his laptop so he can test everything out. There isn't much to put away and you're done by the time he gets back. "Catch," he says. You whip around and are greeted by some airborne Doritos. "Nice." You immediately dig into the bag, suddenly aware of how hungry you are. "I'm not usually paid in Doritos, but I think I can make an exception this time." The smile on his face momentarily ticks up a little higher and he makes an amused hum somewhere in his throat. Just a couple hours ago he seemed to radiate tension and now he's damn near giddy. The voice in the back of your mind tells you that you did that. It's a warm feeling and you're not sure what to do about it. "Thanks by the way." He says looking over his shoulder at you.

You dust your Dorito hands off on your pants and unencrypt one of the cards from your syladex. Drugs, you're going to do drugs about it. "No problem. I'm gonna step out a sec, k?" You say, gesturing to the window. He gives you a nod and starts to go back to checking out his gear, but does a double take when you actually head for and step out of the window. You can fly, why does no one ever expect you to use the window? Doors are for losers.
Your name is ROXY LALONDE and this is not the floor you normally wake up on.

You rub at your eyes and then decide this is more of a full face rub sort of grogginess. Slowly the fog of sleep dissipates and you take in your surroundings. A pillow has been placed under your head and there is a throw blanket tangled around you. There is a desk with a pretty sweet rig under it and a mess all around it. The Apiculture based computer jammed in the window is the giveaway. The floor you have woken up on must belong to Sollux.

You hear running water from the bathroom and noises that lead you to believe he's brushing his teeth. Boy, does he have a lot of teeth. You'd use an electric toothbrush too if you had a game of 3d Tetris for a mouth. You pick yourself up off the floor after wrestling with the blanket and discover you had opted to sleep in your clothes. Damn, and here you thought you might have finally gotten some out of nerd boy. With a yawn, you wander over to the bathroom to find Sollux. He's got pajama pants on that have little bees all over them; it's adorable. "So, did we bang? Was I better than in your dreams?" you ask with a waggle of your eyebrows.

"Trust me, you’d remember if we did."

"Looking out for my virtue as always"

"You have virtue?"

You roll your eyes at his toothpaste covered smirk, but you're still smiling as you lean against the door frame and try to recall the events of the previous night. Let's see, you met up with Sollux at your usual haunt, took turns kicking each other's ass in various games, Mituna and Latula showed up at some point, and it all starts to get fuzzy around then. "So when did we wander back here?"

Sollux spits in the sink and wipes his mouth on a nearby towel before he answers. "After Mituna busted his ass playing DDR, but before you threw up on me." You wince. That sounds like something you might do. "Is that why I was banished to the floor?" you say in an accusing, but playfully antagonizing tone. He pushes past you to pick a shirt up off the floor by his dresser; the designated 'still good' spot for clothes after they've done their time on the chair. "You could not be convinced otherwise despite my many attempts." You nod at him and make a doubtful mmmhmm sound to show that you aren't skeptical at all and totally believe he tried. He makes a circling gesture with his finger and you turn around so he can get dressed. It's cute that he's modest. You're still gonna tease him about it.

"Prude."

"Bite me."

"Name the time and place, honey." You can feel the air go still and the hair on your arms raise from the light static radiating off Sollux behind you.

"Don't...don't call me that," his voice is tight and unsettling in how quickly it turned serious. You begin to turn around, but catch yourself and turn back to face the windows. You catch a glimpse though. Sollux standing there frozen with his back to you, halted in a state of half dress, belt hanging undone on pants only loosely clinging to sharp hips, shirt around his forearms, but not yet over his head. You hit a nerve and it was a deep one. You tease each other constantly, but you know when to

It's happened before. You'll say or do something and he goes stiff and quiet. You'll get too close, physically or otherwise, and he'll shut down. It wouldn't be so frustrating if the rules were consistent, but they're not. Some things are okay sometimes, but not always. You've never pried about it, but you don't think he'd tell you anyway.

You check the time. It's still relatively early. Late morning. "I'm meeting Dave after class today." You say, changing the subject.

"My condolences," he comes back with and claps a hand to your shoulder. You cross your arms and leer at him. "Oh come off it. You don't really think he's that bad."

"He made me listen to his raps. Have you heard his raps, Roxy? Have you?"

You shake your head. "Aaanywayyyy, I'm gonna get going. Gotta make myself at least somewhat presentable." Sollux opens his mouth to no doubt say something smart, but you glare at him before he can get it out, and it dissolves into laughter. You're barely out the door when you turn around and catch it before it can close. "Oh, and by the way," you say as you lean into view on the door frame, "You might wanna tighten up that code of yours. It's a review day today. Wouldn't want to own you too hard." You wink at him and leave before he can get in a response.

=> Be Sollux

She's gone before you can get a word in. You shake your head and gather up the rest of your things because if you don't get your ass in gear, you're going to be late for Lit. Your door has just clicked shut when Karkat and Dave burst out of their room. Karkat's hair is standing up more than usual and he's got his and Dave's bag, as Dave struggles with a zip-up hoodie while holding a notebook in his mouth. You give Karkat an upward nod and the three of you rush down the stairs. Luckily the language building isn't too far across campus. Somehow it would seem that you even made it with time to spare. When you open the classroom door you are greeted by the ominous sight of all the desks being arranged in a horseshoe. Oh boy, this is going to be a participation day. There is no hiding in the horseshoe, so you and Karkat take seats on the center side closest to the door. Dave wanders to the far corner by the windows.

He's leaning back in his chair with his feet up like an asshole, starting up a conversation with some people around him. Someone says something about their brother and the conversation quickly shifts to music.

"Yeah, my Bro is pretty big on the underground DJ circuit. None of that fake shit. Real mixing. It's crazy."

He's talking out his ass, you're almost certain.

"So do you make music too or?"

"oh yeah, totes. He taught me the basics straight up no bs when I was a kid, so I've really had some time to explore my own sound, ya know?" God, they are eating that shit up. You roll your eyes and look at the clock. Class should have started by now. Looking around you see some stuff spread out on the front table. They look like flash card packets, but the colorful kinds you would teach wigglers with. The professor is leaning against the table and jotting stuff down on a legal pad, occasionally looking around at the different small groups of students chatting away. You look back over to Dave who still has people captivated with his bullshit, although it seems they've moved on from jerking his
"No, yeah, that noise is like straight up honest to god psychosis. This shit is the ironic polar opposite of weaksauce. Hercules pissed off the wrong god and got turned into a ghost pepper levels of strong. Gonna send folks to the ER like doc I can't hear you, I can only hear these fiery beats." His tangents are impressive in the same way that a public scuttlebuggy derailment is eye-catching. Karkat nudges your side to get your attention before motioning his chin at Dave and raising an eyebrow at you as if to tease you about your staring. You're already glaring so you glare harder at him. "He just radiates douchery, like some kind of self-obsessed, attention deficit wiggler," you whisper.

The professor clears her throat and tells everyone to settle down and for Dave to remove his feet from the desk. She goes to the whiteboard and draws a chart with two columns. On one side she writes Human and on the other Troll. "Today we're going to be going over some terminological differences in Alternian and Earthling English speech patterns. I'll be passing around two stacks of simple word flash cards. Take one from each pile. Once everyone has their cards we'll be going around the room and I want each of you to give me the Alternian and Earthling term for each object. Additionally, I'll be writing some phrases on the board for us to translate." You see her write weaksauce on the board and realize she was soffitspying on everyone. Not so coincidentally, soffitspying is also on there as well.

You look down at your cards. That's not happening. "Karkat, give me your card," you whisper

"Why?"

"Just give me your troll card."

You did not do a good job whispering because the teacher says "No swapping cards. Part of the exercise is to learn terms you may not know." You slink lower in your chair. Maybe you can disappear if you try hard enough. The teacher starts at the side closer to the windows. People are getting words like 'skateboard', and 'lounge plank', and 'fronds'; how did you wind up with a word like this? Well, you suppose it's not as advanced a word for trolls. Your turn comes up. You give the troll equivalent of worm, but hesitate with your other card.

"And the Alternian card?" the professor prompts you.

"I can't."

"You don't know it?"

"No, I know it, but--" you realize too late that that was your out. You should have just said you didn't know it. Plenty of people wouldn't have. You can feel the blood rising to your cheeks.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand the problem. What card do you have?"

"Stab flower." It wasn't the answer she was looking for and she leans her head forward and gestures for you to continue with the Human version. This is gonna suck.

"Thith- thit- Thitl- Thithsth-" Everybody is looking at you and you can hear a few people started to snicker when it sounded like you said 'shit'. You let your head drop to rest with your hand on your forehead, partially obscuring your face, and shove the card at Karkat. He sucks in air sharply between clenched teeth before he answers for you.

"Thistle." There's a beat of heavy silence as he gently puts the card down in front of you, then clears his throat and practically shouts, "So I have crabs." Bless his bloodpusher. The majority of the class,
Karkat included, bursts into laughter as he holds up a card with a cartoon crab on it.

You're sitting in the cafeteria some time later, prodding mindlessly at some honey-nut nutrition rings you have no intention of finishing. You've been in a shit mood since this morning and the rest of the day hasn't helped much. It's stupid. All she did was call you honey... but that's what Aradia called you. Honey. Honey bee. You had always pretended not to like it, and you didn't at first, but it had grown on you. You can still hear it in your head. It's been over two years. You should be over this by now. You thought you were over it. Apparently not. It's been looming in your mind all day like a catalyst for any bad feeling to latch onto.

You spy Roxy's faded out pink hair across the room. Right, she was meeting Dave. You forgot about that. If you had remembered, you would have gone somewhere else. Then again, did she even tell you they were meeting here? She looks so happy to see him. Somehow they kept missing each other in passing. That hug has got to hurt though. It's pretty doubtful Dave's side has healed up all the way. If it does hurt, he's not showing it. You've noticed that he's a lot more closed off in public, less genuine. Other people don't seem to notice so much and take him at face value. Not that you've been watching him or anything.

He and Roxy are taking an ironic selfie and it makes you wonder if you have a photo of you and Roxy. It's not the most pitch thing to do, taking selfies with your kismesis, but you and Roxy have a soft spades thing going on. She's human and humans have trouble staying in a single quadrant, but they have a particularly difficult time sticking strictly to blackrom. You're like mars black, there's a lot of red in there. You met her when she dethroned you at a gaming tournament and instead of calling the cops when you hacked her computer to challenge her to a rematch, she accepted with a wicked enthusiasm. It's less hate and more rivalry, or as she puts it, a rivalmance. What's surprising is that she doesn't seem to bleed pale like a lot of people might. You suppose that's what makes it work. When things get too red-- let's be honest, when things remind you too much of Aradia and you freeze up like the broken trash-panned mess you are, she just backs off. She gives you space. You'd bet good money that if you had a moirail, she'd pawn you off on them like any good kismesis would do when the situation doesn't call for tough love or firm antagonistic encouragement. A moirail, ha, like anyone would be stupid enough to pale solicit you.

A hand waves in front of your face and you jolt back to reality. "You in there?" You look up to see Karkat holding a tray with the remnants of his dinner on it. "Oh, hey kk," you say without putting a single ounce of effort into masking your gloomy tone. You look down at your cereal that has now morphed into a gross paste and sigh before standing up and heading to the tray drop off with Karkat. You're only a few steps down the hallway when he stops you. "Something is bothering you and if you say it's nothing I'm going to walk back there and force feed that soggy mess that looks like it was, at one point, perfectly good plant-based nutrition rings down your protein chute until you tell me."

You look him dead in the eye. "It's nothing."

A hand quickly snatches the back of your shirt and starts dragging you backward, which is pretty awkward because Karkat is a decent few inches shorter than you. "Okay, okay, I'll tell you. Get your grubby little fronds off my shirt." He lets go and you fiddle with your collar to make sure it isn't all stretched out. It isn't, but you frown at him anyway. He glares back at you, arms crossed, waiting for you to continue. You look down the hall the way you came and motion for him to follow you outside. You really don't feel like having a personal conversation while strangers pass by you. You lead Karkat to the outside wall of the cafeteria and trample some weeds so you can lean against the brick. "Roxy called me honey this morning."
Karkat gives you a quizzical look that says he isn't following you. "Aradia used to call me that." The shift in his expression is instantaneous, apologetic, but knowing that there isn't much he can do for you. "It's stupid, really, don't worry about it." You've known Karkat since before you shed your wiggler legs, he's going to worry anyway.

"I don't have any classes left today. If you want to watch a movie or something..."

You shake your head. "Thanks, but I've got homework to do." It's a weak excuse, but you think maybe it's better to just sulk in private. No sense in ruining anyone else's night on account of you and your emotions. You mess up Karkat's already disastrous hair and push off the wall with one foot. "Maybe tomorrow or something," you say as you cross the short distance to your dorm's entrance. Karkat says something, but you only half hear it. Something about messaging you.

The day seems to stretch on for far too long, and when night finally comes, you find yourself lying there for hours slipping further and further into madness without the release of sleep. Drugs can't solve all your problems, but they can help with this. See? Perfectly responsible. You are definitely not becoming dependent again.

You open the window and step into the night air. It's starting to get cooler at night, you'll have to bring in your bees soon. You float up to the roof and make yourself comfortable far enough away from the edge so that no one can see you. It's quiet. The only sounds you can hear are the flick of your lighter and the crackle of pseudo-soporific plant material as it succumbs to the flame. You hold in the smoke for as long as you can before letting it escape through your sniffnode.

You aren't sure how much time has passed when you decide that you're good and return your bowl to your encrypted syladex. You're getting a little chilly, but you think maybe you'll stay up here a little longer. It's a nice night out and you're not quite ready to return to the confines of your room.

Out of nowhere you hear the sound of sneakers scuff across the asphalt and whip your head in its direction like a glowing-eyed moron.

"Holy shit!" The figure says as they stumble backward in surprise. Their foot catches the raised edge and their hands fly out to grab at the open air in front of them as they begin to topple backward. You know that voice.

"Dave!" You throw your hand out and wrap him in your psionics just before he falls out of your line of sight. You scramble to the roof's edge and bring him back up to the landing, taking his outstretched hand and pulling him the rest of the way over the ledge. He careens into you and the both of you go down. You get the honor of breaking the fall for him.

"Holy shit. Thanks, man. Hitting that fire escape wasn't gonna be a fun time." He's making light of things, but you can feel his heart hammering in his chest from where he is on top of you. It's making your stomach turn in knots again. You gently pat his arm and he makes a quiet 'oh' sound as he rolls off of you to lay on his back. You turn your head to look at him. It's three in the morning and he has those stupid shades on. "So they do glow."

You blink in confusion. "What?"

"Your eyes. They glow. I wasn't sure."

"Oh, yeah, they do that."

"That's pretty cool."

You're disappointed when he sits up. The proximity was nice and there is a certain relief in letting
that thought pass through your thinkspunge. "What are you doing up here?" You ask, breaking the silence that fell between you.

"What're YOU doing up here?"

"I asked you first."

"I asked you second."

"What do you THINK I was doing up here?"

"Ok, I may have an idea of what you might have possibly been doing up here," he says with a small laugh and a slight upturn of his mouth. Silence falls between the both of you again, but it isn't strained. You pull yourself to sit up and rest your forearms on your knees. You're about to ask him again when he speaks.

"Couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about... things and I heard someone on the roof. Not that you were loud. I don't think anyone else heard you. I'm just used to it." You wonder what that means, that he's 'used to it'.

"Same. The couldn't sleep part I mean." You pick at some loose bits of roofing material. "I don't think I'm going to sleep just yet if you wanna hang out for a bit." He looks to truly contemplate the offer for a moment before shaking his head. "Nah, I'm gonna head back to bed. I've got class in a few hours." He gets up. Bits of blacktop crunch under his shoes as he makes his way to the fire escape ladder. "I'll catch ya later."

"See ya." You sit there for a minute listening as he climbs down and back into the building. When you finally get to your feet and head to the ledge, you go up instead of down. You climb higher and higher into the darkness. It's cold up here, but you can take it. You run hotter than most gold bloods. You drift there for a while, looking down at the campus. There's something about Dave. You're not sure how to describe it, only that you feel this sense of...you can't place it, but it leaves you curious in a strange way. Roxy is right; you really don't mind him. She, however, doesn't need to know that.

When your fingers start to go cold, you fly back down. Your room is toasty by comparison and you're greeted by a wave of warmth. You glance at the clock and feel a little dumb for asking Dave if he wanted to hang out with you. It was stupid. You try to push it and Dave from your mind as you crawl back under the covers, but your think sponge keeps circling back to him. The way he looked at you when you fixed his turntables, the way he was on the roof; you wonder if he's like that around anyone else.
Bad coping mechanisms

Chapter Notes

if anyone actually wants my writing playlist, hit me up.

Your name is DIRK STRIDER and you're staring at an unsent message in your pesterchum again.

You and Dave had agreed that he wouldn't try to find you or contact you directly. If it was safe, you would contact him. There haven't been too many safe times over the years. You never outright told Dave, but you assume he figured out that the home network was bugged and logged six ways to Sunday.

After what Bro did to you, you just couldn't risk putting Dave in danger for trying to talk to you. You wouldn't be able to forgive yourself if Bro decided that Dave was a failure too. You don't know if you've even forgiven yourself for leaving him with that monster all these years.

Dave isn't there anymore though. You saw to that just like you promised you would. But what if somehow Bro is still watching him? He was always more obsessed with Dave for some reason, like you were merely a prototype to be tested on. He would have never let Dave limp away like you did. You wondered about that a lot in the past. You think about it less now, but it still comes up. It's pretty hard to ignore.

"How do you want your eggs?" Jake calls from the kitchen. It stirs you from your train of thought like cold water. Your boyfriend hasn't been super fond of Hal modulating your voice for you since he found out that Hal was less a piece of software and more a fully sentient AI, so you make the short walk to the kitchen space of the small apartment. He's a pretty good cook and is always shoving food at you whenever he makes something for himself. Which, honestly, you're grateful for. You have a lot of skills, but cooking isn't one of them. The things you are willing to classify as edible are pretty telling of your formative years. You snake your arms around his waist and rest your chin on his shoulder.

"Hello there, How would you like your eggs this morning?" He's all toothy smiles and warm sounds. You take in a breath. "Scrambled. Do I have peppers?" Your voice is hoarse and quiet, but its there and that's a lot more than you thought you would have after taking a sword to the neck. The first time Dave heard your voice after what you politely call "the incident", you swear he was in tears on the other end of that shitty pay phone. He says he wasn't of course, and you hope that's true because that phone was a relic of yesteryear left unnoticed in a public library in a not great town. Dave can handle himself, but it doesn't mean you don't worry about him. You worry a lot about him actually. Hal calls you obsessive.

Jake laughs. It's the dorkiest laugh you've ever heard, but god do you love it. "You do now," he says gesturing to some peppers that are already cut up in a plastic container you recognize to be his. Leftovers from some other dish he was making. You kiss his cheek before you venture back to your desk. It's been a week since Bro got back to the newly sans Dave apartment and the world has yet to end. It's not like you expected immediate retribution, but you did at least expect some unusual activity on his end. Hal says Bro's websites are still getting regular updates, but you know the guy has a backlog of content. The temptation to break radio silence is immense. Plus, will it ever really be safe? You gently remind yourself that Dave is only a short drive away. He's not in Houston
anymore. He isn't on that network. He doesn't even have the same phone. This is as safe as it gets.

timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

[TT]: Hey.

==> Be Dave

You damn near drop your phone when you see who is messaging you.

[TG]: no way

You’re about to spill your guts when you remember the rules. Dirk was wary that Bro might try to
finish him off. He was a liability for whatever it was that monster wanted of you. With you
disappearing there was an increased chance that this wasn't really Dirk. You pry the case off your
phone and pull out a small worn slip of paper with numbers written on it in Dirk's handwriting.

[TG]: 81 38 8 a9 2 0 a1

[TT]: 81 2 4 89 5 20 81

The response was relatively quick, but you still had another step to it. All he needed to do was
respond with anything but an actual response to your accusation.

[TG]: you're not dirk

Time seemed to slow down as you waited for him to reply. "Come on, please be Dirk, please be
Dirk." You mumbled low under your breath. The implications of the alternative are not something
you want to think about.

[TT]: Cereal is not a soup, Dave.

[TG]: i missed you so fucking much

[TG]: is it cool to talk like normal people yet instead of this convoluted note passing and double talk

[TT]: Probably not, but I believe this is as safe as it gets. I've weighed the odds, trust me.

[TG]: so obviously im not gonna ask where you are or what you're doing

[TG]: because i assume we haven't completely lost our damn minds

[TG]: but are you ok

[TT]: Yeah, I'm okay. I'm not going to lie, it wasn't easy, it wasn't legal, and I had some help, but I'm
doing alright now. I have an apartment, a job, and...

[TT]: A boyfriend.

You pick your head up from your phone and realize you've been standing in the middle of the
walkway grinning like an idiot. It's pretty amazing that Dirk's managed to get so far. He had to leave
with almost nothing, but here he is with his feet on the ground. And he has a boyfriend. That's a
pretty big deal. It's like a slap in Bro's face. You can't imagine it was easy for Dirk to deal with
though.

[TG]: gaaaaaaay
You are emotionally stunted.

[TT]: That would be the central idea.

[TT]: The primary arrangement.

[TT]: You might say it is a prerequisite.

[TG]: for real tho that's cool

[TG]: so

[TG]: when do we chill

[TG]: when does the reunion episode air our fans are in their seats squirming

[TG]: asses are on the edge dirk

[TG]: the fans need to know

There is a long pause this time. You eventually pocket your phone and continue walking back to the dorm. Maybe Dirk hadn't thought that far a-- ha! no Dirk has thought all of the things three times over. He even has an AI to think those thoughts an additional 400 times. He's probably trying to rationalize a decision he's already decided on. You're just about back to your room when pesterchum pings again.

[TT]: I'll get back to you on that.

timaeusTestified [TT] has ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

When you get to your room you're greeted by the sight of Karkat walking in circles and gesticulating wildly while on the phone with someone.

"Because you're his fucking brother, that's why. Look, just try to message him... He won't answer me....I don't know, that's why I'm asking you to message him!....arrgh....Why didn't you say that in the first place?!....Good, fine, bye!" Karkat hangs up the phone and flops down face first on his bed visibly exhausted by the conversation.

"Family drama?" You ask as you throw your bag on the floor and take a seat on your own bed.

"You could say that. I've certainly known the Captors long enough."

"The whomst?"

"Sollux and Mituna," he says as he rolls over.

"Ah," you say with a slow nod. Captor huh? Sollux Captor, that's a cool name, maybe even as cool as yours. "So what's the dealio? Gimme the skinny, short stuff. Don't save the drama for Obama. I want it straight from the source. Drinking right out the hose like--"

"Please, stop talking. I will gladly tell you if you just stop talking. It is a small price to pay." You make a 'you got it' finger gun motion at him and wait for him to continue. He sits up and slumps forward a bit. "Sollux hasn't come out of his room today and I don't think he did yesterday either." The subject matter is a lot less juicy than you anticipated. It's a downer coming off the excitement of finally hearing from your brother.
"Maybe he's just tired. Give the guy some space, dude," you say as you pull out your phone to check your notifications and fall back onto the pillow. Karkat shakes his head.

"You don't get it. I'm not about to put the guy's dirty laundry on display or anything, but it isn't exactly a well-kept secret that he's..." Karkat scrunches up his face and tilts his head like he's trying to choose the least offensive or intrusive way to phrase this. "...got some problems."

Your mind jumps back to the other night up on the roof when he told you that he couldn't sleep either. Maybe you should have asked him why. Would it have been the polite thing to do or just weird? "What like he's crazy?" Karkat takes a deep breath and stands up. You've done it now, Strider. Here comes the rant.

"Human Jegus help you if you say that to his face. Look, I've known Sollux since we were wigglers. He gets in these funks and if someone intervenes soon enough then it's not a problem; he'll bounce back. He pulls it off himself sometimes, I would bet more often then I'm even aware of. But sometimes he can't, and if no one checks in on him then shit can hit the breeze blender. Not to mention if he hasn't left his room, he probably hasn't eaten either. And yeah, I know I'm not in his quadrants, I don't want to be, I have a moirail, but excuse me for giving a flying fuck about my best friend!" Karkat deflates after that and sinks back down on the bed only to get back up almost immediately. "Maybe Roxy can talk some sense into him," he says, throwing his hands up and making for the door.

You're left to sit there alone in some kind of residual awkward silence with yourself. You might as well try talking to the guy. His room is all of what, 10 feet away? You roll off the bed and make your way across the hall. "Yo, Sollux, open up," you say as you knock on the door. "Karkat's throwing a shit fit about you. Are you really prepared to carry the guilt of subjecting me to that? I have to live with the guy. Don't make me break out the raps, man. I know how much you love my raps. I'll do it. You're turning my hand, bro. You don't understand, no, I can spin this shit all day, don't even play, quicker than your combos, melee. You don't need to respond, I'll just keep going on, and on and on, off the chain, these beats insane, yo, I just keep pickin em up, what, like it's tough? Can't stop me now, don't even know how this shit so tight--"

The handle clicks and the door opens just enough that you can see part of Sollux's face hidden behind unruly hair and buried in a hoodie. He looks a bit more worse off than you thought he would. You're not actually sure what you had expected in the first place, but somehow this is worse. "What?" he asks, trying to sound pissed off, but you can tell his heart isn't in it.

"Uuh," Great start. You hadn't really thought this plan through. The door starts to close a little. "Wait wait, ok. So. Karkat was going off about you being less than stellar." He stands there, unresponsive. You take it as your cue to continue. "He was on the phone with your brother, which sounded like an experience, to say the least. I know pissing off Karkat is a sport, but that was just low. The guy's boxers are in such a bunch, man. They're way up there. They're in such a bind he may never recover. Medical science has only come so far." Sollux still isn't answering you and it's starting to get a little weird. "Sooo, umm, I still owe you that solid. Maybe I can come in and uh," you try to peek around him and you can't see much, but what you can see isn't exactly tidy. "help you pick up a bit I guess?" You are a hot second from bailing when he finally speaks.

"You want to help me clean my room?"

"Yes?"

"Because Karkat is worried about me?"
"Yes"

You honestly didn't expect to get this far, so when the troll relents and steps aside with a sigh, your brain starts scrambling for your next move. You step into the room and the door clicks behind you. The place has seen better days. You're no stranger to organized chaos, but the place could use some help. You look back over to Sollux who is pulling a blanket off the top bunk and wrapping it around himself. He looks tired.

Alright, so you walked into this ass end first and aren't exactly sure what you're doing. "Jeez, has FEMA been alerted about your room?" A swing and a miss. Sollux doesn't even crack half a smirk. "Let's get the trash out at least." You look around for a bit before finding the trash bags on top of the mini fridge. There are some wrappers and energy drink cans on the desk, you grab those first before tackling the actual trash can and surrounding trash zone. Which speaking of the surrounding trash zone...

"Do I want to know what this is?" You ask, pointing at the pile of yellowish tissues spilling over the lip of the trash can. You're no expert on xenobiology, but there's like four different things that could be and you have to draw the biohazard line somewhere.

"Tissues"

"Well, yeah, I figured that one out all on my own. Why are they yellow?"

"Have you not noticed I'm a gold blood?"

"Are you telling me that's your blood?"

"Are you this stupid naturally or do you practice?"

You drop the trash bag and take a step toward him. He's all huddled in on himself, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"That didn't answer my question."

"It's none of your business!" he practically hisses at you, his lisp no doubt a factor in that.

"Sollux, what the fuck is that?" Your voice is a little harsher than you meant it to be. He looks away from you and even if you couldn't make out the sliver of fangs you'd be able to tell he was gritting his teeth by the set of his jaw. "Sollux!" He makes a frustrated sound and snaps his gaze back to you.

"I was crying okay? Are you happy now?" He shouts. You can see it now from the way he's looking up at you, the way his eyes are puffy and yellow around the edges, the dried tracks down his face that are just a slightly different color in the light. "Just get the fuck out of my room, Strider." You don't know how to deal with this. You've never been in a position where there wasn't a clear tangible cause of discomfort. You know how to patch a wound, but this, you don't know this. So you wind up leaving without another word.

You shut the door a little too hard on the way out and immediately feel bad about it, but keep going until you're back in your own room. Way to go, Dave. You made it worse. Fuck, what if he's crying again now? Because of you. You hear Karkat coming back around the corner. He's knocking on Sollux's door. After that exchange you just had there's no way he's coming out now.

You hear the faintest of footsteps on the roof and panic sweeps you for a split second before you can tell yourself it's just Sollux. He goes up there a lot. Maybe too much. Still, you find yourself anxious. You should check. If it turns out to really be Sollux, maybe you can offer him some Doritos or
something, like a peace offering for blundering through whatever it was you were trying to do back there. You really fucked that one up.

You look between a bag of cool ranch and original before throwing them both in your syladex. Karkat is nowhere to be seen when you walk back into the hallway. One less awkward conversation for you. The window comes up easy and you climb onto the fire escape and head up. There is a twinge of worry before you pull yourself up the last rung. What if it is Bro up there? You shake your head and press forward. A wave of relief hits you when you see a lanky troll completely enveloped by a sweatshirt sitting against, what is that, an ac unit? Does this building actually have air conditioning? You make your way over and take a seat beside him. He has his legs drawn up to his chest and his arms around his knees.

"Hey," you say.

"Hey."

That's a good sign. He doesn't sound pissed at you.

"Sorry about before. For being--"

"Insensitive. Xenophobic. Obtuse."

"I was gonna say for being a dumbass, but yeah, that too."

"It's cool."

You sit there together in silence for a bit before you remember about your peace offering. You had expected him to be at least a little pissed off, so when he forgave you like it was nothing, you nearly forgot about it. "Oh hey, I brought something for you." You pull the two bags out of your syladex and hold them up for him. "Red or blue?" You only just now realize the significance of those colors, but you smirk as if you planned it from the start. The smallest of smiles cracks at the corner of his mouth.

"Seriously?"

"Yup, red or blue? Come on Captor, the world is dying to know." He shakes his head and that start of a smile creeps further across his face as he takes the cool ranch from you with his hand, and the original with his psionics while you're distracted. "Hey, one of those was gonna be mine," you pout. "Whatever, keep it." He probably hasn't eaten much anyway If Karkat has been right about him not leaving his room. He shifts to sit cross-legged and you see the bowl roll out from its spot hidden in the folds of the sweatshirt. Sollux looks down and picks up the few bits of weed that came loose, dropping them back in and patting them down with a lighter that was apparently in his sleeve. He looks at you, catching you staring.

"What? You think I'd come up here just to sulk?"

A laugh grips you and you shake your head. "One of these days it ain't gonna be me coming up that ladder and you're gonna get your ass caught." He shrugs and takes a hit. It would make a good picture you think. He blows the smoke up and away from you when he exhales. That would make a good picture too. Maybe when he's not a wreck you'll ask him if you could snap a few.

"Did you want any?" he offers, holding it out to you.

"Nah, I don't smoke. Nothing against it though, so you do you, no worries." Honestly, you've thought of trying it, but it wouldn't have been worth the beating you'd get if Bro had caught you. Or
who knows, maybe he was down with the gange and would have hit it with you. You weren't about to
find out. Sollux gives another shrug.

"Look, man. I kind of fucked that all up before, but for real, you look like hell."

"Gee, thanks" he interrupts. You side eye him with a tilt of your head and continue.

"How bout we try that again? You go take a shower, because no offense, you need a shower, dude. I'll straighten up for you. You'll feel better if you can tell what color the floor is." You watch as he puts away his smoking paraphernalia and breaks open the cool ranch. Is he blushing?

"Here, take this," he says, holding out the other bag of Doritos. "I wasn't going to actually take both." You happily take back your snack, maybe a bit too gleefully. So maybe you were genuinely disappointed he took both, it's whatever.

"Did Karkat tell Roxy on me?"

"Yes?" you answer in a confused tone. 'Tell Roxy on him'? What's that supposed to mean? You must be giving him a really weird look because he's sending one right back your way. The wheels slowly start to turn in your head and when it clicks your eyebrows ascend beyond the rim of your shades. "Are you dating Roxy?"

"She's not my girlfriend if that's what you're implying." He takes another couple chips out of the bag and downs them before continuing. "She's my kismesis."

It is an odd thing to process for you. For one thing, the whole quadrants thing confuses you. Secondly, while Roxy is your cousin, you didn't even know you had cousins until after Dirk got kicked out. In fact, you actually already knew Rose and Roxy for a good while before you found out you were related. Rose, of course, uses this against you at every opportunity. This is now twice today you've been out of your element. "Wait so you are hate dating my cousin?"

"I don't hate Roxy, well, not in that way, it's...just ask Karkat he will give you a gogdamn dissertation on the nuances of Human-Troll relations. I'm a citation in his paper." You're not sure if he's kidding or not. He crumples up the empty chip bag and starts to make his way over to the ledge. "You coming?"

"It may have slipped your mind, but not all of us can fly. Some of us mere mortals have to use the stairs."

He rolls his eyes at you, at least you think that's what that was. "Whatever. See you in a few I guess." It's super weird to watch him jump off the edge. You know he can levitate himself, but it doesn't make it look any less like he just casually jumped to his death. The feeling doesn't shake away until you see him again at his door.

===> Sollux: shower

You hadn't wanted to shower, you even thought maybe you'd just stand under the water for a few minutes and get out, but now that you're in here, it's amazing. It's ridiculously relaxing and washing away the layer of grime feels great. You don't know how you manage to forget that a shower does wonders for you.

Not that you're magically cured or anything. Your mind is still in a million places. It had started like it does every now and then, a vivid nightmare. To be fair, it started before that, but the nightmare made everything spiral all that much faster. When you would try to push it out of your mind it would only
be replaced by other shitty feelings jumping on the opportunity. Right now those thoughts were centered on what just happened between you and Dave, both in your room and on the roof. His persistence. The concern in his voice. The way he came after you even after you yelled at him. He even brought you food. No, no it's all just wishful thinking.

You remind yourself that he's human. He doesn't know what he's doing. Humans are just like that. They'll bond with anything. They're a social cooperative species. You're not special and it didn't mean anything. It was just a convenience. His roommate was concerned and it was distracting him so he took the matter into his own hands. You're not special.

Even if it did mean anything, as soon as he saw how messed up you really are, he'd bail. There's a reason you've never had a real moirallegiance. There have been people interested before, but it never got past a certain point. You were just too much. They "weren't experience enough" to handle you. You were "too intense" "too unbalanced".

But that doesn't matter because it didn't mean anything. You thunk your head against the wall and refuse to acknowledge the ache in your chest. You need to get your shit together. A little while and a little soap later you're getting out of the shower. You tousle your hair dry and wrap a towel around your waist before peeking your head out of the bathroom. Dave is gone. You open the door the rest of the way and step out into your room. It looks a lot better. The trash is gone and your clothes, even the semi-clean ones, have been picked up and put in the hamper. Guess you'll be doing the laundry today. He left your stuff alone, but you prefer it that way. Its embarrassing enough that he did those two things for you. You had only just thrown on some jeans and a t-shirt when there's a knock at the door.

You open it to see Roxy and Karkat. He's a little surprised that you opened the door so quickly. Or maybe its the wet hair implying that you showered. His surprise draws back to a scowl fairly quickly. "He's your problem now, Roxy. Eat a sandwich, dumbass." He shoves a sandwich, clearly smuggled out of the cafeteria in a napkin, into your hands before giving Roxy a look and storming off back to his room. Love you too, kk. The corner of your mouth twitches into a weak smile. He's a good friend and you're lucky to have him.

"Alright you," Roxy says as she grabs your shoulders and steers you backward into the room. "Here's what we're gonna do. First, you're gonna eat that sandwich while I START your laundry. Then we're gonna go through your project because it's due next class."

"Oh Roxy, you're going to give me the vapors if you keep talking like that." She gives you a look because you're being a smartass and a gentle shove so you sit on the edge of the bed. "Eat."

"Yes, ma'am."

She rolls her eyes at you. "Where do you keep the laundry soap?" You point up to the shelf on top of your closet. You've got those little pod things. She grabs one and tosses it on top of the laundry basket before looking around curiously. "Did you clean?"

You put your hand to your chest in mock offense and swallow the food in your mouth before responding. "You say that like I never do." She crosses her arms and shifts her weight to one leg, her head tilting to the side. "Okay, you got me. Dave did. He owed me a solid. Barged his way in here and declared that he was redeeming it for me." That's not exactly how it went down, but you're allowed to retain some of your dignity.

Her expression softens at this. "He's a good guy." There's a glimmer of sadness in her eyes. It's only
there for a moment before she shifts her focus back to you. She walks over and leans down, gently letting her fingertips rest at the base of your horns, and kisses the top of your head. "I'll be back in a few. You better be here and you better open that door for me." She goes to pick up the basket and shifts it to her hip so she can gesture with two of her fingers from her eyes to you rather pointedly, before maneuvering out the door. There's that sweetness again. Too sweet to be hate, but still antagonistic and full of fire.

When she comes back, the two of you go over what still needs to be done with your project. Luckily it isn't much, and when the alarm Roxy set for the laundry goes off, you're just about done looking it over. She shoo's you off to go move your stuff to the dryer while she looks at the progress you've made. It's riddled with errors and she makes sure to point that out. You're really off your game, but it's more than you would have accomplished otherwise. When you're laundry is done and crammed back in your dresser-- Roxy tried to tell you to fold it, but couldn't keep a straight face, you flop back onto the bed. Roxy flops down beside you, letting her arm drape over your stomach.

"Am I done being responsible yet?"

"Yeah, that's enough to satisfy Karkat's request that I make you functional again." She props herself up on her elbows and looms over you. There's a reckless smile on her face that says she's been keeping part of the plan from you. "Now, it's time for therapy Roxy style." She springs up and off the bed before pulling you to your feet. Oh, you know where this is going and you could not approve more.

 ==> Sollux: Be a degenerate

The barcade isn't too far from campus for obvious reasons. It's a little bit of a trek, but not unreasonable. You can cheat the distance a bit on the way there though. It's dark out when you take Roxy's hand and pull the two of you into the sky. You don't actually have to make contact with her for your psionics to carry her, but you want to.

You touch back down when you're a little more than halfway there on one of the back roads. There's a burst of light behind your cupped hand as you light a joint, followed by a familiar soft orange glow. You tell yourself that this afternoon doesn't count because it was only one hit, two if you count the one Dave interrupted when he climbed up the ladder, but you don't. Barely anything. You're fine. You're out to have fun with Roxy. It's fine.

You turn down a side street and downtown is now in your line of sight. You take another drag and hold it before blowing it up and out into the night sky. "You want a shottie?" you ask before you move to snuff it out.

"Hit me," Roxy says as she stops and turns to face you. Her eyes are all lit up in anticipation of the fun you're going to have tonight. You take another drag. This one you don't hold in as long and instead you pull Roxy closer, one hand on her jaw, lips barely touching as you slowly exhale and let her take the smoke from your lungs. She never smokes with you, but sometimes she'll ask for that, and sometimes you'll offer. She prefers her vices in liquid form.

She steals a kiss and you smile into it before she pulls away. She always blows the smoke out of her nose like a dragon. It's cute. You snuff out what's left of the joint on the side of your shoe before returning it to the thin plastic tube it came out of. It's supposed to be for holding cigaret butts, saving the environment and whatnot, but it's perfect for this the way the stopper seals away the smell.

The barcade was originally an arcade so it has that tacky trippy UV reactive carpeting throughout most of the place. There are rows of older cabinets taking up most of the back corner, it blends into
newer cabinets and shooter games, then the rhythm games, booths, and the claw machines ending at the front. The arcade side is separated from the bar by two air hockey tables and a wealth of places to sit down to eat or otherwise chill. Crammed in the other back corner are a few pool tables near the patio exit.

Roxy makes a b-line for the bar while you go get tokens. You two never spend more than a few dollars. Arcades aren't expensive if you don't suck. Except for the DDR machine; it takes no prisoners with it's set quantity of time.

You have two machines that you consider your machines; Galaga and Gyruss. Roxy's are Duck Hunt and Time Crisis. You can give her a run for her money when you play doubles with her on Time Crisis because it's Time Crisis and amazing. Who doesn't love Time Crisis? She's not bad with a joystick either and is always keeping you on your toes with your Galaga score. You both hold the high scores on your respective machines. Although lately, someone who goes by DSTRI has been climbing your leaderboards along with those on a few other machines. You head over to the Galaga machine and sure enough, that bastard has crept up to the fourth slot.

"Oh, hells no. Get 'em, babe." Roxy says before chugging down nearly half her drink. You need very little encouragement to knock this guy off your board. You pop in a token and get ready as the theme plays. You have twin fighters in the hottest of seconds and are blowing through stages. You're completely zeroed in on this and barely notice that Roxy left and came back until she's over your shoulder again with commentary such as "fuck em up, Sollux", "oh shit oh shit oh shit", "Nooooo", "Twin fighters, huh?"

She wanders off to check her own scoreboards and leaves you to it. You eventually die and wait to see the final results. Take that DSTRI. You knock the mystery player down to fifth and put your name in. The cap is 6 characters so it just makes it.

You head over toward the light gun games and see Roxy knocking ducks out of the sky at high speed. She holds the zapper like a rifle, aiming with her locked left arm, her stance solid and determined. It's impressive. The dog gets her in the end, as it always does, but she blows on the barrel in triumph having cleared enough levels to knock some chump off her board.

You do a few rounds of light gun games together-- you can never seem to beat her at House of the Dead, before she pulls you back to the bar. It's her third you think. You steal a swig and make your way back over to the machines. Soon enough she's pulling you over to the dance games. They're occupied, but that's okay. It gives her time to enjoy her drink. You stick your token on the machine and half lean, half sit on one of the faux speakers on either side of it. She takes a sip of her drink before wrapping her arms around your neck and leaning in close to your ear.

"You look stoned as shit," she whispers before trying and failing to stifle a laugh.

"eheheh, I wonder why."

"I wanna kiss you."

"Only if you beat me."

She pulls away and gets a steeled look in her eye as she leans back and points at you with the bottle in her hand. "Get ready to pucker up, lover boy. And no special fx." One of the other machines frees up and she runs over to it. You grab your token off the machine you were leaning against and switch to the one Roxy is feeding coins into.

You put up a good fight. Honest, you did.
"Suck it, Captor! Lalonde reins supreenn." She grabs the front of your shirt and practically smashes her face into yours. Your back hits the machine and the kiss breaks apart to come back together in a more cohesive, but just as aggressive manner. It leaves you dazed. When she lets you up she winks at you and chugs the rest of her drink. You swear she does that when you're spaced on purpose.

You get yourself some water after all that movement and only then realize how thirsty you are. Roxy presses a bottle into your hand and says she's gotta take a wicked piss. You nod and tell her you'll be out back. It must be getting late because the crowd has gotten significantly thicker. When you push your way through and open the patio door, you're greeted by a blast of cool air. It's almost as sobering as it is refreshing.

There are some other people out here. It's less a patio and more the alley behind the building with a few tables and chairs. There's a troll standing with her back to you. She has long black curly hair and her horns curl back and around just like...

"Aradia?" you whisper so faintly that you're not even sure you said it. She turns to her friend and it is most certainly not Aradia. You shake away the thought, take out the little plastic container and ascend to the roof. You're only up there for a few minutes when you see Roxie's pink hair. You float her drink back to her and she looks up at you.

You'll play fast and loose with your own well being when you're fucked up, but you won't use your psionics on others. You hold up a finger and take one last long drag before tossing the roach with the other ones up here for whoever is desperate enough to take them. You float back down to her and stumble a bit when you land.

She laughs and wraps her arms around you, sending the both of you stumbling in the other direction and into the wall. You resign to leaning up against it. Roxy spins around so her back is pressed to you instead. You space out for a bit there, content with the weight against you, and are only brought back to earth when Roxy steals your glasses.

"Wanna get outta here?" she asks, looking up at you over your glasses.

"Fuck yeah."

The two of you stumble back to campus, back to your dorm, and into the elevator. Everything is hazy and warm. She hits a button. It's not your floor. You're going to her room. It's only a matter of moments before you're falling back into her down comforter. It's like a fucking cloud and it feels good against your skin. She curls up next to you. You let your mind wander.

"You're right, Roxy," you say after some time.

"Mhm, totlly. What's I'm right 'bout?" she slurs partly because she's really drunk and partly you think because she may have been falling asleep.

"Dave's cool." She laughs and rolls over and then back to look at you.

"Dave'so far frm cool. You dun even know."

"No, like," You laugh into her neck. "You were right. I don't not like, wait, no. I. Dave is okay."

"I knew itttt," she gloats as she scoots over to lay half on top of you. You wrap your arms around her. This is nice. You like this. It's simple. It's-- oh.

"Your knee is in my crotch."
"mmm's my thigh. has a time-share."

A small chuckle escapes you. You let her win that one. You know she wants more than you're giving her. She is literally on top of you. All you would have to do is ask. But you don't.

"Roxy?" She makes a hm? sound and picks her head up off your chest to look at you. "Hypothetic hypothetically speaking," you pause to re-collect your thought. "would it be okay, would you be okay with me having a moirail?" She lets her head fall back against you and gives you a squeeze.

"mmmm. am yur kissisisis."  

You think that was a yes. You should probably ask her again later. If you have the guts to.
Dumb Anime Shades

Chapter Notes

tw panic attack

it's fairly detailed so reader beware etcetera etcetera

also idk but i was fucking feeling youth by glass animals while writing this so yeah

edit: I'm bad at math. fixed some numerical errors in relation to their ages.

===> Be Dave

Today is the day. You've waited seven long years for this. Seven years of sneaking around, of pretending, of waking up in a cold sweat alone, or worse, with that creepy puppet, Cal, on top of you. But it all ends today.

You are beyond amped as you hop off the bus and make your way down the street. Dirk had the morning shift today. He didn't say where of course, but you're meeting up after he gets out to grab a slice and catch up. It's a little farther in than the area where the college kids usually hang around. The electronics shop is up here so you're a little familiar with the area, but it's still pretty new to you.

The pizzeria he told you about, the one with the brick oven, should be right around here somewhere. You're about to pull out your phone and check your maps app when you see him. White collar, black pants, pointed shades. Not Dirk, Bro. He almost has his back to you. You swear you can feel the color drain from your face. You're frozen to the spot on the corner where you stand, until he turns, not completely toward you, but you can tell by the subtle way his head snaps that he's seen you.

And suddenly your body remembers it has legs. Your heart races and you bolt down side streets and alleyways blindly without any idea of a direction except away and fast. You're gasping for air, but you keep moving, flash stepping to change direction on a dime. The world around you is a blur.

How did he find you so quickly? You're almost 2,000 miles away. You were so careful. Dirk was so careful. He took risks, sure, but he had to. None of your friends would have ratted you out. Not even the girls' mother would have ratted you out. As awful as she is, she and Bro are estranged. Where did you go wrong? Where did you fuck up? It had to be you. You must have left something behind that tipped him off.

You turn down another side street and collide with something fast and hard. You break your own fall and spring back on your feet, years of horrendous training having given you some odd, but useful reflexes. However, when you try to open your eyes, you're greeted by blinding light. Your shades must have been knocked off when you hit...oh god what did you hit? Who did you hit? You don't realize you're backing away until you feel the wall behind you. You can see a figure, but your eyes can't adjust fast enough to see who it is. You're so fucking dead. He's gonna be so mad. He hits you hard enough when he isn't pissed at you.

"Who's there?" you shout. It's difficult to get the words out. You're still breathing pretty hard. You're
sword drops into your left hand from your strife specibus. They're still coming towards you. "Get away from me!" You go to back away, but you're still up against the wall. You tighten your grip on your sword and try to brace for the strife you know is coming.

"Dave, calm down. It's me."

Not Bro. It's not Bro.

"Sollux?" You can barely get his name out. You're still panting so hard. You're gasping for air, but you just can't seem to catch your breath. Is that you making that sound? It's awful. Like a shriek played in reverse with the volume turned down. Your sword disappears back into your specibus. He's coming closer and you can see him a little better, but everything is still so bright that you can only open your eyes to thin slits. You bring your hand up to try to blot out the sun. You're legs falter and now the wall is the only thing keeping you upright.

"Dave, what's wrong?" He's moving slowly and carefully. His hands brace your shoulders. You're shaking. Your lips are going numb. "Hey, look at me. Dave, look at me. Shit, you're hyperventilating."

"Can't. See."

"You can't see? Like, at all?"

Your shades, they're clipped to his shirt. He must have seen you drop them. You reach out for them, but forget about the sun and are treated to a not so great surprise.

"Whoa," you hear him say. He probably saw your eyes before you shut them again. That's the least of your concerns right now. You fumble for your glasses, but your fingers won't cooperate. "I got it." As soon as he lets go of you, you slide further down the wall to the ground. Your legs are all pins and needles. You still can't catch your breath, but your shades are being slid back onto your face. You can see again.

"I can't. Breathe."

"It's okay. Here." He uncaps a water bottle and presses it into your hand, making sure your fingers curl around it. You still nearly drop it and have to hold it with both hands instead. "Slow. That's it." When you pull it away, breathing is a little easier. You drink more before it can speed up again, but it goes down wrong and you start coughing. You're pulled forward and then there is a hand on your back rubbing slow circles. You try again, sipping the water slower this time. He's in front of you now asking what happened. It all comes back to you in a flash and your eyes dart in panic as you look for Bro. He could be anywhere. Always look up. That's what he told you.

"Whoa, take it easy. You're okay, Dave," Sollux says, tightly gripping your shoulders again as you try and fail to get to your feet. You're legs still won't cooperate. It's no good. You need to move. You're dead in the water like this.

"No, Bro is here." You swallow hard and make that awful gasping sound again as you try to take in air. "He's here. Knows I was. Seeing Dirk." Your words are punctuated by desperate gulps of air. Sollux pushes the water toward you again and has to remind you not to drink so fast. "Not safe. Need to get out of here. Not safe," you pant. You lean back against the brick wall. It's the first time you've really looked at him. It's because he's making you look at him. His hand is on your jaw. His eyes are locked on yours and he's speaking softly to you.

"Dave, you're safe. It's okay."
"No, he's coming, he's--"

"Dave," He interrupts you. His's voice is gentle, but firm and calls your attention. "I can shoot lasers from my eyes. I'm pretty sure you'll be fine." He smiles reassuringly.

"You what?" It's weird enough to momentarily snap you from your panic. You drink more water. You can almost breathe again, but the progress feels so fragile like you could slip back under at any moment.

"Dave, do you know what's going on?" He keeps using your name. It's weirdly comforting, grounding. You shake you're head. Maybe you're dying. Fuck if you know. "You're panicking. You need to try to breathe more normally. Hold your breath for a few seconds and try again. Through your nose, out your mouth. Lean forward." You follow his directions, latching onto his arm as you bend toward him and let your head hang. You can tell you're starting to feel better because shame is a thing again. This is suddenly incredibly embarrassing. "I'm sorry," you choke out because you have no idea what else to say. He just keeps rubbing your back while you keep breathing.

There's a sudden shift in the air and you sit bolt upright. He's there at the end of the alley. You're eyes go wide and your grip on Sollux tightens. Bro. His name is stuck on repeat as your mind reels in panic again. And then the strangest thing happens. A sensation not unlike static spreads over your skin. Red and Blue lightning arcs off of Sollux, crackling and sparking. His eyes are glowing and he's making this low sound that you can barely hear, like it's only just teetering on the threshold you can perceive, but you can feel it thrumming through him. Safe. He said you were safe. That fucker wasn't kidding.

It's distracting enough to halt you from completely undoing all the work you just did calming down. And then you see it. Bro is holding his hands up, palms out in front of himself like he's surrendering. Bro would never do that. The scar on his neck. Not Bro. Dirk. It's Dirk.

"Sollux, wait. That's Dirk. It's not him." You force out, tugging his arm and trying to move between them unsuccessfully. You only manage to pull yourself to your knees, but that's okay because it seems that Sollux understood. The lightning is gone and the static on your skin has dissipated.

He's coming over slowly with his hands still up until he's sure Sollux has stood down. Polo shirt. It's grey, not white. Black pants. They're slacks, not jeans. No piercings... because he was coming from work. He's in his work clothes.

"Sorry." His voice comes out of the small red box strapped to his neck even though he moves his mouth. You know it's mostly there for show. It's just a speaker bluetoothed to his shades, nothing special. It's only on his neck so people don't ask questions. The ugly scar across it answers enough. "I know I look a lot like him. I should have... I didn't realize until you took off running." It wasn't like Bro wore the same thing all the time, but it was something he wore an awful lot.

You hold up your fist for him to bump it. Your voice is still shaky when you speak. "It's cool." He smiles and doesn't leave you hanging. You stare at him. You aren't sure what to feel right now. Mostly you feel overwhelmed. The embarrassment is still very much present though. You glance over to the troll on your right. You're still holding onto him; he looks uncertain and a little uncomfortable. Well, shit. Things are already weird. Might as well go full tilt. You launch yourself at Dirk, wrapping your arms around his neck and burying your face in his collar. You missed him so much.

"Whoa, hey there." He says as he catches his balance. Arms come around you a second later, holding you just as tightly. You stay that way until you hear Sollux clear his throat.
"Should I go?" This is probably super weird for him. You crash into him, freak the hell out, and now you're over here having the worlds most unconventional family reunion in front of him.

"Sorry, man," You laugh nervously. "this is Dirk, my older bro."

"Not the 'bro' you were talking about?"

"No, that's Bro with a capital b. Not short for brother. My older older brother though." Sollux raises an eyebrow and looks up like he's trying to parse that and figure out what Bro is short for, but he doesn't ask. "If you want to peace out, it's fine. You probably weren't standing here all day just waiting for me to run into you at mach five chock full of crazy."

He looks to the side at his backpack. It's on its side and some of its contents are spilled out like it was opened in a hurry. There's a small box that says SSD in big letters on the side. "I was just picking up a hard drive. Been meaning to fix my husktop. You didn't interrupt much." That's good. You would have felt bad if you freaking the fuck out had made him miss something or be late somewhere. "I'll get going." You nod and give a weak wave in lu of an actual response. He picks up his bag and stands to leave before looking back hesitantly. You think he's checking to make sure he didn't miss anything until he speaks to you. "If...if you want to like, talk about this later. That'd be okay." He turns his face away.

It could be that you're still in mental disarray, but you think you may actually take him up on that. He really seemed to know what was going on, and you should thank him properly when you can more reliably string together sentences. "I, yeah, thanks. I'll catch ya later." He glances over his shoulder and gives you a quick wave as he disappears down the alley.

Dirk comes to sit next to you and you lean against his shoulder. Sollux's water, your water now you guess, is still in your hand. There isn't much left. You take a sip.

"Your friend is terrifying."

"What?" you say with a weak sort of disbelieving laugh.

"Did you see all the energy that came off that kid? And that was just a warning shot. He was ready to fuck me up."

You don't really have a frame of reference for how powerful psionics are. You guess Dirk does and apparently Sollux is pretty strong.

"He thought you were Bro. I think I said some shit about that."

"I bet."

"Part of my mouth is numb."

"That can happen."

"My legs too."

"It'll come back in a minute."

He wraps his arm around you and rubs your shoulder. There's a tight feeling in your chest. You don't want to stay here anymore.

"Help me up?" You ask him. He pulls you to your feet, but when you go to stand your foot isn't having it. You wince and carefully test your weight on it. You were making some pretty wicked
turns back there, you must have twisted it.

"Here, hop on," Dirk says, kneeling down so you can climb on his back.

"I'm not five, Dirk." You are not being piggybacked out of this alley.

"It's either this or I carry you."

You are being piggybacked out of the alley. It really isn't so bad. It's kind of nice actually. You're still pretty shaken up and Dirk has always made you feel safe. Well, safer you suppose. It was never really safe. You must have gotten turned around somehow while you were running because it doesn't feel like it takes too long to get back to where you started. He takes you to the parking lot and kneels down beside a beat-up Jeep, the kind you can take the cover off of and drive with the back and side open. You suspect it used to be yellow, but he spray painted it black. Dirk would do that. Best to not stand out if you're hiding. He goes around to the driver's side and unlocks it. You pull on the handle too soon and he has to unlock it again for you. You hop up onto the seat and undo your laces before gently tugging off your shoe. This isn't the first time you've been through this and it won't be fun if your ankle swells later. "I figure you're not up to getting pizza right now, so how about we go back to the apartment and order in. We can wrap your foot up too."

"Yeah, sounds good." Your voice is a little shaky. You pull up your hood like a security blanket and buckle yourself in. The car starts up and you mostly zone out for the drive there, staring out the window, but not really paying attention to the world passing by you. Doesn't take long before you're there. The neighborhood doesn't exactly look nice, but it's not awful either. This time Dirk just scoops you up for the short walk to the door. It's on the upper level of the two-story building. Thankfully no one is around to see you being babied like this. Totally not cool, but you'll always be a kid in your brother's eyes you suppose. He used to patch you up like this all the time.

You're set down on the sofa and Dirk disappears to another room, the bathroom you assume, and comes back with an ace bandage. "It doesn't look too bad. You should be good as long as you stay off it for a few days." He says as he wraps it up. "You have classes tomorrow? I think Jake might have crutches if you need them."

"Nah, I'm good for the weekend. So who is Jake?" Dirk's face goes red and he looks down and away. You chuckle. "Is he your boyfriend?" You tease in a singsong tone.

"He might be," He mumbles.

"He is." A different voice comes out of the red box strapped to Dirk's neck. He looks betrayed as he quickly covers the speaker with his hand.

"Hey, Hal," you say.

"Hello, Dave. Good to see you again." It comes through a bit muffled, but you can still hear it. Dirk takes his shades off, pulls the speaker off his neck, and sets them both on the table. "You two can catch up. While I order the pizza."

You hold back the frown that threatens to appear at the sound of Dirk's actual voice. A permanent reminder of just how far Bro will go. Sure Bro was tough on the both of you, but up until that point, you never thought he'd go that far. Dirk thinks Bro meant to kill him, and you certainly don't blame him for that assumption. You though, you're not entirely sure if that was his intention, or if he lost control, and you aren't sure which is worse. You catch up with Hal for a bit until Dirk sits down next to you and flicks on the tv. "How're you doing? Are you alright?" He asks. You take a deep breath and nod your head.
"Yeah, sort of. Better than before." The memory is still fresh and the fear is still an afterimage in your mind. Something else is there too though. Some feeling you're unsure of. You don't know what it is exactly, just that it's tied to Sollux. You must have zoned out a little because there is a hand on your shoulder suddenly, jarring you from thought.

"I'll be right back. Gonna change." He disappears and you're left alone with Hal. His eyes appear on the shades like he's shifted his focus back to you.

"He's looking more and more like Bro. You would think they're twins." He says in that voice you know is more robotic than need be. He modulates Dirk's voice, or what used to be his voice, just fine.

"Yeah, I noticed," you say with a huff.

"It bothers him too."

"I imagine it would bother anyone to look like the guy who tried to kill you." You not sure what Hal is getting at and you're not really in the mood for it anyway. You feel ripped open and raw. Things you've been jamming down inside are starting to bubble to the surface. Dirk comes back out looking much more like himself. He's got his piercings jammed back in his ears and his eyebrow, and his tattoos are on display with his sleeveless hoodie. Bro always hated his tattoos, the piercings too. You think Dirk pierced his tongue just to spite him.

The doorbell rings and Dirk goes to grab the food. He's in the kitchen for a bit before he comes back with your slices and a glass of AJ. It puts a small smile on your face. You're not really hungry anymore, but you eat regardless. Dirk sits down with slices of his own and some orange soda. He tells you about what he's been doing. This Jake guy turns out to be the same Jake as the one in your extended friend group. Even if you don't talk to Jake that often, and he's more so Jade's brother to you, the fact that you didn't know only reminds you how out of the loop you are on Dirk's life. He's got a job doing some basic tech support and making frankentops on the side. He tells you it's amazing what people will throw away, perfectly fixable computers. He's given up on college, but he's trying to cobble together different certifications to prove his skills. They cost a fair chunk of change though, so it's been slow going.

You find out that he's been claiming you as a dependant for the past year, and you're on his health insurance. He laughs and says it isn't the worst fraud he's committed. You know he's referring to how Rose and Roxy helped him and Hal skim their mother's bank account when he really needed money. They had it down to a science how much and how often they could take without her noticing. You remember that time, right after Dirk got kicked out. Bro changed the locks so Dirk couldn't come back after he got out of the hospital.

"You look tired. Do you want me to take you back to the school?" You nod. It's been a hell of a day. It's barely dark out, but you fully intend to embrace unconsciousness the second you get back.

==> Be Sollux

You are a terrible, awful, awful person. You were doing a half decent job of telling your feelings to fuck off, but after today it is painfully obvious. You pity Dave; you pity him so hard. You pull the covers over your head and curl up into a ball. What were you supposed to do though? Just leave him there?

You know what that feeling was now. You couldn't put your prong on it before when the two of you
were up there on the roof that night, but it's clear now. Dave is all broken up inside just like you, and you felt that. To a certain extent, you don't give a fuck that people know you're crazy. It's not like you walk around openly displaying your feelings, but it's old news that you're messed up in the head. Not for Dave though. He has this shell around him, a wall he's put up, and it's full of cracks. How long it's been that way you don't know.

You replay it in your head. You caught yourself with your psionics, but he pulled off some kind of freakish acrobatics and sprung back up on his feet. Then he brandished a fucking sword at you, terrified out of his mind like a feral beast.

And you just rushed to him like a desperate fool. Nearly stepped on those sunglasses, which apparently aren't really sunglasses so much as they are prescription lenses. You've never seen eyes like those. You didn't think humans could have red eyes. You gather that they aren't supposed to.

He needed you, and a part of you really liked that he needed you. You feel horribly guilty about that. Gog, you're a pale harlot. The whole thing was wildly inappropriate. 'But he needed you,' you tell yourself. There was no one else to help. Even if there was, would he have trusted them? He trusted you completely. As soon as he knew it was you he put away his weapon. He couldn't SEE and he let you get within arm's length of him. The way he clung to you, you nearly chirped at him.

And holy shit, you growled at his brother. He couldn't have possibly heard it, but it doesn't erase the fact that you did it. You have a massive pale crush on Dave and the worst part is that he's entirely oblivious. It's not just that he's oblivious to your feelings, but oblivious to the implications of your actions and how terribly terribly unseemly it was of you. You can't even apologize because he doesn't understand what you did wrong. But he needed you. He wanted your help. He thanked you.

You make a nasally whine and turn over to curl up in the other direction. Uggh, and then you proceeded to solicit him instead of just sweeping everything under the rug and pretending it never happened. You are scum.

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

[TA]: kk ii fucked up.

[TA]: ii fucked up 2o bad.

[CG]: ARE YOU OKAY?

[TA]: phy2iically ye2.

[CG]: WHAT DID YOU DO?

[TA]: ii pale 2oliiciited dave liike two 2econd2 after he had a paniic attack because iim a fuckiing creep.

[CG]: YOU WHAT?

[CG]: OKAY IM GOING TO NEED YOU TO ELABORATE ON THAT BECAUSE HE CAME BACK HERE ACTING ALL WEIRD A LITTLE WHILE AGO

[TA]: weiird how?

[CG]: SOME GUY BROUGHT HIM UP HERE. SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH HIS FOOT AND HE'S EERILY QUIET. THIS GUY NEVER SHUTS THE FUCK UP. IT'S UNCANNY. WHAT DID YOU DO?
[TA]: he'2 hurt?

[TA]: ii wa2 going two piick up a new 22d for my laptop and on the way back he ju2t came running out of nowhere.

[TA]: he cra2hed riight iinto me and proceeded two freak out liike 2ome cornered bea2t he wa2 terrifiiied.

[TA]: iit wa2 hard to under2tand hiim but he 2eemed two thiink 2omeone wa2 after hiim.

[TA]: he wa2 going two pa22 out ii if ii diidn't do 2omethiing ii 2wear!

[TA]: what wa2 ii 2upo2ed two do ju2t leave hiim there?

[CG]: YOU SOUND LIKE YOU'RE TRYING TO JUSTIFY YOURSELF, BUT IT ISN'T ENTIRELY UNREASONABLE.

[CG]: DO YOU KNOW WHO THAT GUY WAS?

[TA]: hii2 brother maybe?

[TA]: wa2 he weariing dumb aniime 2hade2?

[CG]: YES. I THOUGHT *DAVE'S* GLASSES WERE DUMB, BUT IT WOULD SEEM HE IS ACTUALLY THE MORE NORMAL ONE. WHO WOULD HAVE GUESSED.

[CG]: SO WHAT EXACTLY DID YOU DO TO SOLICIT HIM? I DON'T THINK MEDICAL ATTENTION REALLY QUALIFIES.

[TA]: hii2 brother 2howed up ii gue22 they were meetiing 2omeplace when he freaked out.

[TA]: before ii left ii told hiim we could talk about iit later ii if he wanted.

[CG]: SOLLUX, FOR A GUY WHO'S SO FUCKING SMART, YOU'RE A REAL DUMBASS SOMETIMES. DID HE SEEM COOL WITH IT OR DID HE TELL YOU TO GO FUCK YOURSELF?

[TA]: he 2eemed not oppo2ed two the idea.

[CG]: CONGRATZ, IT WOULD APPEAR YOU GAVE SOMEONE MEDICAL ATTENTION AND THEN OFFERED TO FOLLOW UP WITH THEM LATER.

[TA]: no iit'2 not ju2t that!

[TA]: there were feeling2!

[TA]: ii growled at hii2 brother for fuck2 2ake.

[TA]: he wa2 2o 2cared and iit'2 not liike ii knew iit wa2 hii2 bro.

[CG]: OKAY WELL, THAT IS A LITTLE DIFFERENT, BUT IT'S STILL REALLY NOT AS BAD AS YOU'RE MAKING IT OUT TO BE. AND HONESTLY, I DOUBT HE SEES IT THAT WAY. HE'S NOT EXACTLY WELL VERSED IN TROLL CULTURE, WHICH IS UNDERSTANDABLE SINCE HE'S FROM TEXAS.

[CG]: SO YOU THREW YOURSELF AT YOUR PALE CRUSH, WHICH I TOTALLY
CALLED BY THE WAY, JUST SAYING, AND MADE A FOOL OF YOURSELF. BIG DEAL. IT HAPPENS. IF HE'S ACTUALLY ANGRY AT YOU, WHICH I HIGHLY DOUBT, JUST APOLOGIZE AND MOVE ON.

[TA]: ii gue22 you're riight.

[CG]: OF COURSE I AM, ASSHOLE.

[CG]: DO YOU WANT TO WATCH A MOVIE?

[TA]: yeah, 2ure.

[CG]: GREAT, I'LL BE OVER IN A SECOND.

carcinoGeneticist [CG] has ceased trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

===> Be Dirk

You're lying in bed with Jake. You've got your head resting on his shoulder while he plays with your hair and lets you talk close by his ear. It's hard for you to project your voice, but at this volume, it almost sounds like it used to, like you could simply be whispering. When you asked him to spend the night he probably didn't have this in mind.

"I didn't notice until I saw my reflection in the window. I was going to message him, tell him I was going to be late, but he was already there. I could see him in the glass, just standing there. I barely moved and he bolted. I've never seen him run so fast." Jake stops running his fingers through your hair so that he can place a kiss to your temple. When he speaks, it's against your skin.

"I don't think it can really be helped that you look so similar to your brother, but I hardly think that to be the only factor at play here." You make a questioning sound against his neck and he continues. "Well, he's all discombobulated right now. He's been up here not even a month. Plus he hasn't seen you in years, photographs maybe, but he hasn't seen you in person in a long time. You've changed since then, you're older, probably taller, broader, more muscular" you give him a playful nudge at the way he starts talking like he's getting distracted by a particular mental image of you. "Okay okay, the fact of the matter is that your overall shape combined with what you were wearing simply slotted better in his noggin as being Bro shaped at a glance. From there it was just panic induced trickery."

On some level, you knew this, but you really needed to hear it from someone else who wasn't also you. "You're right. I just worry about him. He's doing fine and it's not like he's alone up there. He's got Roxy in the same building and her...what was it called...the spade one...kismesis; Roxy's kismesis is right across the hall from him." Jake shifts to lay on his side and you snuggle up against him, tangling your legs with his and burying yourself in his embrace.

"He's the troll kid you found Dave with, right?"

"Yeah, I had never met him before, but Roxy sent me a photo once. He's something else, Jake."

"What makes you say that?"

"You know how Hal is built into my shades?"

"How could I forget?"
"I mean, okay, so sometimes when I would strife with Bro, Hal would feed me combat advice. He would tell me to evade or point out attack openings, things like that. That guy, when he thought I was there to hurt Dave, he was lit up like a goddamn Christmas tree. Hal told me to run."

"That's pretty gosh darn intense, Dirk. Roxy sure knows how to pick em."

He laughs and it makes you laugh too until it dissolves into a hum and then a comfortable silence between you as you occupy the same space. Dave will be okay. He has people around him now who can help him. You got him out, you got him here, and while you would sooner die than let anything happen to him, it's not only up to you. Things will calm down. It'll be better next time you see him. You know it will.

You tilt your head up. "Hey, Jake?" you say against his throat. He doesn't look down.

"Yes, Dirk?"

You kiss his neck and feel him shiver. "So you think I'm broad and muscular and flexible?"

He laughs deep in his throat. "I don't remember saying you were flexible."

"I think you might be right." You press up against him and kiss his neck again a little lower. "Guess we'll have to test that theory." His hand guides you by the jaw to meet his gaze as he looks at you.

"For science, huh?"

"Of course."

==>

You hadn't really planned on doing anything this weekend, but now that you can't, you find yourself incredibly bored. What did you even do on the internet all the time? Right now you can't seem to recall anything remotely entertaining. Maybe you're just distracted. There has been an awful lot on your mind in the past 48 hours.

You were still too worked up yesterday to talk to Sollux, but you really shouldn't put it off for too long. The longer you wait, the bigger a deal it becomes until it turns into this awkward unspoken thing between the two of you and you never speak to him again and that would suck so much. That thought actually physically hurts you somewhere in your chest. Never speaking to Sollux again because you bruised your ego? That's not a future you're down with at all. He's snarky and a little weird, but you think you might legitimately enjoy his company.

---

**turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering twinArmageddons [TA]**

[TG]: hey

[TG]: are you actually online

[TG]: shit whatever ill just get this out before it gets weird

[TG]: look about the other day i just wanted to say thanks you really seemed to know what you were doing there like 10/10 stars would recommend to friends and neighbors

[TG]: it was cool of you and
[TG]: if hallmark makes a card for sorry i threatened you with a katana i will slap my money on the counter so fast

[TG]: the cashier wont know what hit em

[TG]: you back yet

[TG]: nope

[TG]: guess ill keep talking

[TG]: since im already down here stroking your ego my brother thinks you are terrifying

[TG]: i have the most limited frame of reference for your tesla coil fuckery but i guess your shit is wack because dirk isnt exactly the kind to be easily intimidated

[TA]: my 2hiit ii2 iindeed wack.

[TA]: let me know iif you fiind a ’2orry ii threatened two vaporii2e your brother' card whiile you are looking for miine.

[TG]: welcome back

[TG]: or welcome i guess

[TA]: you are diifficult to ignore.

[TG]: its a gift

[TG]: but yeah so thanks and what not

[TA]: no problem.

[TA]: ii’ve been there before and iiit 2uck2 a22 0/0000 1010.

[TG]: nerd

[TA]: ye2, that ii2 kiind of my thiing.

[TA]: 2o, ii have a que2tiion.

[TG]: shoot

[TA]: iiit’2 a biit iiironic comiing from me.

[TG]: well now you have me interested

[TG]: im always down for some of that sweet sweet irony

[TG]: lay on the cringe

[TA]: iim going to pretend that ii totally beliieve you under2tand what iiirony actually ii2 for the 2ake of gettiing to my poiint.

[TA]: 2o what i2 up wiith your eye2?

[TA]: ii diidn’t thiiink that wa2 a color human2 could have.
[TG]: so you know how roxy has pink eyes

[TG]: mine are like the same but worse

[TA]: are you telling me that that ii2 the actual color of roxy’2 eye2?

[TG]: are you telling me you don’t know what color your girlfriends eyes are

[TA]: 2he ii2n’t my giirllfriend 2he ii2 my kii2me2ii2.

[TG]: whatever

[TG]: you dont know what color eyes your hate mate has

[TA]: ii can’t beliieve thii2 the entiire tiime ii thought they were contact2.

[TA]: new que2tiion.

[TA]: why do you and roxy have weiird eye2?

[TG]: shitty genetics the whole fam has weird eyes but im the big winner of the photosensitivity jackpot giant paper check of hope you like darkness bitch

[TG]: apparently god has taken the time to wipe instead of just continuously shitting on me tho because dirk thought ahead to put me on his insurance so i can go see one of those real live eye doctors and maybe get this addressed by an actual medical professional instead of relying on ben stillers magnificent shades to shield my delicate red eyeballs

[TG]: alright you got answers to a fairly personal question so im calling you out and returning the favor

[TA]: ii 2uppo2e that2 fair but ii can’t 2ay iim wiithout 2u2piiciion.

[TG]: suck it up bro you asked about my disability now i get to ask about your weird troll thing

[TA]: ...

[TG]: that may have come across wrong

[TA]: you think?

[TG]: so back there when my bro showed up and you became a laser light show for the floyd reunion tour you made this sound like fuck a neon lamp i guess

[TG]: it was super low i could barely hear it

[TG]: what was that

[TG]: yo you still there

[TA]: iiit ii2 a threat re2pon2e reflex.

[TA]: ii can’t make that 2ound on command.

[TG]: do trolls have more secret sounds i can’t hear cuz as an audio enthusiast i am offended deeply and truly
[TA]: keep being offended we have a lot of sound you can't even hope to hear.

[TA]: to be honest i'm surprised you could hear that one.

[TG]: ah well kind of

[TG]: it was more like

[TG]: just the feeling of sound without the actual sound part if that makes any sense at all

[TA]: kind of.

[TA]: how is your foot?

[TA]: kk something was wrong with it.

[TG]: i just twisted it no big deal

[TG]: gotta stay off of it for a few days which you would think would be like fuck yeah gotta do nothing doctors orders but im going out of my mind over here with boredom like what did i even do all day on the internet that was so great

[TG]: hey how familiar with the work of ben stiller and owen willson are you

[TA]: thi2 feel2 like a trap.

[TG]: it is

[TA]: ii would say ii am not very.

[TG]: does the word zoolander invoke ecstasy in your very soul

[TA]: what i2 a zoolander?

[TG]: get your ass over here were watching this movie right here right now because it is a goddamn tragedy that you have gotten this far in your life without having already been exposed to this timeless 2001 classic

[TA]: giive me li2ke 2 miinutes ii'm about 200 meters above you.

[TG]: have you been up there this entire time

[TA]: that ii is a po22ibility.

    twinArmageddons [TA] has ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

===> Sollux: land gracefully

Your face meets the asphalt shortly after the rest of your body. It's less than pleasant and bits of the crumbly blacktop stick to your palms when you push yourself up. You must be hungry. The only time you overshoot or undershoot a landing is when you are fucked up or haven't eaten in a while, and right now you're sober. Shocking, you know, but you need to come up for air sometimes. You do have at least some self respect. You're not going to be high 24/7 like some clowns you know.

    turntechGodhead [TG] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]
Right, when it comes to the roof Dave has the hearing of a legislacerator.

[TA]: fanta2tiic.
[TA]: exemplar really.

[TG]: cool

turntechGodhead [TG] ceased trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

You dust yourself off and make your way back to your room. The weather is nice today and your bees seem pretty ecstatic about it. They buzz around you as you come through the window, following you for a bit before going back about their bussiness. You rummage around in the snack hoard that is the middle shelf in your closet and discover that you only have one package of pop tarts left. You'll have to make a note to get more eventually. For now, you grab that and an appleberry blast and make your way over to Dave's room.

You're a little nervous about it. When you hadn't heard anything from him yesterday you were worried that Karkat was wrong and that maybe Dave really was freaked out by you. It was silly really to think he'd contact you right away. Stupid to hope.

Dave greets you from Karkat's wheeled desk chair before propelling himself to the microwave as it dings, clearly mad with power over his scooting abilities. There is a laptop on the bed open to VLC media player and paused on the Paramount Pictures logo. He must actually own the movie, or at the least, "own" the movie. You pull over his desk chair, the same school provided one that you have, and take a seat just as he drifts over with a bowl of easy mac. "You can sit on the bed if you want. Only reason I'm not is so I can keep my foot up."

You pull the laptop closer to the middle. "It's fine." He shrugs and starts the movie before leaning back with his feet up on the edge of the bed. He's wearing mismatched holiday socks. For a brief moment you thought that by some strange twist of fate, Dave Strider didn't talk during movies. It turns out he just loves his easy mac.

The minute he sets aside the dish, he starts talking and you breathe a sigh of relief. If you had to sit silently and watch this absurd movie next to your injured pale crush you were going to short circuit the hot second you ran out of toaster pastry. The way he talks through it, but not at points where you'd miss something makes you think he must have seen this a thousand times.

"What's that you're drinking?" he asks, pulling you from the movie you hadn't expected to be so invested in. You hold up the can for him to see the label even though he probably can't read it.

"Appleberries and a metric fuck ton of sugar." You hold out the can to him and he takes it like drink sharing doesn't mean anything. It means so many things, just not in this context, not to him. You simultaneously die inside and soar. He takes a sip and maybe chokes a little bit?

"Oh my god this is carbonated apple juice," he says before carefully turning the can around in his hands looking for the ingredients before remembering he can't read it anyway and handing it back to you. "It is without a doubt the most artificial food item to ever grace my tongue, I can still feel my
taste buds vibrating, but that's definitely apple juice." You glance at him and then to the ingredients on the can.

"Those bastards."

"It says something like red dye number 6 and artificial fruit flavors parenthesis apple pear and I don't know something outlandish like rutabaga, doesn't it?"

You try to give him your most over the top look of astonishment as you answer. "That is exactly what it says."

"Fucking liar."

"ehheheh."

The movie turns out to be the exact kind of awful shit you love to make Karkat watch. A lot of Alternian films have disturbingly similar earth film counterparts. There is a whole subreddit dedicated to finding the counterpart films and entire websites dedicated to conspiracy theories about them. This film doesn't, but when Dave starts talking about the genre-- and further deepening your suspicion that he doesn't know what irony is exactly, you start listing off movies to see if there are any overlapping Alternian versions.

"Wait let me get some pens." You raid Karkat's desk and come back with a red pen and a blue pen, and one of those yellow legal pads. "Alright so we have In which 'Bil' Biliam Prston Esquir and 'Ted' Theodr Loghan inexplicably venture through time and potentially ruin the fabric of space in order to avoid being culled for failure to comply with school-feeding, contains wildly inaccurate depictions of history, historical figures,--"

"Dude."

"Right, So we have: 'Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure' and it's troll equivalent, Anchortroll and Anchorman, Blades of Glory and Blades of Glory which are about wildly different sports," You say as you start writing the abbreviated Alternian titles on the left in blue and the Earth titles on the right in red.

"That's insane."

"Hm?" You pick your head up to see him staring at you, but not in the way that usually follows that sentence for you.

"You can just write two things at once like that?"

You shrug. "Yeah, I guess it's easier if you don't have a dominant hand." Okay, so you aren't really that dense. You know it is pretty cool, and there is a chance you may be showing off for him, but you're going to play this nonchalant.

"So you didn't have to practice or anything, you can just do that? Man, that duality bit you have must run deep."

"You have no idea."

You smirk and you can see the start of a question on his face when the door opens and Karkat walks in. He gives you a look that asks are you doing what I think you're doing, you better not glub at me later about this. You shoot him one back that says mind your damn beeswax.
"Sup, Karkles?"

"My blood pressure."

"What cataclysm has presented itself to you this week?" you ask.

"Oh no, this isn't a cataclysm, this is a chronic infection slowly eating away at whatever still remains of my sanity."

"Kankri?"

"Kankri."

"Who's Kankri?"

"My brother." "His Brother," Karkat and you say simultaneously.

"Well he just sounds like a delight."

"If by a delight, you mean an insufferable fuck, then yes, Dave, he's a delight." Karkat sits on his bed and ruffles his hair before looking over at the two of you and the credits screen behind you. "Did he make you watch that godawful movie too?"

You side eye Dave who just smirks like he's real proud of himself. "You know there's a sequel?" he asks you in an insincerely casual manner.

"Oh really?" you answer in an equally disingenuous tone. The two of you look at Karkat who is having the dawning realization that you are not on his side in this matter and is going on a face journey starting at cognizance, wandering through betrayal, dipping briefly into objection, and finally settling on resignation as Dave sets the movie to full-screen mode.
Your name is KARKAT VANTAS and while you do not have the same major as your roommate, you do share many of the same classes.

You are studying writing for film and television and he is studying film for....film you guess. You aren't really sure he's nailed down a focus yet. You've seen him dabble in music and photography, both of which you've been pestered into experiencing. Okay so maybe he is actually pretty good at both, but you will still complain.

You originally were not too happy about the roommate arrangements largely because Sollux was supposed to be your roommate until there was some weird glitch that shuffled a bunch of the rooms in your building. You could have filled out a form to have the issue corrected, however not only would it have been a hassle, but Sollux got a single room out of the mix-up and seemed pretty excited about it, so far be it from you to take that away from him. The other reason you had concerns about your roommate is because you know how to use a search engine and thought to see who this guy was. You found his hipster-ass ironic blog, his sound cloud, and a webcomic that is an affront before God. Your vision still hasn't fully forgiven you yet for subjecting it to that color scheme. When he finally arrived a week late into the semester with only a backpack, you may have felt a little bad and decided to cool your jets and reserve further judgment until later. That lasted for an hour at which point you asked him to kindly shut the fuck up.

Dave has yet to shut up, but you supposed after living with him for a little over a month that you could have done worse. He has some peculiar habits, like the food hoarding and never taking his sunglasses off, but they're harmless and don't really impact you. The mumbling though, you could really do without the constant static that is this guy's thought process leaking out of his noise tube. You've asked him to cut it out a few times and he always says 'sure thing' but it starts back up again sooner or later. However, in the grand scheme of things, it isn't so bad. You'll live. The guy has bigger things to deal with if the night terrors are any indication. You don't bring those up. You don't think he would want you to.

Overall you'd say he's alright. You've thought about this more as of recent because your best friend is ass over end in pity for the guy. Not that he'll do anything about it. His last venture into moirallegiance was...not good. Neither was the one before that. He's more or less the worst kind of pity bait. A "seemed like a good idea at the time" sort of temptation. People would assume he was being open with his problems only to realize those problems run so so much deeper, get in over their head, and bail on him. You wind up scraping him up off the floor every time because you give too many dams. He's practically your littermate though. Sollux says he is content to have Dave as a friend. However, you see the way he looks at him because you aren't blind. The temptation to meddle is powerful. It's something you plan to talk to Kanaya about. You're really at a crossroad with it. You've wavered back and forth on whether they would be a good match in the first place. It's part of what makes you hesitant. Texas is not a place with a high troll population even in the cities--take a guess why, and thus, Dave can at times be fantastically dumb to some of the finer points of your culture. That's not to say he's xenophobic, not on purpose at least. You've never had to correct him twice on anything that really mattered. He tries. Although, quadrants seem to soar gracefully over his head at high speed. Part of you wonders if it's an act designed to piss you off, or if he really is that emotionally stunted and truly just doesn't get it. Not to mention that humans have that whole sexuality deal going on and you can't get a read on him. You're not too good at that, to begin with, but Dave is a complete mystery. Just when you think you've figured it out he throws a curved sports sphere at you with his irony bullshit. At the very least, as far as personalities go, you think they get along well.
Presently, the two of you are making your way out of an introductory film class and heading toward the equipment room to reserve a camera for a short assignment largely about editing. The numbers didn't divide evenly so your three-person group is actually a duo for this project.

"Come on, it's October. It's a free pass to do a bad horror movie."

"October has more to offer than your weight in synthetic blood, Dave."

"It doesn't HAVE to be bloody."

You round the corner and walk up to the counter in the equipment room. Calling it a counter is a bit generous. It's more of a long card table with a cheap plastic table cloth over it. Your tuition money hard at work. You grab a pen and start filling out the paper forms. "We're not doing a found footage film either"

"The day I suggest that, you can beat me with the tripod while the Blair witch watches and critiques your performance."

You swap forms and are about to finish filling out your half when you see the date that Dave has put on it. "Dave, we need to do a different day. I'm visiting my moirail that Saturday." He leans over and awkwardly reaches across with his left to change the date by a single digit.

"Boom, done." His handwriting looks like he was writing on the scuttle buggy when it's next to yours. The two of you start to make your way back to the dorms. Dave keeps pushing for the horror angle, but you're just really not feeling it. "Alright, so if you're so opposed to horror, what did you have in mind?"

"Well, we can't forget about our object." You remind him. Everybody was given an object. Your group got a mop.

"Right, the object. The object for our project. The project which involves a designated object."

"You have no idea what our object is, do you?"

"Not a clue."

"It's a mop."

"Oh dude, you're gonna be so proud of me. I'm rising above the sticks. I'm overcoming my upbringing right here. I'm about to be culturally sensitive up in this bitch. Get ready. Should we request a new object? Is this a taboo thing?"

"We do have janitorial devices on Alternia. We aren't heathens. That said, I would greatly appreciate if we could avoid er... buckets." You're sure it was an oversight. It had to be right? You're sure all the teachers have gone through some kind of sensitivity training. He couldn't possibly have given you a mop on purpose, could he?

"You sure? I will totally make a stink about it for you. I will fly off the goddamn handle at this guy. I can 100% get away with it. I'll even lay on the southern drawl for the irony. You know he probably did it on purpose like it was some kind of joke to him just to see what you'd do." That's actually pretty nice of Dave to do. He's absolutely right that he could get away with it. You're about to agree to let him do it when an idea strikes you and a wicked grin takes over your face. No, if this guy did it on purpose then you're going to throw it back in his face a different way. "I like that evil smirk you have going on there. What's the plan?"
"Oh, I have an idea. It's a good one. Speed dating."

"Speed dating?" He looks more than a little confused and stops in the middle of the sidewalk to hear out your idea with his full attention.

"Speed dating. We get a bunch of different brooms and things like that. Maybe even a Swiffer. Oh gog, if we can find a wet jet, that too. This is going to be hilariously obscene. And the last date is the damn mop." He stares at you with his mouth agape for a moment, completely still before doubling over with laughter.

"I love it, yes, oh god. That is amazing. It's beautiful." He's still laughing as he straightens up and walks in a circle with his hands on his head. "I'm already getting ideas. This is going to be amazing. Karkat, you're a genius, a spiteful, spiteful genius. Do you want to be the date or should I? I know we agreed you could do most of the writing and I could do most of the filming, but this is your baby now. I'm not gonna tell you how to raise your child." You think for a second. You're not sure if you can hold a straight face through that, and Dave really would do the role well, but would the innuendo be lost if the date wasn't a troll?

"I don't know if I can do that. We'll have to think about it. Maybe we can draft one of our friends so you can still do the camera work." The both of you are practically buzzing all the way back to the dorm, bouncing different ideas off each other. You're just about back to your dorm when you see Gamzee. He's hanging around Sollux's door with his palm husk out, probably messaging him. You narrow your eyes at him and make a low growl as Dave unlocks the door. Gamzee looks up at you. His eyes are half-lidded and bloodshot. He doesn't growl back, just stares at you before turning his attention to the opening door beside him. You hear your door click open and follow Dave inside, but your glare doesn't leave the tall troll until you cross the threshold and close the door.

"What was that about?" Dave asks. For a minute you're confused before remembering that that sound is within his hearing range.

"My ex-moirail." You say with contempt.

"Ouch, that didn't exactly sound like you're on good terms."

You make your way over to your desk and get out a pad of paper to jot down your project ideas on. "No, we are not on good terms. We're on very shitty terms as a matter of fact."

"If you're on such awful terms, why is Sollux hanging out with him? Seems like a dick move if he's your best friend," Dave says as he immediately locates a notebook in the hazard zone that is his desk. Your expression saddens a bit at the mention of Sollux.

"Yeah, well, he's not hanging out with him so much as he's buying drugs from him." You like to tell yourself that their friendship hinges on getting fucked up.

"Like, drug drugs, or just like pot?" There's an edge of concern to his voice.

"Pot, but... it's a bit more complicated than that. His medications interact with it and he really shouldn't be mixing them," You sigh and fiddle with the notepad in your hands. "It's something we agree to disagree on. As for Gamzee, you could say his connection to the Makara's is more relevant than mine. His older brother and Gamzee's older brother have a moirallegiance, a really solid one I might add, so he should be on good terms with Gamzee. I'd be more irritated if he was snubbing him just for my sake."

Dave stops what he's doing to lean on the back of his chair and give the conversation more of his
attention. "Interact how?"

You pick at your nail beds with your claws. This is something of a moral dilemma. In his own words it 'makes any weed, good weed'. What his mood stabilizer actually does is enhance the psychoactive properties. It's not like it makes him hallucinate in the colloquial sense. It just feels really good. He says it makes his head hazy so he doesn't have to think for a while. You can understand that, but he's on other medication too and playing chicken mixing all that shit together. It's hard to blame him though.

It would be really rude and misguided to bait Dave into asking Sollux about any of this. More so because you know the guy pities Dave but won't do anything about it. You'd be giving him false hope and mixed signals. Yet, you have been a bit concerned about Sollux lately. He's been overindulging. It's becoming a habit for him. It's not just a fun thing to do every now and then anymore. It's not social. He's doing it alone and a lot, usually at night. He did this once before, but the dry spell cut him off at the pass. This time there isn't much stopping him. No, no, Dave has only the loosest grasp of quadrants as far as you're aware despite how you ramble on about them when you talk about your writing or what you're reading. He wouldn't know what he was doing. It would be a disaster and only make matters worse.

"I really shouldn't be saying anything about that," you confess. "Mine and Gamzee's business doesn't involve it. We broke up because I gave and gave and got jack all back. Then he went and screwed over a good friend of mine. He was a real dick to her and I auspisticised way too late because I was still hoping to salvage my own relationship with him." You throw yourself under the bus to shift the focus away from Sollux. Dave seems to notice he's making you uncomfortable because he just nods his head like he's listening and turns back to his notebook.

"One more thing If you don't mind me asking. That growl, was it a general thing or did it mean something specific? Feel free to tell me to fuck right the hell off."

"Troll subharmonics and 'sounds' are kind of...tonal flavor to standard speech. Some things are more specific than others and it can be very situational. In this instance, I was conveying something like 'you know what you did and I still haven't forgiven you', but it didn't mean those words exactly. It's more of, it's like contextual or an expression maybe?" Dave does that nod again like he's listening and thinking over your words. He opens his mouth to speak, but seems to change his mind about what he's going to say because there is an extra beat there and a shift of the way he holds himself.

"Let's umm, let's get back to the project. I want to write all this down before I forget. You have no idea how many times I'll tell myself oh sure yeah I'll remember that, and then all of five minutes later it's gone entirely." You nod and go over the general concept again and start making different lists of things you could incorporate. The atmosphere slowly shifts back to the hurried excitement it was earlier as you brainstorm. This film is going to be awful in the best of ways.

===> Be Dave later: search the web

'troll noises humans can't hear'
'troll threat response sound'
'troll threat response 20hz'
'troll low sound threat reflex'
'troll below human hearing range reflex'
'troll infrasound threat reflex'

You're deep into a google frenzy. You've got eight tabs open and you only just came across the golden key search term. That sound Sollux made has been at the back of your mind for weeks.
You've googled it a few times, but the results were difficult to navigate and you weren't really sure what you were looking for or at. You're still not sure, but your conversation with Karkat sparked your curiosity again. Sollux had said it was a reflex. Maybe you should see if they work the same as the kind Karkat was talking about. His was on command and conveyed a feeling or an idea versus a set meaning or thought. If it was reflexive did it work the same way? You look around even though you know you're alone. You open a new tab and click the search field. A pang of anxiety runs through you as you stare at the empty search field. Something inside you tells you that you shouldn't search this because you shouldn't feel this.

'troll infrasound reflex protect'

You close the tab before you can fully read the results, then close all the other tabs, and shut the lid of your laptop. Your pulse is beating a little too quick. You're all on edge like someone is watching you and they'll jump out any second to tell you they knew what you were just looking at, like a kid getting caught with porn. Your eyes go wide and you open your laptop back up to clear your browser history. You're just about to close the lid when pesterchum pings.

tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

[TT]: Will you be joining Karkat this Saturday?

[TG]: what

[TT]: Karkat, will you be coming down to the college with him when he visits Kanaya?

[TG]: Wait karkat's monorail is kanaya

[TT]: Moirail and yes, I was under the impression that you were aware of this. Apparently, that is not the case.

[TG]: I thought kanaya was your girlfriend or are you in one of those quadrant things

[TT]: She is indeed my girlfriend, however, we have an understanding that both she and I have different interpersonal needs of the romantic inclination. For her, this means that while she considers me to be her Matesprite, our quadrant can and will blur into other quadrants occasionally. For me, it means that I have to understand that her filling her other quadrants does not mean she cares for me any less, but has different needs that she finds natural to have addressed by different individuals with different complementing attributes.

[TG]: Uh huh

[TG]: Those sure are some words there

[TT]: You may play as ignorant as you'd like to my dear cousin, but I am more than certain that you are capable of grasping this simple concept.

[TG]: K so back to that thing you were saying before that giant block of text

[TG]: Karkat didn't say anything about going down there or well he did but it was only in reference to

[TG]: Nevermind

[TG]: Doesn't matter

[TG]: You're gonna have to point out to Kanaya that me and Karkles aren't exactly over here having tea
parties and gossiping on the veranda

[TG]: he probably has about as much of an idea as i do of whats going on

[TT]: Duly noted. I will speak to her once she returns from class.

[TT]: It would be nice to finally see you in person after all this time.

[TT]: We could sit down and really dissect your deep seeded issues with intimacy.

[TG]: yeah

[TG]: that would be pretty sweet

[TG]: hey wait no

[TG]: my brain and my deep seeded issues with intimacy are off the table

[TG]: theyre chillin on the floor they are locked in the basement like junior while his dad is trying to score some sweet pta ass

[TT]: Interesting...

[TG]: goddamnit

[TT]: As easy a target as that is, unfortunately, I must cut this short as I have a lot of work to do before tonight.

[TG]: what did your gpa drop from a 4.0 to a 3.99999

[TT]: Yes, that is precisely my motivation for clearing my evening schedule. I'm shaving my legs for the sheer thrill it brings me during group discussions on pre-Colombian art.

[TG]: weird choice of foreplay but aight

tentacleTherapist [TT] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

You close pesterchum and stare at your desktop contemplating your next move. Even if you closed the window before, you still saw some of the search result headers. You bite at your lip and open your browser in incognito mode.

'quadrants'

====> Be Roxy

tipsyGnostalgic [TG] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT]

[TG]: an it dosnt matter cuz she doesnt caare

[TG]: s nopt a real sceice it doesn counta bein nothin

[TG]: dick iv won shit

[TG]: *dirk

[TG]: im fckin haxxor wizard i coulda hackd nasa an she woulndt givea fuick
[TG]: og mybe she would xuz prechiious astro physics

[TG]: she hates me

[TT]: She doesn't hate you, Roxy. She has an idea of you in her head of what she thinks you should be, of what she wants you to be. It isn't you though. It never was and it never will be. Until she accepts that, she is only going to be continuously disappointed in you. It sucks, but a lot of this isn't in your hands.

[TT]: What number are you on?

[TG]: 1

[TT]: Bottle?

[TG]: yeha

[TG]: alls i got arm

[TG]: *amt

[TG]: **atm

[TG]: it empty

[TT]: I think you're good for now anyway.

[TT]: You know you can always come here for the holidays. You don't have to go home. The couch is a pull-out.

[TG]: <333

[TG]: nepta is back

[TG]: she wantsa do manippurrrs

[TG]: i think maybe i do that

[TT]: Go have fun. You can message me later if you need to.

[TG]: ty <33

tipsyGnostalgic [TG] ceased pestering timaeusTestified [TT]

==> be Sollux

You have the dumbest hidden talent. You are ridiculously good at pulling gravs. Kurlos has the top cut off a tropical grub punch jug, the bottom cut off a 2-liter faygo bottle, and a bong slide punched through the plastic bottle cap. It's majestic really. It might look easy, but there is a certain art to pulling the bottle up out of the water at just the right rate while you light the bowl to get that perfect opacity of smoke. You're sitting in the Makara's living room, which is in an attic level apartment, on a beat-up brown sofa with Gamzee on your left, Mituna on your right and Kurloz to Mituna's right lounging in a splay sac. The grav is on a coffee table that has seen better days. It has writing all over it and looks like it's been gouged with a knife two or twenty times. There are cigarette ashes embedded in places where the wood is cracked and a few cigarette burns on the dingey grey-green
carpet. The tv that sits on top of a stand made from milk crates, is probably the nicest object in the room aside from the game console.

You pull another grav. This one is for your brother. You take the slide out and pop your thumb over the hole so the smoke can't escape before he gets to it. Mituna jumps up and downs the whole thing in one swift go before popping his head back up and falling back into the sofa. You'd think he was being dramatic if you didn't know that his balance is just that terrible. Kurloz points to him, taps his lips, and then makes a motion like he's cocking a shotgun. He's asking Mituna to shotgun him. Highbloods and their high tolerances. The gold blood has no qualms about that and scampers over to his moirail's lap so he can exhale his hit into the other trolls mouth. It's made a bit difficult by the piercings that Kurloz has. They remind you of a corset piercing except the threads run like stitches through the snug rings instead of crossing. It's your turn next. You pull your own hit and it's a bit more opaque than you generally go for so you take it in two goes, making sure to exhale into the spoof. You don't usually forget that, Mituna would be the primary suspect for that party foul. In this building, it probably isn't a big deal, but as a precaution, it's better for the place to smell like dryer sheets than weed. Gamzee is last. You can tell this hit is pretty beat so you top it off a bit before pulling it and he thanks you before, like Mituna, wasting no time downing the smoke. You see the starts of little wisps leaking out his sniffnode and slap the spoof into his hands. Kurloz turns on Netflix and the four of you spend the next eternity flipping through titles trying to decide on something to watch.

It could have been slowly or suddenly, but at some point, everyone stopped talking while they were signing and you've only just become aware of that.
"You guys need to talk while you sign or I'm never going to get any better at it. Only Kurloz gets a free pass on that."

"My bad, my invertibrother."

[Starshine, load up The Fayghost Fountain]

"Your bong names are the worst." You wanted to be more creative with that, but you don't know the signs for what you'd like to say. Even that sentence you fucked up and Kurloz shows you how to properly emphasize your dislike for his naming conventions. Regardless you start prepping The Fayghost Fountain for round two while the others continue to scroll through titles. It's a few minutes after they finally pick something that you start to feel less than ideal. You pulled your second hit pretty weak, but maybe you shouldn't have had it at all. You were really good a minute ago, but now you find yourself needing to lean forward a bit. It's a weird feeling, happens sometimes, but leaning forward seems to help. You're discreet about it and no one else seems to be the wiser. A few minutes later though you find that now you need to lean back a bit. It's almost nausea, but higher up. It's making you fidgety so you decide maybe you just need to stretch your legs and grab some water.

Going to the kitchen is a hazy expedition, but just standing up seems to have helped. You grab some water from the tap and lean against the counter while you sip at it. You tell yourself that you just overshot it a bit this time. You're fine. Totally. It's not your medication doing this. Gamzee makes his way lazily into view and leans against the kitchen archway.
"You good there, man? You up and motherfucking disappeared a while back." Have you really been gone that long? Nah, Gamzee's perception of time is near non-existent.

"Just getting some water." You say, holding up your glass to him before refilling it. He motions his head for you to follow him back out to the living room and so you do. As you're sitting down though, that feeling starts coming back. Like a tightness, a weird nausea up in your chest that creeps into your neck. You swallow thickly and reach for your drink again.
"You sure you good?" Gamzee asks again.

"Fucking wiggler, had too much didn't you?" Mituna teases you. He might be right though. Gamzee pulls you into a side hug and rubs his hand up and down over your arm.

"You just gotta chill. It's all good." He isn't letting go and you're not sure how you feel about this contact. For the moment it's somewhat reassuring. Hesitantly you let your head rest against the taller troll and wait to come back down. Mituna makes the noise you've come to recognize as him being confused in his thought process. It's a grumbly uncertain whine indicative of a mood shift or a conflict. Essentially an error message.

There's a hand ruffling your hair. "You'll be fine," he says in a much softer tone than a moment ago. Kurloz makes a heart with his hands and tilts his head to the side while smiling, his way of saying awwww. They're right of course. A little time and some pizza has you in a better place soon enough. This is where you like to be. It's a hazy place where you don't have to think. For these few hours nothing in the outside world matters. You're relaxed and floaty. Your skin almost tingles in how much more aware of touch you are. Sound vibrates oddly in your ears, but you wouldn't be able to describe how it's different if someone asked you. Mituna's eyes are dim, but more so at the edges and you know that yours probably look much the same. Gamzee pushes you up from where you're leaning against him and gets up to turn the Nintendo on. He doesn't appear to be coming back, instead choosing to sit on the floor, so you lay down with your head against the armrest. The others look to be getting a game of Mario Kart going and you think they're going to leave you to your stupor until a touchpad is shoved into your hands. You completely wreck their shit on rainbow road.

Your palm husk buzzes. You fish it out of your pocket and when you see that it's Roxy, you tell the others that you're gonna sit this round out.

tipsyGnostalgic [TG] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

[TG]: solluuuuux

[TA]: 2up

[TG]: u shuld com hang out wth me

[TG]: nep made me so purrdy

[TG]: we had grks night and now im all dress up wit nowhere ta go

[TG]: *girls

[TA]: iim 2o bliitzed babe.

[TA]: iim on the no fly lii2t.

[TG]: yur with clown tpwn junction right?

[TG]: tell gamz u gonna get laid he will haul your ass over here sp quick

[TA]: eheheheh he would.

[TA]: ii'm not up for paiiliing tho, but 2loppy makeout2 may be on the table.

[TA]: iill 2ee how ii feel.

[TG]: shit well nowq you better get your ass ovr here
You look up from your phone and blink your eyes a few times. "Who wants to drive me back to the dorms?" There is a delay in response until Kurloz pauses the game.

[Why? Are you still not feeling so good?]

"I'm fine. Real good, actually." He tilts his head at you in a questioning manner. Right, you didn't tell them why. "Roxy wants to see me." He nods real slow as a grin creeps over his face. Gamzee leans back in that creepily flexible way he does until he's looking at you upside down.

"You about to get your motherfucking lay on aren't you?" Gamzee says with a laugh that's too loud for you right now. He straightens up and looks over to his brother who gestures his head at Mituna and winks before pointing at Gamzee and giving him a short sharp nod then tilting his head. Gamzee smiles slowly before coming back with a response. "Yeah, I'm good." He gets to his feet in one fluid motion, uncrossing his legs as he stands and turns to face you. "Come on, lover boy."

[TA]: iill be there iin a few miinute2.

[TG]: yesss ;D

twinArmageddons [TA] has ceased trolling tipsyGnostalgic [TG]

===> Dave: family reunion

The weekend has arrived.

You're sitting on the train with Karkat checking your phone again. It isn't terribly far, but you wish you brought a book or something. Karkat is nose deep in his own book and useless for conversation. You stare out the window counting the stops until the train finally lurches--

You're sitting on the train with Karkat checking your phone again. It isn't terribly far, but you wish you brought a book or something. Karkat is asleep and useless for conversation. You stare out the window counting the stops until the train finally--

You're sitting on the train alone checking your phone again. It isn't terribly far, but you wish you brought someone with you for conversation. You stare out the window, counting--

You're sitting on the train alone when it suddenly lurches. Your elbow slips off the armrest and sends you to the floor where you land on your knees with one hand on the seat in front of you. There is a glint of light in the corner of your vision and your eyes can't help but follow it. Tacky custom sneakers. The breaks are squealing. Black jeans. You taste iron. The glint of light off a polished metal surface. It momentarily blinds you. Cold steel against your skin forcing your gaze upward. It's bright. It hurts.

"Get up, little man."

You jolt awake and the alarmed troll next to you drops his book, losing his page in the process and crafting a string of swears that are lost to you because the only thing you can hear is the blood pounding in your ears. You lean forward, resting your forearms on your knees as the disorientation fades and the world comes back around you.

"Fucking hell, Dave. I was right at the good part." There's barely any bite to it. Like he's giving you an open to save face. You'll take it.

"Which part is that? The end?"
"You wouldn't know a good book if I threw it at your head."

"How long was I out for?" You ask, shoving your shades up to rub your eyes.

"A while. I'll cherish the silence forever. We're just about here," Karkat says as he flips back and forth through his book to find his place and shove a bookmark in it. There's a ding and the name of the next station starts scrolling across the LED panel above the door. The train slowly comes to a gentle stop. When you step onto the platform Rose and Kanaya are there waiting for you. Rose has mentioned that Kanaya was a fashion major and you think they might be wearing her designs. Kanaya has on a skirt that looks like it wraps around from the side and almost hits the floor, with a shoulderless long sleeve turtleneck that has her sign embroidered on the one side where you would see the little polo dude or the alligator on those pricey shirts. Rose is dressed a bit more formally, or maybe it's the ruffles giving that impression. Her black dress isn't as long as Kanaya's skirt, but it's still fairly lengthy. It's shorter in the front, showing off boots that come halfway up her calves, and starting just passed the hips dark purple ruffled lace gives the look of the dress having tiers to it. Her sweater might be from a store though. It doesn't have the same hand made for her look that the dress does. Kanaya has some mad skills.

Karkat rushes past you and nearly knocks over his moirail with the sheer force of the hug he gives her. She smiles fondly and wraps her arms around him. He's much shorter than her and she can easily rest her head on his. When you get closer you can hear a shameless chorus of little chirps from the both of them.

The hug Rose gives you is much shorter and has significantly less inertia. Although that isn't to say it's impersonal. She's shorter than you thought she would be given how tall Roxy is. You maybe have two or three inches on her.

"It's good to finally see you, Dave."

"Yeah, same." You are eloquent as ever.

"Kanaya and Karkat are going to be spending some time alone, so I thought we might visit a favorite coffee shop of mine. It is a Starbucks knock off. All the flair of pseudo-intellectualism, but with food that is edible." Her eyes open a little wider when she mentions the food so as to emphasize the dig at the chain shop while her voice remains calm and even. It's just as you imagined she would talk.

"Sounds good. I'm hella hungry and that train ride knocked me out cold. Could use some of that sweet caffeine in my veins right about now." You say hello and goodbye to Kanaya before parting ways with her and Karkat. The cafe isn't too far, just a couple of blocks in a little downtown area much like the one by your own campus. The buildings here are a little taller and it reminds you faintly of Houston. You push the thought from your mind. She really wasn't kidding about it being a Starbucks knock off. It looks so much like the place that you're certain some kind of brand infringement is happening. The two of you make your way to the line and you stare up at the menu. It is a bit overwhelming. So, it might be surprising to some, but you've only ever been in Starbucks like twice or something. Bro had money, but not a whole lot of it, and some of his financial decisions were questionable. By questionable, you mean straight up reckless.

Sometimes it would be for one of his entrepreneurial endeavors. Other times it would be swords or weird "ironic" shit. You think maybe it was only semi-semi- ironic, or maybe not even ironic at all. It was fucking weird is what it was. But also, every once in a while you'd do something right in his eyes or show a skill he approved of and he'd run wild with it. Your DJ equipment was one of those things. He caught you touching his stuff when you were little. It scared the ever-loving shit out of you. You thought you were going to get the ass beating of a lifetime and then he up and gets you your own shit instead. Point being, you probably were not super poor, Bro's websites did alright and
his DJing brought in decent cash, but he didn't balance shit all that well. Sometimes food was a problem. So Starbucks wasn't really a thing you spent the few dollars you had on.

You get a sandwich that Rose recommends and a regular coffee, black with two sugars-- like Sollux, your brain interjects. The thought surprises you and you stutter as you finish paying for your order. Rose gets some kind of danish and a fancier coffee. Or perhaps it isn't fancy? You're not sure. It might just be unfamiliar.

"Where would you like to sit?" she asks when your sandwich is ready. You scan the room before choosing a table in the back corner. It's cozy and private and you can see the entire room from where you sit with your back to the corner. "So, how are you adjusting to college life?"

"It's a bit different than the community version. It's different than a lot of things, but I can't complain. Karkat is a pretty good roommate. Don't get him started on his books or their complicated romance arcs though, or there goes your afternoon. But no, he's pretty chill." She nods and sips at her drink. "It's good seeing Dirk again too. I'm thinking it's no coincidence that he's nearby. Has he been here long?"

Rose shakes her head before she clarifies. "No, he has only been here since acquiring his current employment. Roxy and I were glad to see him stay somewhat near us this time."

"Yeah, gotta keep an eye on him. Self-sacrificing doofus." You say it with love and a shake of your head.

"Precisely."

Dirk really would do anything for you. You think maybe it's some kind of self-soothing thing for him too. He's antagonized Bro on more than one occasion to get his focus off of you. The bell on the shop door rings and you check to see who has entered.

"How are things going with your Mom?"

"Par for the course." Rose scrunches her face a bit as if she tasted something sour. "You know how she loves to foster our development in only the healthiest ways know to modern psychology. Her fluctuations between attempts to pit us against each other, textbook gaslighting, and pure unfiltered neglect are fascinating. Although, she is trying this new spin on her backhanded compliments so that's refreshing at least. I have concerns about Roxy, however. Mother is always a little harder on her around the holidays. A primer for our inevitably tense and unnecessarily formal family dinners that end in both of them sauced"

"She's still insisting that computer science isn't real science, huh?"

"Of course. Flawed logic is difficult to dispell." The bell on the shop door rings again and you look again to see who is there before going back to your sandwich. Rose was right about it being good. "Would you keep an eye on her for me?"

"No, Rose, in fact, I think I'm going to paint my shades solid black so I never have to look at her again. Especially once I ragdoll down the stairs from the lack of eyesight and get real cozy with the brain damage."

"Thank you. I appreciate it." The bell dings again and you look up again. "Speaking of your eyewear. When is your appointment?"

"Tuesday? I think it's Tuesday." The bell dings and you look up again.
"Are you alright? You seem jumpy." You pause mid-sip to make a hm? sound and lower your coffee. The question catches you off guard. "You check your surroundings every time someone walks in and mumble under your breath. Not to mention you've chosen to sit at the table with the best view to protection ratio." oh.

"I'm good." She clearly doesn't believe you for a second, but doesn't press any further. "So, Kanaya, she's a bombshell. Nice catch." Only the smoothest of segways for you.

"Yes, she is rather...radiant." There is something about that sentence that you aren't in on, some kind of joke Rose is enjoying. There is a long stretch of silence as you both sip at your coffee. She's doing that thing she does. The psychoanalytic magic she can work on you. She's waiting for you to say something. You don't know that you can though. Sure, some things you can joke about, you can make lite of things that bother you, it's the primary way you cope with that, to be honest, but if you were to actually let something out in a serious way... Could you stop yourself from spilling everything? Would one secret spill into a spiral of them? What would Rose think of you? She reaches her hand across the table to give your hand a squeeze before retracting it. Does she know? You didn't tell her about what happened when you first met up with Dirk, but did Dirk tell her? Or perhaps Dirk told Roxy. They talk a lot. Maybe Roxy told Rose. Jeez, does everyone know? "Dave, it's alright." Oh wow, have you been sitting like a statue staring off into space this whole time? You take a deep breath and try to relax your shoulders.

You need to change the subject. You can't be doing this now, here, in public. "So, you seem to have this quadrant thing on lock." No, bad, why, why would you let that come out of your mouth. You have immediate, instant regrets about saying that. "I mean, it must be weird sharing Kanaya with Karkat." That really wasn't much better. Way to go.

"At first maybe, but moirallegiance and matespriteship are different. They are even more distinct for Kanaya. As we speak she and Karkat are probably delving far deeper into personal topics than I would ever be comfortable with." It would appear that you manage not to completely fuck that up. "Is there a particular reason you are inquiring?" Ah, shit.

"What, no. I. It was just an observation. Can I not notice things from time to time?" That was too defensive. Oh no, there is that glint in her eye. That knowing fucking glint. She's going to say it. Here it comes.

"Interesting..." She checks the time. "Did you need anything for your dorm? We could stop at the supermarket before we meet back up with them. My treat."

"Nah, save your dollars. I'm so good. I've got stuff." Everyone has already done so much for you. You've been such a burden already.


"Well, if you're offering, it would be nice to get some of those individual AJ's" They are too pricey for you right now what with you not having any kind of cash flow.

When you meet up with Karkat at the train station you have two bags of groceries and necessities with you. Rose was absolutely insistent and the fact that you managed to keep it down to two is a miracle. You say your goodbyes when the train pulls up. Karkat lingers so long that the train starts moving before you can even take your seats. He looks a little sad to be going, but overall, he looks hella less stressed out. Within five minutes he's passed out against the window and you're left to your thoughts. Your thoughts are really getting crowded these days. You pull out your phone and hover your thumb over the pesterchum icon. It opens mostly by accident. A nervousness is spreading
through you as you stare at your chum roll, as you stare at Dirk's chum handle. It's sweet relief when the decision is made for you as he goes offline.
I reworked this chapter and I think it flows a lot better now. I also bothered to write the explicit bits.

The smut is hyperlinked to "==> Sollux: Answer your Kismesis"

Both versions are identical at the beginning and the end. The one here just has all the nasty omitted.

If you wanna cry I might recommend "Adore" by Amy Shark during "==> Be Sollux" & "==> Sollux: wake up"

I'd also recommend "Powerful" by Major Lazer for ==>Sollux: Answer your Kismesis

Karkat and you got back too late last night so movie night got pushed over to today. Nobody seemed to mind much. What does anyone really have planned for Sunday night anyway besides last minute homework? Karkat actually was pretty down for changing movie night to Sunday instead of Saturday, which would be easy considering your little group has only gotten together once before. Last time you were subjected to some Alternian rom-com that you barely followed. Karkat and Nepeta seemed to really like it though. Roxy seemed pretty indifferent on it and Sollux just plain didn't show up.

This time it's Roxy's pick and you're glad you didn't even need to suggest that she pick a horror movie. When you get up to the common area on Roxy and Nepeta's floor you see that everyone except Sollux is here. You hold back the frown that threatens to make an appearance on your face and instead survey the snack situation. Looks like Roxy has the popcorn handled like the rebel she is. People kept setting off the fire alarm so they specifically banned microwave popcorn. How people were messing this up when there is a dedicated popcorn button you will never know. Next to her Karkat has a jug of some kind of fruit punch with a label you can't read and a stack of cups that he is labeling with everyone's name. You notice there are only four cups.

"What's with the cups? Sollux a no-show again?" you ask as casually as possible. Karkat sighs and rolls his eyes, but Roxy is the one to respond first.

"I tried to get him out of his room, but he said he had a lot of work to do," She says raising her eyebrows and jutting her mouth to the side while looking away. She clearly wasn't satisfied with the answer she got. He had a similar excuse last time too. You nod your head a few times in acknowledgment.

"So who wants to see all the shit I smuggled out of the cafeteria?"

"Oh yes! Show us your catch!" Nepeta says as she leaps down from the couch and situates herself
dead center in front of the coffee table. You start with flair by manifesting french fries from inside your coat and the goods only keep coming from there like handkerchiefs from your sleeve. Two cheeseburgers come out of your pockets, a snack bag full of cheese nips (Nepeta pounces on them immediately), a second bag of cheese nips for everyone else, oranges that you pull out one at a time dramatically for effect, cookies, and an apple that was for Sollux but you guess that's yours now. Roxy and Nepeta are laughing like they're at a magic show, but Karkat isn't impressed until you pull out an ice cream cone.

"What the hell? How?" He yells in pure bafflement. You hand it to him and shoot him some finger guns.

"Trade secret, Karkles."

"That's impressive." Roxy chimes in. "I'm gonna take a wild guess and say this is a Strider family secret?"

"You know it." You play it cool, but really it was something Dirk taught you to do for the bad times. When you were small enough to get away with it, he'd stuff your jacket full of food and tell you to start bawling your eyes out. No one was gonna stop someone carrying a screaming little kid out of a store. "So what movie do you have for us on this fine October evening?" You ask as you grab the apple and a seat on the couch.

"I couldn't decide between this absolute classic or British zombies."

"Oh man, that's a tough call." You lean over to better address Karkat, but are halted by the wide-eyed wonder on Nepeta's face. "Ha, of course Nepeta's down for Freddy."

"Oh man, I didn't even think of that. Nep, you gonna love this."

Nepeta does indeed 'love this'. Neither you nor Roxy make mention that it's Krueger, not Cougar and shoot Karkat a tandem glare when it looks like he might. When it's clear that Karkat is less than engrossed in the movie you decide it's a perfect time to let Nepeta know that there is an entirely unnecessary amount of sequels. You could have sold tickets to the look of dread on Karkat's face. Everyone is still pretty amped up when the credits are rolling so you all decide to pop in Shaun of the Dead too. Karkat seems to be less grumpy about this one and possibly actually enjoying the movie by the time your halfway through it. He's slotted the two main characters firmly into a moirallegiance. You've seen this one a million times so you're only half paying attention. You wish Sollux had decided to come. He probably would have really liked this one.

==> Be Sollux

You think you may be depressed again. Well, more than you usually are at any rate. You've been trying to stave it off since shortly after the newness of the semester wore off. Today you bailed on another movie night despite it partly being your idea in the first place. It was going to be fun. You had even been looking forward to it. Then when the time came, the thought of being around everyone for an extended period was exhausting, and you knew you would just feel bad for not getting any work done. Yet, here you are hours later still not getting any work done. You probably should have gone.

You can barely focus on what you're doing for more than a few minutes at a time and your work is really suffering for it. Roxy had been on your ass about it, but after a certain point it stopped being motivational and made you want to work less on it. You can barely keep up with your classes. The only reason you're even going to your classes is that if you don't, you will definitely fall behind
irreparably. You're tired all the time too, so fucking tired, mentally, physically, but you can't sleep. Sleep will only come if you help it along. You're becoming dependent again, you know you are, but you can't help yourself; it works. It eases the pressure and gives you a break from yourself, but sometimes you feel guilty about it.

You look up at your homework. The blinking cursor mocks you. This assignment is a mess. It's trash. You're trash. If it wasn't due soon you'd scrap it and start over. The idea of doing that is exhausting. Even if you did have the time, you probably wouldn't bother. It's good enough to pass. That is where the bar has been for the past two weeks. It's only getting lower. At this rate you'd consider doing anything, even binge playing video games, to be somewhat productive. You don't even know where the time goes.

Eh, well, maybe you know where some of it goes. It's not even that late yet, but you're already looking out the window. You just don't want to feel so shitty and run down. You don't want to feel. You stand up from your chair and your vision greys with dots. You hold still as you wait for it to pass. Way to go, Captor. You can't even stand up correctly. Carefully you make your way to the window and hang your legs over the sill. Red and blue psionics engulf you and carry you out and up to the roof. It's chilly now at night. You probably waited a bit longer than you ought have to bring in your bees, but they're snug in your room now. You pull your hood down and let the light wind brush through your hair. The solitude up here is nice. It's different than being cooped up in your room.

When you touch down to the roof you stumble and catch yourself against the AC unit. Your stomach is doing something weird. That can't be good. You're suddenly not sure if you're incredibly hungry or going to throw up. Can you even throw up right now? When was the last time you ate something? You stand still for a bit and take deep breaths until the feeling subsides, but the minute you start moving, the feeling comes back and has you latching onto the nearest object for some sense of stability. Shit, you think you may actually throw up. Is that what this feeling is? You're not sure what's happening and it's starting to make you nervous.

You should go back to your room. You can always come back up here after you eat something. You should really eat something. Maybe drink some water too. This is so pathetic. Your pan is such a piece of crap. You can't even take care of the most basic shit. And now you're not sure that you trust your psionics to not drop you if you try to go back through the window. You'll have to go down the fire escape. The lock you can handle. Your psionics aren't completely shot. You take another deep breath and get ready to move.

When you push off the duct you get maybe a few feet before a feeling of dread sweeps over you and your stomach flips. The world is ripped from beneath your feet and passes through your line of sight as you crumple to the ground.

You think you may have been briefly unconscious when your eyes start to flutter open again. Footsteps are hurrying toward you. "Sollux!" Dave? It's Dave. You make a groan of recognition, but don't really move. You still feel like you might be sick and your head is foggy. You hear him skid to a stop, kicking up loose bits of roofing as he does so. He's kneeling next to you now with his hands held out like he isn't sure if he should touch you or not. "Are you alright? Shit, of course you aren't alright, you're on the ground. Come on, talk to me, man." he sounds worried. Slowly you push yourself up onto your elbows, staying that way for a moment with your head hanging. When Dave puts his hand on your shoulder his touch is hesitant at first, as if to give you plenty of time to react. You carefully turn just enough to take hold of his arm as he helps you sit up. His hand lingers on your back like he's afraid you might slump over. To be fair, you haven't let go of him yet either.

"What're you doing here?" you ask.
"I heard you fall," he says almost sheepishly like he'd been caught doing something questionable. "When you didn't get up I..." You realize after a moment that there isn't an end to that sentence. "What happened?"

"I think I fainted." You're actually fairly certain that that is exactly what has just occurred. "Should eat something. My blood sugar is probably a negative integer." It isn't a lie, hyperbole yes, though not a lie, but it does skirt the edge of being misleading. It sounds like a reasonable response, not like you did the worlds shittiest job of taking care of your baser needs like some freshly molted wiggler.

"Can you stand up?"

"Maybe?"

Dave helps pull you to your feet and was apparently ready to catch you because you don't land flat on your ass when you lose your balance to the black dots obscuring your vision. "Head rush," you say as he steadies you and loops your arm around his shoulders. He pulls you tight against his side and slowly helps you toward the fire escape. You're so close to him, too close. It hurts to be this close to him when this means so little.

"I got you," he says as you stumble and feel him take your weight. You don't start moving again until he's sure you've got your feet back under yourself. Things are coming back into focus just in time for you to attempt to use the ladder. Dave goes down first and as you slowly make your way down you feel his hand bracing your back to make sure you don't fall. The warmth of his hand is like fire. You aren't sure how you convince all your limbs to get through the window in an orderly fashion, but you guess you did it because now you're standing in front of your door. "Do you have your key?" he asks.

You hold up your hand and let little waves of psi roll over your skin. "I don't need one." You touch the door handle and open it from the other side.

"Can anyone with psionics just stroll through any door they please like that?" Dave says with thinly veiled alarm.

"No, it's normally a line of sight thing." These doors aren't that hard to open, for you at least. The rectangular handle is mirrored on the other side and pushing it down will unlock the door from the inside. You're not actually using your psionics to unlock the door, just pushing the handle. The two of you make your way in and Dave helps you over to the bed. It's killing you how gentle he's being.

"Sit tight. You said you needed something with sugar?" he says as he makes his way over to the snack hoard. You start to pull a bottled water over with your psionics, but a pain runs through your head and you wind up dropping it. Good call on not flying. "I got it. Here." He hands you the water bottle along with a fruit roll up then makes his way over to the bathroom with a cup ramen. The sink runs and is followed shortly by the hum of the microwave. The sound is somewhat soothing somehow. You peel the gummy snack away from the paper and jam a chunk in your mouth like some kind of barbarian instead of savoring it like you normally would. It's gone in only a few bites that way. You chug down some water, but stop because it's too much too quickly for your stomach. You could probably do with more sweets, but you're not so keen on the whole food thing right now.

"Can you see if there is any grub punch left in the fridge? So much sugar in it," you say as you lean against the bunk post. It feels like there is a cup in your hand sooner than should have been possible. Maybe you zoned out there for a second. You take a few sips of the red sugary liquid. Your body is super thrilled with you finally making a decent decision like re-hydrating it or replenishing its fuel.

You hear the shuffle of cabinets opening and the sink running again before Dave comes back over
this time with a white plastic box in hand. "You're bleeding," he says calmly as he tilts your head up and pushes back your bangs. You can't help the little sound that rumbles in your throat as he gently wipes away the streak of blood dripping down your forehead and collecting in your eyebrow. You're mortified for a split second before he makes a humming sound and smiles softly. You'll agonize over that horrifically pale exchange later. You're still a little too dazed for the moment. He moves away and comes back with a small sterilization square. It stings when it comes in contact with your skin. You hadn't noticed it before, but now you know exactly where the cut is up by your hairline.

"How bad is it?"

"It's just a scratch, no worries. Head wounds bleed a lot is all." He presses a folded over gauze pad to the cut and guides your hand to hold it in place. By the time he puts away the first aid kit the microwave beeps. "Where do you keep the forks?"

"There are chopsticks somewhere over there," you say, gesturing to the general area where Dave is standing.

"Really? Chopsticks with your ramen?"

"I like them. They come in pairs." You smile weakly and Dave shakes his head, silently laughing at you. He brings you the food and takes over holding the gauze to your head, peaking at it to make sure it's clotted enough before disposing of the bandage. You know you won't finish the ramen, but you'll try to get through as much as you can with small spaced out bites. He sits down next to you. He is so close that your knee is brushing his ever so slightly. Gog, this is so brutal. You keep telling yourself that you can just enjoy Dave's company and his friendship, but can you really?

"You okay?"

Ah, fuck he noticed. "It's nothing. Just not feeling so hot." fuck, fuck, fuck. Technically not a lie. You did just collapse. You do feel kind of awful. He doesn't need to know there is more than one reason you feel awful.

"You- you want me to stay here for a bit?" did he sound nervous? No, no, that's just you reading into things. You fainted. It's normal human concern.

"If you want to." You just can't bear to turn him away despite how much you disgust yourself for it. You continue trying to put some more ramen in your stomach while he flips through his phone.

"Check it out." You turn your head, disregarding the string of noodles connecting your mouth to the cup. He has a music player pulled up. You don't recognize the song he plays, but quickly realize it's his music.

"That one isn't on your sound cloud. " You catch yourself misspeaking as it happens, but can't stop the words in time. He gets the cockiest grin on his face.

"You listen to my music, huh? What happened to it being terrible?"

"I never claimed to have good taste."

"Just admit it. My jams are fresh as hell."

"They remind me of retro wave and cloud rap."

"Uh huh. So is that what you're always listening to in those fancy headphones of yours. That your home genre?"
"Not really. Sometimes. Your music is alright I guess."

"Mark the calendar. I think that was a compliment."

"Get bent."

He snickers and shoves you lightly with his shoulder. You shove him back. "If you ask nicely, maybe I'll send you some of the tracks I'm working on that aren't up yet."

You roll your eyes at him and slowly get to your feet. You're only a little light headed now. No more spots in your vision. You abandon the Ramen and go back over to the bed, this time opting to lie down. You have to sort of scoot around and behind Dave to do so which feels so unnecessarily strenuous. All of this has really worn you out. His music is still playing off his phone, but you recognize this song. It's one of your favorites of his, but you're not about to give him the satisfaction of that lest his ego explode.

He brushes back your bangs and mumbles "Good, still shut." It makes your heart flutter and you have to insist to yourself that it wasn't just an excuse to touch you. He kicks off his shoes and gets a bit more comfortable leaning against the headboard. For a while he just sits there with you, letting the playlist run on shuffle until at some point you fall asleep.

===> Be Dave

You are kind of freaking out right now and by kind of, you mean definitely hella freaking out. It's well past midnight and you just left Sollux's room after finding him collapsed on the roof, after taking care of him, after he fell asleep listening to your music with you. Music that, as it turns out, he genuinely likes.

You can always hear him up on the roof. It doesn't wake you from a dead sleep anymore, but if you're awake you'll hear his footsteps even when he's trying to be quiet. At some point, it even became comforting in a weird way. You were finishing up some tracks when you first heard the uneven footsteps. That worry that crept up your throat, you told yourself it was normal. You two are bros, good bros even. It's normal to worry about him. It was harder to justify the mounting panic that swept through you though when shuffled footsteps and a much louder thud were only followed by silence. However, you did justify it, right up until you actually saw him lying there on the ground. Even then you were afraid to touch him. You're always so afraid to touch him.

The phrase 'intricate rituals' comes to mind; thanks, Rose.

There were so many excuses to be close to him and, wow that's weird, that's creepy of you isn't it, but you liked it. You liked taking care of him. It felt good, so fucking good to make him feel better. This wasn't like patching up Dirk after a fight. This was something else. Your heart has been racing for what feels like hours. You think you might die.

This feeling isn't exactly foreign to you, but you've never felt it in quite this capacity before, and never for a guy. It's a bit terrifying for more than one reason. You sneak back into your room as quietly as possible, you do not need to wake up Karkat right now, and jam yourself into the corner of your bed.

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT]

[TG]: are you awake

[TG]: i need to talk to you
[TG]: i really need to talk to you

[TG]: im freaking out over here answer your phone

[TT]: What's wrong?

[TT]: Are you okay?

[TG]: no im not fucking okay

[TG]: im freaking the fuck out because

[TT]: Dave?

[TG]: ...

[TG]: i

[TG]: after he kicked you out

[TG]: he picked me up by the collar and slammed me into the wall so hard it left a dent

[TG]: he was on my case all the time about if

[TG]: if i turned out like you

[TG]: not that i am

[TG]: not exactly

[TG]: its complicated

[TT]: I'm sorry.

[TT]: I hated leaving you with him.

[TG]: no this isnt about that

[TG]: that wasnt your fault

[TG]: i

[TG]: fuck

[TG]: god fucking damn it

[TT]: What are you trying to tell me? Whatever it is, it's okay, you can tell me.

[TG]: i like him too much

[TG]: what do i do

[TT]: To clarify, are you freaking out because you have a crush on a guy possibly for the first time and it is sending you into a panic because we've literally had it beaten into us that that is not okay?

[TG]: wow way to just lay it all out there dirk
[TG]: have some damn tact why dont ya

[TG]: what if hes watching what if he finds out what if he hurts you to punish me

[TT]: We'll be okay. Bro purposely isolated us back then. We have more people looking out for us now. We have Hal monitoring anything he can of Bro's too. Also, while I'd rather keep her out of it, we are closer to our aunt now. We have some options.

[TT]: Plus, who the hell hides out in this state. Nobody in their right mind would willingly come here. It's the worst. Have you seen how they drive here?

[TG]: ha that is a fair point

[TG]: do you really think that

[TG]: the people thing i mean

[TT]: I do.

[TT]: And I stand by what I said before, Sollux is crazy powerful.

[TT]: You are talking about Sollux, right?

[TG]: WHAT

[TG]: how

[TG]: who

[TT]: Hahahaha

[TG]: oh my god fuck off fuck right the hell off

[TG]: how

[TT]: Roxy is the most gossipy drunk I've ever met.

[TT]: It also was not difficult to figure out.

[TT]: You talk about him an awful lot.

[TG]: no way i do not

[TT]: Scroll up if you don't believe me. Ctrl+F his name. How many hits did you get?

[TG]: axvffffffjmhgd

[TT]: Told you.

[TT]: Are you doing any better now?

[TG]: yeah i guess but i still dont know what to do

[TT]: Talk to him maybe?

[TT]: I hear communicating with people is a fairly efficient means of conveying things of this nature.
[TG]: ...

[TT]: Okay, okay, real advice time. Gonna lay some older brother wisdom on you. Get ready because this is some quality stuff.

[TT]: Talk to him.

[TG]: you're enjoying this aren't you

[TT]: A little bit.

[TT]: If you won't talk to him, you could try talking to Roxy first. She is dating him after all. I'm assuming, of course, that you have a different quadrant in mind, right?

[TG]: no shit im not about to steal my cousins man fuck that is a weird thing to say why did i say that

[TG]: i could have backspaced that couldn't i and yet there i was hitting enter anyway

[TT]: It's not the red one, is it? They flip into that one a lot from what I hear. That could get complicated.

[TT]: no i dont really feel that way about anyone

[TG]: like its not a thing i have

[TG]: i think

[TG]: and i think bro knew something was off he was always asking creepy shit about when i was gonna become a man

[TT]: You're not "off", Dave.

[TT]: you know what i mean

[TT]: man this is a regular feelings jam shits heavy as hell up in here

[TT]: i think im good i think i have thoroughly humiliated myself enough for tonight maybe even met my quota for the year but who knows im real good at it a regular pro at inserting my foot directly into my mouth like a goddamn sword swallower

[TT]: It's fine, really, and I promise not a word to Roxy.

[TT]: you better not

[TT]: my collection of awful ringtones is as vast as it is shameful and hal would jump at the chance to fuck with you

[TT]: im gonna try getting some shut eye

[TT]: sorry for keeping you up you probably have work too shit my bad

[TT]: No, I'm off tomorrow, so don't worry about it.

[TT]: Go get some rest.

[TT]: yeah ok
You're a tad confused when you wake up significantly closer to the ground than you generally do. It's weird that you would sleep on the bottom bunk. You rub at your eyes and look around for your glasses, finally spotting them on your desk next to a half-eaten container of Ramen. The events of the previous night all come back in a flash as you are suddenly much much more awake than you were a moment ago. "Holy shit." You flop back down on the bed and stare up at the blurry slats above you. You play back everything in your mind in gross detail. It was one pile and a handful of chirps short of the stuff out of those trashy books Karkat reads in public.

Your eyes go wide. No, no it wasn't. You DID chirp at him. You chirped at him and he smiled and he made a sound back at you. It was kind of like a laugh, but not a laugh. It wasn't mocking you. It was like...like maybe...

You're not sure if you want to let yourself open that door. You know you won't be able to shut it again if you do. Would you have these doubts if he were a troll? Probably not. With a sigh, you throw your legs over the side of your bed and haul yourself up and out. You put on your glasses and find out that you don't have to rush to get ready for class. Actually, you have time to use the ablution trap AND eat. You turn off your alarm so it doesn't go off now that you're already up and start getting ready. The water stings against the cut on your forehead, but the pain is eclipsed by the memory of the way he carefully tilted your head back and brushed aside your hair. The callouses on his hands were rough, but his touch was so soft. You wish you knew what that sound he made meant. Did he know what yours meant? Did he know how safe you felt? Your chest aches. You grit your teeth and finish washing up.

You throw on a black hoodie with your sign on it and a pair of grey jeans. You wonder if he really will send you his music. It kind of sounded like he was going to send you some stuff he was still working on. Did he want your opinion on it? You let the smallest of smiles cross your face. You stand there and chew your lip, thinking of all the things he said last night, all the things he has said before like that, the excited way he nudges your arm when a good part in a movie is coming up, the way you can't tell if he's actually decent at smash bros or just good at button mashing, the way he won't tell you if he's decent at smash bros or just button mashing, the stupid way he drops all the b's in probably, the way he can't say y'all without his accent coming out in full force. Somewhere along that stream of thoughts you stopped thinking about evidence he might return your feelings and just started thinking about him. You throw back your pills with water that's either from last night or two days ago and head out the door feeling timidly optimistic about this. It's a feeling made of glass, but you let yourself feel it all the same.

Then just like that, there are spider cracks running all through it as you catch Dave coming out of his room. You watch him freeze at the sight of you and run back inside. He avoided you. He doesn't want to see you. He figured it out and wants nothing to do with you. No, that couldn't be. He just forgot something. He probably didn't even see you. Those shades just made it seem like he was looking right at you. Now you're biting your lip for a different reason as you make your way to the cafeteria, still trying to hold onto that good feeling that was within arms reach a moment ago.
You freeze when you look up and see him. The look on his face makes your heart stop. He's smiling. It's breathtakingly genuine and you're the only one around to see it. You whip back around and close the door, before falling back against it. Your heart is beating so fast like it's trying to catch up for the moment of time it stood still. You've never been more thankful for lollygagging both so that 1. you could witness that, and 2. so that Karkat isn't here to see you flustered out of your head. Oh man, why is this suddenly so much harder? Everything was just fine until you pulled your head out of the sand and wrenched open the lid to Pandora's box. How on earth are you gonna do this?

Well, you sure as shit aren't going to grab a coffee from the cafeteria before class now. Sollux doesn't have class for another half hour so that's probably where he's-- oh god, you have his schedule memorized. Your eyes go wide and you stare into space at this revelation. This isn't like that crush you had on Jade when you were kids. That did not feel like this. This is overwhelming. You know Dirk said to just talk to him, but how the hell are you supposed to do that now? You saw him candidly smile and it has sent you into disarray. How are you even supposed to think and speak at the same time in his general direction now?

You slide down the door and hold your head in your hands. It's not like your concerns from before are gone either. What if Bro is watching you? What if he finds out about this? What if he goes after Sollux, or Dirk, or even Roxy? Dirk seems to think Sollux can handle himself, but he didn't seem to be feeling too well the other night. You saw the way his psionics cut out and the way it looked like he was heading toward the fire escape. He never takes the fire escape. He didn't think he'd make it. He thought he'd fall. Something is wrong with him. You don't know in what way exactly, but you want to. As if your mind wasn't in enough places, a new thought occurs. What if he doesn't want you to know? What if he doesn't feel the same way about you? You hadn't even thought about that yet. You were too busy considering everything else to consider that even if you did talk to him, he might reject you.

You're starting to make that little gasping sound again, so you hold your breath. You reset and try breathing again. Just like before. Just like Sollux told you. It worked before and works again. You reign yourself in before you can spiral out of control. You're still jittery with worry so you get to your feet and gracelessly clamor to the little fridge Karkat has that he lets you use. He's cool like that. You sit on the edge of your bed with an apple juice and try to steel yourself. Your face is blank long before you truly are composed again. Years of practice.

You get to class late and Karkat is glaring daggers at you because you have the storyboard and he's been stuck sitting there for 15 minutes like an unprepared idiot.

"Where the fuck were you? You were 'almost ready' when I left" He loudly whispers at you. Most people might think that that was his inside voice, but they'd be wrong.

Oh shit, you didn't think of an excuse. "Had to take a shit." Flawless. You straight-faced it perfectly. His eyelids do that fluttery thing like he can't believe what he's just heard while his eyebrows nearly disappear into the forest that is his hair.

"I cannot stress enough how much I did not need to know that." He takes a breath. "Anyway, you have the storyboard at least, right?"

"Of course I do," You say as you reach over to rifle through your bag. You dig around for an extra six seconds before coming back up and clapping your hands together. "So, funny story." He stares at you silently. It's the Karkat equivalent of the tide disappearing way the fuck back into the ocean. "I'll be right bac."
"Oh no, you don't! You sit your ass right the back down!" He throws his hands up in the air and mumble-shouts something on the way out of the classroom. You're actually kind of relieved. You really aren't feelin' accidentally running into Sollux right now. The second class lets out your phone immediately pings.

    timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

[TT]: Are you all set?
[TG]: for
[TT]: Your eye appointment.
[TG]: thats tomorrow
[TT]: It's today. I'm right around the corner.
[TG]: tell me you are not messaging me while driving
[TT]: No, of course I'm not. Hal is.
[TG]: wait am i talking to hal or dirk
[TT]: You can't tell the difference between your own brother and a machine?
[TT]: Don't be a dick, Hal, and get out of my color.
[TG]: watch the road dirk
[TG]: hal isnt my appointment on tuesday
[TT]: Incorrect.
[TG]: shit well ok i guess
[TG]: ill see you guys in a few
[TG]: the main entrance right
[TT]: Yeah, that works.

    timaeusTestified [TT] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

You've never been to an optometrist and you've decided you were not missing out on anything. This guy is stupid fascinated by your eyes to the point of irritation, your irritation. However he seems to know Dirk, and Dirk has assured you that he's alright and everything he's doing is normal.

"Dave, you need the drops."

"I don't want the drops."

"You need to do the drops."

"I don't NEED to do anything."

"You don't need them every time, but this is the first appointment. Quit being stubborn and let him put in the drops."
You do not like the drops. As if everything wasn't bright enough without your shades on, the eyedrops will dilate your pupils and they're gonna be stuck that way for a while. On top of that, the doctor doesn't like your shades one bit even if they did belong to Ben Stiller. He's assured you though that the style is very popular and that you can get a pair just like them, but with prescription lenses in them. You're not pleased about this whole arrangement, but you agree and he starts the exam.

Your opinion of the man changes on a dime once he brings down that horrifying mask and starts switching around all the lenses. It's like going HD. Why did no one tell you you've been walking around with vision like a 480p youtube video. You're going to have to reevaluate your entire photography portfolio. Your shots are going to be so much better now that you can actually see them. You're going to take a million pictures as soon as you get the chance. Maybe Sollux would let you take pictures of his psionics. Oh, bad thought, bad thought. You grit your teeth and push it away. You aren't ready to deal with that yet and certainly not here.

Dirk says he's going to check with his insurance company to see if they'll cover a second pair so you can have a non-tinted pair to read with when you're inside. You don't think it's really that big of a deal as long as you have the tinted pair. You've gotten this far without them. Dirk thinks otherwise though and is insistent, so you go along with it. They are special lenses so it will take some time to get here, but you've been assured it won't take too long. You have to admit they do sound kind of cool and they do look just like your old ones. The lenses are supposed to get darker when you're outside, but still stay tinted when you're inside. The doctor said a bunch of other technical things about your photosensitivity improving blah blah light variance blah blah less eye strain, but you weren't really paying attention. You got the gist of it. Until then you can still wear your shades.

When you get back to your room without running into Sollux you breathe a sigh of relief that is quickly followed by a pang of sadness. It's how a lot of the rest of your week goes. It doesn't help that your body has it ingrained in it to associate this kind of paranoid hypervigilant adrenaline with Bro. You're actually not sure which is causing what. Is it your fear of him watching you and seeing you with Sollux that's making you so on edge? Or is the idea of confronting Sollux putting you on edge and letting anything and everything else latch onto it? You aren't sure what to do, so you do nothing. You try to focus on your project. You only have this week and the coming weekend to film before you have to start editing. Karkat has been harping you about it and you can't really call him out on it because he's right. That and he did all the footwork to get someone to play the troll part.

When the optometrist called to let you know your new shades were ready, you were pretty surprised. You thought he had meant it would take an extra week to get special lenses, not an extra day. Maybe you just weren't paying attention. You probably could have been doing more of that. Either way, it gave you something to bitch about and you were pretty grateful for that. They're actually pretty amazing. You can see better than you've ever seen before. Everything is more vivid too, and the contrast is a vast improvement. You can't really complain about the glasses themselves, so instead, you complain about the brightness and the headaches that you've been told will go away soon enough.

===> Sollux: Answer your Kismesis

"Sollux, open this fucking door!"

There are two loud thumps as Roxy bangs on the wood. You're sitting on the floor by your bed with your knees brought up near your chest. You don't want to deal with this. You're depressed, you're drowning in homework, Dave won't so much as look at you anymore, nothing is even remotely enjoyable, and you're tired as fuck. You are completely out of shits to give. "Leave me alone!" you
"I swear to hell! Open. This. Door." There's a loud bang with each word of the command.

"Go. Away." You say, mocking her cadence.

"You can't just hole up in your room every time something bothers you!" You don't respond this time. "Don't you fucking ignore me!" It's not just 'something' it's everything. It's everything stacked on top of everything else. If everyone is trying to scale a mountain, they may have different mountains, but they've got gear. You, however, not only do you not have gear, but your mountain is made of loose dirt and leaves so even if you did have gear you would still slide right back to the bottom. "Sollux!" Alright, that's it. She wants in? Fine. Fucking, fine. What do you care if she's yelling at you from inside or outside of your room? You stand up, march over to the door, and roughly wing it open.

"What the fuck do you--" You can't get the words out before she's pushing you back, wedging herself into your room before you can close the door on her, but she doesn't stop there and in a hot second you find yourself up against the wall. The door clicks shut.

"The hell is wrong with you?" She is pissed. Her brows are drawn down and tight and there are tear tracks down her face, leading to her set jaw, and a mouth pinched smaller than usual. The fists balled in your shirt may also be indicative of this. She's been drinking too, you can smell it on her breath, but you're really not one to talk, because you're not exactly sober right now either.

"Do you want that list itemized or in chronological order?"

"That is not what I meant and you know it, smartass," she says, letting go of your collar so she can angrily point at you. However, she remains in close proximity, keeping you pinned where she put you. You narrow your eyes at her as they glow brighter.

"Oh? And just what did you mean? What could you possibly have meant beside 'why are you so fucked in the head?' Why is your thinkspoon so gogdamn broken?' hm? Tell me, Roxy. Just what did you mean?" Your voice gets louder as you go until you're talking just as loudly as she was if not louder.

"I meant why are you being such a dumbass!"

"I'm being a dumbass?"

"I'm glad you agree."

"No, fuck you. You can't just come in here and insult me and and--" You try to advance on her, but she shoves you back to the wall with her hands pinning your shoulders and she growls at you. You've heard humans try to make troll sounds before and it's mostly an absolute disaster. The pitches are all off, too high or low, carrying the wrong implications because it's like synthesized speech, but that is not what is happening here. Roxy really did just growl at you albeit with an accent.

"I can and you bet your ass I will. You've been moping around all week. I haven't heard a word out of you since I tried to get you to come hang out with us, which by the way, Dave was disappointed about. And don't act like you don't give a damn, I'm not stupid. You need to do something! Talk to someone! Go outside! Fuck, I'll take you out to get plastered. Just do something! I'm not gonna let you lock yourself away like this!" You stare at her completely dumbfounded as your brain tries to catch up with the different feelings going through you that are mostly centered around having your kismesis growl at you with such fervor and tear you a new one. Just when her expression begins to...
falter from your sudden silence, you pull her forward, your hand on the back of her neck, and you kiss her hard and desperate. She's only briefly surprised before she starts kissing you back in equal amounts of not gentle. "You're such an idiot." She says against your neck before biting the tender spot where it meets your collar.

"And yet this is where you choose to place your affections." Her teeth won't break your skin, but the effort is appreciated. One of her hands tangles itself in your hair and she pulls your head to the side. "Are you marking up my neck?" you hiss at her. She moves to a different spot and starts again, sucking and biting at the sensitive skin. You can't decide whether to press into it or pull away and wind up doing a bit of both beneath her.

"Yep. You get to walk around with a neck full of 'my kismesis had to kick my ass in gear' marks." Fuck, that's kind of hot. The way she says it right next to your ear is also pretty hot. You try to turn the tables and flip her, pin her against the wall, but she's not having any of that. You only manage to push maybe a foot away before your back meets the brick again. A leg plants itself firmly between yours, one hand on your upper arm, another on your jaw; you are very much pinned. She looks directly into your eyes and it is searing. Then she kisses you again. You pull her closer, as flush to you as you can, the words 'do not maul' flashing in your mind as you're wary not to grab her too hard with the claws you now keep filed down dangerously blunt just in case. "You're gonna get your shit together, Sollux," she says against your lips. You try to get back to kissing her, but she pulls her head back. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm gonna get my shit together." She lets you kiss her.

"Why?" She's pressing up against you in a way that is wonderfully intimidating.

"Cause I'm a disaster."

"Wrong answer." She bites your lip. You wish you could bite her back.

"Because you said so."

She shakes her head. "Still wrong." She pulls your hair to expose your neck and you make a noise of submission. "Because you're better than this," she says her lips feather light against your voicebox. She lets you go all at once and the sudden lack of contact makes you shiver. You run your fingers through your hair as you try to reel yourself back in a bit. Roxy is standing there, hip cocked, arms crossed, eyeing you up and down. A lot of the down actually. Roxy is staring at your crotch, isn't she? You look down and sure enough, there is some wriggling happening in your pants. Your bulge hasn't come out to party, but it's peaking out to see what all the fuss is about. She has the most indecent smirk on her face.

"Oh shove it," you say as you flip her off with both hands. She giggles as she comes back over and tugs you forward by your shirt (this poor shirt, the collar is never going to be the same), walking backward until reaching the bed where she turns you both around so she can shove you down onto it. "I said shove it, not me," you come back with, but there isn't a whole lot of bite to it. She climbs on top of you and bends down to give you a kiss that you eagerly return.

"So, you uh, gonna bring that little guy out to play orrr..." The hands you have on her hips tense up. You can see her noticing your unease.

"I, I'm keeping my clothes on, but...you don't have to...entirely...if that's what you want." You run your nails gently down her legs, feeling the transition from the fabric of her skirt to bare skin and then just grazing the tops of those ridiculously tall socks you think look great on her before going back up again. You feel a bit guilty about all this. She wants to be with you so badly. She sighs and
runs her fingers through your hair and over your horns.

"What does that mean? Are we just gonna make out till we're all hot and bothered and then I leave to
go think of you in the shower again?"  

"Wait are you thinking of me in the shower or thinking of me while you're in the shower because
those are two diff-- ow hey." She gives you a good swat to the arm and you can't keep a straight face
anymore. Neither can she. "Come'ere," You say, scooching backward so your legs aren't hanging
over the edge so much and she can lie down next to you. Or on top of you as seems to be the case.
She really likes to do that and you find it endearing. "I think I have a compromise," you say as you
snake your hands up her sides and under her shirt. Her skin is so soft. If you weren't so careful, or if
you didn't file down your claws so much, it would just shred to ribbons. She trusts you so much.
She's so patient with your bullshit. She's so eager to have you, but she's waiting still because you
need her to. You undo the little clasp that everyone in the movies seems to have issues with and pull
the combined bundle of clothes up over her head before chucking it somewhere to your right.

"Are you not gonna tell me?" She grabs your hands that were resting on her waist and pins them
above your head. She's staring you down, and gog those pink eyes.

"Make me." You can hear the breath she takes in through her nose as she tilts her head and flares her
eyes. How neither of you has yet to break any teeth with the force of your kisses you will never
know.

"Tell me." She bites at your lip. Her fingers are in your hair, and yours are drawing red lines over her
back. "Tell me." Her hand is on your side, running up your shirt. "Tell me, Sollux," You pull her
close and rock your hips up against hers and the enthusiastic response you get back is enough to
have your bulge squirming out far enough to twist around itself like it's one. It has your breath
hitching against her neck and that only seems to drive her wilder. Honestly, she could probably get
you off this way, but this is about her, not you. You continue on for as long as you can stand it
before you say her name.

"Roxy." You press a hand to her side. She pauses her efforts to grind you into the mattress and takes
to placing gentle kisses against the marks she's left on your neck. You run the pads of your fingers
over the exposed skin of her back, down toward the base of her spine where you know it makes her
shiver. "Don't leave this time." She picks her head up to look at you. She's blurry. Your glasses were
knocked off at some point.

"What do you mean?" she asks as she reaches for something above and to the right of you and then
sets the red and blue object out of harm's way.

"I need it to be different and I've never done this with anyone." You move to sit up and she backs off
of you to rest on her heels. You grab the closest blanket and bunch it up between you and the wall
behind you before leaning back against it and taking Roxy with you. You pull her so that she's
situated between your legs with her back to you. She's still breathing hard and the thought that she'll
be breathing harder, against you, it makes a spark run down your back. You wrap your arms around
her and bury your face in her hair. You love the way she smells. You kiss her neck. "Don't leave this
time when you think about me."
Small tremors are still running through the both of you as you fall back together to lie on the bed. Everything is quiet except for the sound of you and her panting. She's on top of you again, but now she's facing you, laying astride one leg off to your side, resting her head against your chest. She runs her hand up your side and down your arm. With limited coordination, you run your fingers lazily through her hair. You hadn't intended to go that far.

"You okay?"

"Hm?" Your thinkspoon isn't back online yet.

"You said you hadn't meant to go that far."

You must have said that out loud instead of in your head. You inhale deeply and let it out as you give her a squeeze of reassurance. "Yeah, I'm okay." You let your eyes fall shut. "Can you keep talking though?"

"Jeez, I don't know. Can I?" she laughs gently against you and you laugh along with her. "That was really good. Worth the wait." She sits up a bit and rests her chin on her hands so she can look at you. You open your eyes just enough to see her. Her hair is a disaster, She's flushed all the way to her shoulders, and there is the most dazed expression on her face. She's beautiful. "Bonus points for figuring out another one of your kinks." She raises her eyebrows suggestively at you with a grin of triumph on her face.

"Don't get cocky just because you won this time. You seemed pretty into it yourself. No one has ever said anything that perverse to me." You waggle your eyebrows right back at her equally as suggestive. She tilts her head curiously and you immediately realize your error.

"Oh? And just what did I win?"

"Nothing." You reply too quickly. She pushes herself higher up to loom over you.

"No, no, you said I won something. What did I win?"

You throw your arm over your eyes and chuckle through a smirk. "You're my Kismesis, Roxy. What do you think you won?" Not that you really ever were in the lead. You were pretty quick to submit, although she didn't have you begging until the end. You cover your face with your hands as you turn more yellow than you already are. "I know you can hear those mid-range sounds just fine." You slide your hands up into your hair before letting them fall aside. She has the widest close-mouth smile plastered on her face like she might be holding in a laugh. "Oh, shut up." She was.

"I didn't say anything," she musters through her laughter as she sits up. "Those little clicks and stuff you make are hot." You reach back and throw a pillow at her. She throws it right back at you. Ah right, you are gonna need to wash that pillowcase now. You prop yourself up on your elbows and survey the damage while you float a water bottle over from your desk for yourself and an unopened one from beside the fridge for Roxy. Your mouth is crazy dry and her's probably is too. This is a mess. The sheets are a mess. Roxy is a mess. You're a mess.

"You may want to rinse off." You suggest. Roxy looks around and then down at her self while nodding her head.

"Yeah, yeah that might be a good idea."

You move to sit up and swing your legs over the side. "Go first, ill get rid of this and find something
for you to wear." She comes to sit next to you and wraps an arm around you.

"Really though, are you okay? I didn't mean to push you into er...participating."

You lay your head on her shoulder. "You didn't. I got kind of carried away, but you would have stopped if I had asked." She did actually. You didn't even have to ask. She backed off when you got uncomfortable. You take her hand in yours and thread your fingers together. You should say this now before you lose your nerve. "But if...if I'm ever too quiet," She brushes her hand over your arm. "...check in." it probably would have been worthwhile to mention that before, but you were a bit distracted.

"That's cool. I can do that." She gives your hand a squeeze and thankfully doesn't make a big deal about it.

"Cool." You let go of her hand and to stand up only to grimace as genetic material drips down your leg.

"Forget about something there, Sol?" she snickers and gives your arm a little pat. "Been there before." She winks at you and makes her way over to the ablation block. Yeah, you need to wash these jeans immediately.

When you get out of the ablation trap Roxy is still in your room. You're not sure why you expected her not to be. She found your sheets and made the bed, mostly anyway. She's wearing the pants you left out for her but doesn't have a shirt on yet, just her bra. She's looking in the mirror at all the marks you left on her.

"What's the damage?" You say as you come up behind her, glad to see that the marks on her back are just faint pink lines.

"Don't worry, you didn't break skin." Seemingly satisfied she throws on a T-shirt that isn't the one you left out for her. It's one with your sign on it. Definitely not a very spades thing to do, but endearing all the same. She turns around and you think she's about to loop her arms around your neck, but then she tugs your collar back to get a look at her handiwork. "But I broke yours." This time she does let her arms hang around your neck while she looks at you with a raised eyebrow and a smug smirk on her face.

"I noticed," you say with a smile as you tug her close and let your arms hang around her waist. She grabs your chin and tilts your head side to side.

"I do good work," she remarks about the collection of hickies a.k.a. "get your ass in gear marks" she gave you. You hum in response before stealing a quick kiss.

"I guess I better get to the laundry. Then maybe get some food."

"Good. I think I might come with." She grabs a laundry pod and smacks your ass on your way out the door. You roll your eyes and shake your head at her. Well, that's certainly one way to get you out of your room.
You're sitting on top of one of the tables in the laundry room while Sollux moves his stuff from the washer to the dryer. He seems a lot better now that you "motivated" him to leave his room and got him started on being productive. He always has trouble with that first step but seems to do okay once he gets moving again, and you are dying for him to get back to trying to 1-UP you. It's ridiculously motivating. Having such a passionate rivalry is thrilling like nothing else could be. You don't want him to fail, you just want to beat him. You want him to take second place to you and then come back and dethrone you so you can turn around and do the same to him. You want to be better than everyone else with him. You want people to talk about you and him on forums like he's your arch nemesis. You want him to stare at his projects for hours only for you to come over and solve it in two seconds just to piss him off, while you pretend like you didn't just spend the last hour and a half furiously digging through stack overflow. But he needs to be on his game for that. If he's off, you're off. You can't counter if he doesn't strike.

You let your mind idle while you watch him, taking in the way he moves, the way his clothes fall on his frame, the nail marks on the back of his neck that disappear under his shirt. You hadn't expected to like leaving your mark on him as much as you do. Maybe it's because he likes it too. A ghost of your touch on his skin. He heals quick, trolls do that at varying rates. They're never there for long, but while they are, there is a little possessive part of you that sees them and says 'mine'. He's so careful with you. It's sweet, but you wish he'd be a bit more rough. The marks he left on you are already fading. However, it is progress. If his nails hadn't been filed down so much, the way he grabbed you, desperate and needy, the thought of the marks it would have left leaves you feeling warm.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" he says, breaking the cozy silence of the liminal space you were sharing.

"Shoot."

"You said something earlier about Dave. What exactly did you mean by it?" He keeps moving stuff between the machines, although more carefully than before like it's a distraction to keep from looking at you. You think back to this afternoon. You were talking about Sunday, about Dave being disappointed that Sollux hadn't come to movie night, and about how you knew he "gave a damn".

"About movie night? He wasn't too thrilled about your being a double no-show."

"That was it?" He sounds skeptical but willing to drop it if you say yes.

"Wellll," you drag the word out as you cross your arms and quickly sway side to side in debate. With a sigh, you give in. "Not exactly. I mean, is there like...are you guys tiptoeing around something? Is there something I should know about?" Oh, that came out wrong. He jerks upright and turns to face you.

"No! I wouldn't, it isn't like that, I swear!" it comes out fast and laced with worry. You hop off the table and grab him by his upper arms. You're not about to undo all the effort he just went through picking himself up.
"Augh, that's not what I meant." You feel him ease under your hands and his expression moves to something more pensive.

"You mean a different quadrant."

"Yeah."

"That you should know about because he's your cousin."

"You got it."

"Would that be weird for you?"

"nnnm," you make a so-so gesture with your hand and scrunch up one side of your face. "Kind of, but not really? If you were into him in a flushed way maybe, but I don't see an issue since it's pale." You're alluding to the vacillation neither of you likes to talk about.

"Wait, how do you know that? Please tell me I'm not that painfully transparent."

"Babe," You say as you let go of him to shift your weight to one leg and park your hand on your hip. You give him a 'what the heck' gesture with your other hand. "Oh gee Roxy, you're right, I totally don't dislike Dave- OH BY THE WAY YOU CHILL WITH ME HAVING A MOIRAIL? Totally unrelated." He starts to blush and his mouth makes a thin line as he fails miserably to hold back a smile.

"I didn't think you remembered that," he says, looking away as if it will save him any face. You roll your eyes and lean against the washer.

"I wasn't THAT drunk."

"You were pretty drunk."

"Says the guy who stared at the elevator panel for five minutes. Why do you think we went to MY room?" So, maybe it wasn't five minutes, but it was like he was trying to figure out some ancient puzzle. You both chuckle and he leans against the dryer as your conversation dissolves back into silence. He wants to ask you something, you can tell by the way he's looking down at the floor.

"Humans have that whole sexuality thing going on. Do you know if I even stand a chance?" His voice is quiet in a way that suggests pessimism. It's a good question, one that you don't really have an answer for. It can be hard to tell when Dave is serious or not. He jokes about stuff somewhat indiscriminately. He's never mentioned dating anyone either. And it's not like you have the kind of relationship with him where he'd tell you about a crush.

"I have no idea. Dave can be hard to read sometimes. A lot of times actually. He keeps his emotions behind seven proxies." You snort laugh at the stolen joke. Sollux finds it funny too, but his laugh is subdued by the uncertainty of your answer.

"He's avoiding me. I think I freaked him out."

You cock an eyebrow and twist to look at Sollux more directly. "Why's that?" He shakes his head. The cue for it being a complicated answer he doesn't want to get into with you. It doesn't really matter the reason. His reaction doesn't exactly shock you regardless of what it is in response to. You can't imagine Dave grew up with a lot of support in the "dealing with your feelings" department. Anything he got would have been from Dirk, and Dirk only recently started working on expressing his baggage through a hole larger than a pinprick. You really had to work at that too. The only other
source would be Rose, which now that you think about it, might give him a standing chance. "I wouldn't worry too much. Seven proxies, remember?" He shrugs and takes a deep breath before pushing off the dryer and picking up the empty laundry basket.

"I'm going to head back."

"You're not gonna fall right back into your slump are you?" You give him a hard look.

"No, I have a plan. This isn't my first encounter with a down-swing."

"Alright. If I catch you sulking again it'll be me AND Karkat breaking down your door. He won't be so creative in getting you moving." You wink at him and start making your way back to your room. Nepeta is there when you do. She's covered a large section of the floor with newspaper and has her art project contained on it. She looks at the way you're dressed and gets a devious smile on her face.

"Looks like someone had a pawsome day." You fall excitedly sideways into your desk chair and lean back to get at the desk's bottom drawer.

"You have no ideaaaaa," You say, as giddiness starts creeping into your voice. "Nep, oh my god, Nep, it was so hot." She gets this wide-eyed look that happens when you gossip about relationships and quadrants with her.

"Ohhhh~~~! Tell me, tell me!" She says, completely forgetting about the painting she's working on. You uncork the bottle you pull out of the drawer and take a sizeable swig.

"I went in there so angry. Ugly crying angry. I was gonna rip this boy a new one. Totally did, I was all up in his face. Walls were involved, Nep." You take another swig. She's covering her mouth with her hands waiting in anticipation. "He was being a stubborn ass and I was just so unreasonably mad and I made this sound like a growling frustrated noise. I didn't even mean to, wasn't even trying. I thought I broke him. He was standing there silent for what felt like forever. Then he suddenly starts macking on me." She makes a high-pitch squeal and grabs at her hat.

"That's so purrfect! It's so hard for humans to purrduce those kitmesis growls because you can't purrceave most of them. I'm so happy purr you!" She jumps up and grabs your hands. Her excitement is infectious and you join her in the gleeful swaying of your arms. You only let go to clap your hands to your mouth, stand up, and spin around before falling back on your bed.

"Oh my god, oh my god, the sounds, oh my god. " You sit up to sip again the wine bottle and set it back on the desk. "He did this fuckin rad thing. Ok, so, we were getting mad hot and heavy, hella down, which you know, is huge. He's talking all close and shit and making this rumbly sound I can't really hear like it's standing on the edge of my hearing flipping me the bird. Hell if I know what he did, but he tried again and hoooolly shit, Nepeta, it was the wildest most resonating resonance to ever fucking resonate. x2 voice combo. Two frisky frequencies crossing paths and high fiving each other in my ears." You fall back on the bed with your arms spread out. Then there is a sudden thud to your right and a Nepeta sitting on her heels with barely contained excitement.

"That's so catsiderate of him. He must be so ears over paws with you~~" She's toying with her hat now and looks between you and the shirt you have on. "What does it mean for humans to share clothes?" You move to sit cross-legged and let your eyes drift up as you think about it.

"For people dating it's...comforting I guess. Their clothes smell like them obvs, but also it usually isn't something you ask for. You just steal their shirt like 'yoink this is mine now'." You remember your wearing his pants too. "He gave me the pants to borrow though. My skirt got a little dirty." The grin on your face is absolutely scandalous. Nepeta jams her hat back on before grabbing your hands.
"That's is exactly the mix of red and black you and Sollux have. Oh, I bet he doesn't know! You should tell him it's territorial too. Clothes sharing isn't a kitmesis thing, but claiming something of theirs as yours could be," she says. You can see the wheels turning in her head as she ponders it. You hadn't really thought about it that way. She has a good point. You'll have to find the opportunity to casually drop that idea. She jumps up off the bed and springs to her desk, agilely avoiding stepping on the project supplies all over the floor. "I've got to write that down in my notebook. Karkat and I can mews over it later."

"One of you needs to minor in something you can use this as a thesis for. No way are your musings, not book length by now."

"Purrhaps, or maybe one day he can write screenplays with it. Imagine the kinds of romantic entanglement gemeowetry he could make." That would be off the rails. Karkat reads so much of that stuff. You haven't read any of his writing yet, but you imagine it is probably pretty intricate. He's good at organizing things. While Nepeta has her back to you, you quickly pull the shirt collar up to your nose. Maybe it's the wine starting to hit you, but you feel a sense of calm as you breathe in the scent that lingers on his clothes.

So, you've decided to meddle. After a long talk with Kanaya last Saturday, you've been cleared to meddle by your moirail, but only if you really really need to. You have decided that you really really need to. Something has definitely occurred between Dave and Sollux because they are avoiding each other. You are certain of it and it's getting weird. Although it would seem that it is mostly Dave doing the avoiding. He's trying to be sneaky about it, and physically he's damn good at it. If he doesn't want you to hear him coming, you won't. However, if you question him even in the vaguest of ways, the guy is a terrible liar. Regardless, it's annoying you. They've been at this all week. You have a project due soon and went through all the trouble of speaking in a civil manner to an Ampora; Dave better get his act together so you can shoot this thing. That's your justification and your sticking to it.

Since his appointment with the ocular docterrorist, Dave has been grumbling and moaning about how dang bright everything is nearly nonstop. Apparently, he was told to stop wearing those sunglasses all the time, and has been given a new near identical set of glasses with different lenses that you're going to guess are not as dark and do something special. Regardless of their specialness and their benefit to his health, there is an adjustment period that Dave described as "migraine city population me" and then a bunch of words that don't matter. This is where your plan comes in.

carcinoGeneticist [CG] began trolling grimAuxiliatrix [GA]

[GA]: Karkat That Is Mean

[CG]: IT'S NOT MEAN. IT IS EFFECTIVE.

[GA]: You Are Hiding His Medication

[CG]: IT'S NOT MEDICATION, IT'S JUST EXCEDRIN.

[GA]: That A Physician Directed Him To Take

[CG]: IT'S NOT LIKE I'M FORCING HIM TO NOT TAKE IT. ALL HE HAS TO DO IS
TALK TO SOLLUX. SOLLUX HAS THE SAME SHIT.

[GA]: Are You Positive That This Silent Feud Even Exists

[GA]: It Has Only Been A Few Days

[CG]: YES AND IN JUST THOSE FEW DAYS THEY HAVE SOMEHOW MANAGED TO MAKE IT BOTH GLARINGLY OBVIOUS AND HORRIFYINGLY UNCOMFORTABLE.

[CG]: DAVE IS ACTIVELY AVOIDING EVEN TALKING ABOUT THE GUY. BASED ON STATISTICS ALONE, WITH HOW MUCH DAVE TALKS, HE SHOULD HAVE AT LEAST MENTIONED SOLLUX IN PASSING BY NOW.

[GA]: I Know I Said You Could Meddle But I Am Not Sure I Fully Approve Of This Methode

[GA]: Could You Not Simply Invite Them To A Group Function Together

[CG]: IF THEY CAN AVOID EACH OTHER IN CLASS, THEY CAN AVOID EACH OTHER AT A PARTY, OR IN ANY GROUP SETTING REALLY.

[CG]: THIS PUTS THEM ALONE AND FORCES THEM TO SPEAK TO EACH OTHER.

[GA]: Karkat Have You Taken The Moment To Realise The Situation You Are About To Put Sollux In

[GA]: You Are About To Deliver To Him His Pity Crush In A State Of Incapacitation

[GA]: That Is Practically Pornographic

[CG]: IT IS NOT PORNOGRAPHIC

[CG]: I'M NOT OVER THERE BENDING HIS ARM TO TEND ON PRONG AND FROND TO HIM. I'M SIMPLY PUTTING THEM IN A SITUATION THAT COULD LEAD TO THEM BOTH BEING SLIGHTLY LESS HIGH CALIBER DUNDERFUCKS ABOUT THIS WHOLE SITUATION.

[GA]: I Have My Doubts But Do Let Me Know How It Turns Out

[GA]: I Know I Only Met Him Briefly But Rose Speaks Well Of Him

[GA]: For The Most Part

[GA]: It Would Be Nice To See Sollux In A Healthy Moirallegiance As He Deserves Such

[CG]: THANKS

[CG]: I ACTUALLY ALREADY HID THE EXCEDRIN AND AM WATCHING DAVE TEAR APPART HIS DESK AS WE SPEAK.

[GA]: You Were Banking On My Approval

[CG]: <>

[GA]: You Are Not Off The Hook Mister

[GA]: I Will Hold You Personally Accountable In The Event That This Goes Sideways
carninoGeneticist [CG] ceased trolling grimAuxiliatrix [GA]

===> Dave: Scour Your Room For The Pills

You can't believe you lost the Excedrin. You could have sworn that you left it on the nightstand. Your side of the room is chaos, but it's organized chaos. You know where everything is. Except for these goddamn pills. "Ugghh, where are they?" You groan as you hold a hand to your forehead. It feels like your head is going to crack in half and your eyes are going to run out of their sockets like an undercooked egg.

"If you cleaned your side of the room every now and then this wouldn't be a problem." Karkat chides far too loudly from the other side of the room.

"Not now. Fuck, have you seen them? I'm dying over here." You give up your search and sit on the edge of your bed with your head in your hands. You are on the edge of tears it hurt so much.

"Message Sollux. He gets migraines like it's nobody's business because he does such a shitty job of taking care of himself. He probably has the maximum strength they can legally--"

"Shut. Up." You're so curt in your interruption that Karkat shockingly does, in fact, shut up. You're not thrilled about talking to Sollux, but you suppose it has to happen eventually and this is a good excuse. It's got a purpose to it and you can bail as soon as you get ahold of those pills if you want to. 'If you want to', it rings through your mind again because the part of you that you're scared of desperately wants to see him again. That part of you, every time you dodge him, every time you go out of your way to not cross his path, every time you suppress the urge to bring him up in conversation has been making your chest ache. You pull out your phone and hold it in your hand a moment before unlocking it. It feels unusually heavy. For about the millionth time this week, you open the gallery and scroll through your pictures until you reach the only one you have of him. You took it when he wasn't looking while he was fixing your turntables. He's content and focused, eyes glowing behind the hair partially obscuring them from your view as he looks down over a tangle of wires with this faint smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. You close it and open pesterchum. You have to confront him. You don't really have much of a choice. You don't think you can bear walking all the way to the campus store and who knows if they even have it. It could all be for nothing and then you'd be stuck talking to him anyway.

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering twinArmageddons [TA]

[TG]: i need a favor

[TA]: what ii2 iiit?

That was fast.

[TG]: please tell me you have something for migraines

[TG]: i am dying

[TA]: of cour2e ii do.

[TG]: thank fucking god

[TG]: can you bring it over if i have to move again my head is going to explode
Begrudgingly you get to your feet. And slowly make your way to the door. "He's making you go over there?" Karkat asks. You really wish he'd stop talking. You don't bother with an answer and continue the trek across the hall. You forget to ease the door shut and the click it makes when it shuts is the loudest damn thing you've ever heard and you once knocked over every single bottle in the shower. You really don't want to knock on this door so instead, you slump against the wood and jiggle the handle. Red and blue psi crackles around it just as you're turning it and it pops open immediately.

"Motherfucker," Sollux hisses from the top bunk. Using his psionics must have hurt. His room is as dark as it could possibly be given the time of day. He has those special black-out curtains up over the windows and his computer is off. Even the apiculture computer is somehow off. Did he put the bees to sleep or something?

"nnnggh," you groan. He seems to understand your semi-nonverbal request because an arm appears from the top bunk and points to the nightstand where a bottled water and a pill bottle are.

"Two," he says before you can ask. You accidentally nod your head and are filled with regrets. The bottle has one of those child safety caps and you fuck it up three times before you get the bottle open. Each click is deafening in the silence. You down the pills with a generous amount of water. It's cold. He must have just taken some of these himself. With a quiet whine, you set your shades on the table and shuffle to the bottom bunk and lay down. You suppose you can stay. It's quiet and dark in here.

You wake up sometime later to the sound of wood creaking as Sollux slowly climbs down from his bunk. It can't be too much later because your head still hurts, although it's much more bearable now. He has his glasses off and is holding his forehead much like you were. He's making his way over to the bottle of pills. "How long has it been. Should you be taking more of those?" you whisper.

"Probably not long enough, but fuck it, my head is killing me." The pain in his voice pulls you to your feet before you can think better of it and you gently reach out to take the pills from him and set them back on the nightstand. You're nervous as fuck, but you know this will help. "Hey," he weakly protests. Your pulse quickens and it does nothing good for your headache. The idea that you can help him with this, that you can make it better pushes you forward.

"Sit," you say as you steer him to the bed. "Face that way." You gesture to the door and he follows your directions, turning and pulling his feet up to sit cross-legged. You sit behind him. Part of you is terrified to touch him, but there is also a part of you that desperately wants to.

"What are you doing?"

"Dirk taught me. We would get pretty bad headaches sometimes." You start at his shoulders. Troll's and Human's muscular structure doesn't differ too much. It's the same idea. You figure the pressure points ought to work about the same. You knead at the muscles in his shoulders working down between his shoulder blades before running your hands back up and fanning them out again. This time you press your thumbs into the junction right before his arm. You feel him hold his breath for a
moment before letting it out to breathe normally again. You count in your head and move onto the next ones on his neck. You can feel it giving beneath your fingers as you work little circles into the muscle. It's somewhat relaxing in how it's a practiced motion your hands can almost do themselves. Unfortunately, that leaves room for your mind to be vividly aware of the feeling of his skin against yours, every small movement he makes, the small sharp breaths that you can tell he's trying to hide; you think he might have his hand over his mouth.

You tip his head forward slightly and press at the two spots at the edge of his skull. The sound that slips through his fingers pulls you from your trance and you can feel the blood rushing to your cheeks as you work your thumbs firmly into the spot. You figured that might happen, this spot is specifically for migraine pain, but even expecting it, the whimper makes something in your chest flutter.

"Dave, stop." There is an urgency in his voice that has your hands halting immediately and pulling away from him. "I can't let you blindly do this to me." He's still facing away from you and you can see the tips of his fingers at his sides as he holds himself. "I know quadrants confuse you, but you should know that this is really really pale and...and..." He's struggling to say something and it's more than his headache holding him back.

"I know," You interrupt before he can say anything else that might dissuade you from speaking up. You can feel it at the back of your mind. It happens now or it happens never. Like a fixed point where fate diverges. You ball your hands into fists to keep them from shaking. Why is this so hard? "I know it's pale, but if you don't mind, I don't mind." You clench your teeth in an attempt to keep your cool. Sollux slowly and carefully turns, not to completely face you, but enough to look at you.

"Dave, it is so hard for me to think right now. What are you saying?"

You take a deep breath. When you speak it's like a dam breaking slowly and then all at once. "I like you, a lot, too much. I didn't know or I didn't want to until- Fuck, I saw you lying there and you weren't moving and I-" You cover your face with your hands, but it doesn't still the words that won't stop spilling out. "I can't get you out of my fucking mind. I've been dodging you all week because I'm so emotionally stunted that I do some kind of acrobatic pirouette off the goddamn handle at the slightest indication of feelings. Which was easier than I thought it would be because apparently, I memorized your schedule unconsciously like some kind of repressed uptight victorian who can barely handle existing in the same space as you much less holding your hand- oh god please make me stop talking. Either say something or strike me down now before I further humiliate myself, before any more incriminating confessions launch themselves from my mouth."

"Dave." Oh thank god, he said something. You can stop speaking now. You bite your lip just in case your brain gets any more bright ideas. "Calm down. It's okay." There is the soft rustle of fabric as he moves to sit beside you. His hand touches your back and runs up and down in a slow, soothing motion. He's so close to you. His leg is touching yours. You want to lean against him so badly. You try, but your body won't let you and you hesitate. This is so pathetic. He probably thinks you're so pathetic acting like this. This was a bad idea. He's going to let you down easy, but you know it'll be the end of your friendship. It'll be like the past week, but forever. He pulls you the rest of the way and you fall against him. You bring your hands away from your face, but you keep your gaze downward. Your stomach is tied in knots. Your mind still isn't willing to let go of the idea he'll say no because if you do it'll only hurt that much more when he tells you to get lost. "I make a terrible Moirail." Oh god, here it comes. "You think I look pitiful now, but it goes so much farther. I'm really fucked up." His voice nearly cracks at that. "I'm really messed up, Dave. Trust me, you don't want any part of this. I'll only wear you down. You've been too nice to me already. I shouldn't have led you on." He's ripping your heart out and he's doing it with a cliche. It's him, not you. It makes it hurt worse. "You've got a chance at getting your shit together. I'll just ruin that." Wait, he's serious. He
thinks you're a vaguely functional human being, or at least he thinks you have a shot at being one, and that he's just going to mess it up. He saw you have a fucking meltdown; how can he think he can wreck you any more than you already are.

You sit up abruptly and look directly at him. "Are you fucking kidding me? I'm like the damn poster child for fucked up bullshit." You see him wince and bring your voice back down. "If you think you can mess me up any more than my brother did then you're fucking crazy." Your eyes go wide and your expression falls to horrified realization. That wasn't supposed to come out. You didn't mean to say that. You're suddenly very aware that you don't have your shades on and every fiber of your being tells you to run. You try to scramble away from him, but in your panic, you forget how close to the edge you're sitting and wind up hitting the floor hard. You stay there. This one can't be played off. You can't talk your way out of this one. His hand taps your shoulder and you look up to see it being extended to you. This isn't the first time he's helped you up off the floor. You remember the first time he did it. The way you stumbled into him. The way that brief contact meant far too much to you, so you brushed it off as just from you being touch starved. Another thing on your list of problems. You take his hand and let him help you back up onto the bed. The two of you sit side by side on the edge. Neither one of you can look at the other. Your hands are bracing you at either side and you have your fingers twisted up in the sheet you pulled askew when you fell.

"He's the one looking for you, right?"

"Yeah."

You feel him shift beside you before his hand covers yours. "Are you sure about this? Are you sure you want someone like me?" There is a fragility to his voice, a cautious optimism that dares to hope.

"Not someone LIKE you, just you. I don't care if you're a mess. I'm a mess. With our powers combined, we can be the hottest mess anyone has ever seen. Captain planet will take one look at us and be like I ain't touching that one. Who knows, maybe we can cobble together one vaguely functional being like some kind of ill-advised chimera." You're rambling again. This time you stop yourself. The silence hangs. You aren't sure what else to say so instead you let go of the sheet your fingers are still digging into and flip your hand over to gently take his. He lets out a single hesitant chirp at you. You smile and hum in the same sort of fond affectionate way you had before.

"What does that mean?"

"What does what mean?"

"The sound you made." he says, "I had no fucking clue how to possibly google it." You chuckle behind closed lips as you recall your own frenzy of searching.

"I've never thought about it. I guess it's... a response... a way to express fondness." You shrug. "You chirped at me and it was nice." He squeezes your hand. You suppose he's just as nervous as you are. "Does your head still hurt? Want me to finish doing what I was doing?" You ask. It isn't what you're really asking though. You can't say what you're really asking. Instead, you ask if he wants to pick up where you left off. If he wants to continue doing what you both have established to be distressingly pale.

"Yeah. Could you? That was actually helping a lot." He lets go of your hand and turns to face the door as you had instructed before. You situate yourself behind him and find your place again, pressing your fingers against the hollow at the base of his skull, then the two spots to either side of it. He's still trying to disguise how nice it feels, but not like before.

The points by his ears are harder to find because his ears are a different shape than yours and the
rounded cartilage is how you find them on yourself. His come to points and it makes them a bit longer than your own, and you think the angle may be different, but aside from that, they are fairly similar. You have one hand bracing the right side of his head as you feel around near his temple. "There?" you ask, not sure if it's the right spot. If you find the first one and the last one you should be able to guess where the rest are. He makes an 'mhm' noise in response and again when you ask him about the other one. The whole time you go through them, five of them to a side, you have to resist the temptation to run your fingers over his ears. You're not exactly sure why you want to touch them, just that you do. Perhaps you wonder if his ears are sensitive like yours, or maybe they're simply interesting. Not now, you tell yourself. He's practically boneless by the time you circle back to his shoulders, rubbing your hands over them briefly before doing the same up and down his neck.

"The other ones are on your face, so we'll just skip those for now," you say, a bit of embarrassment creeping in your voice. You know there are parts of his face that are the diamond version of third base and hell if you are touching that right now. He starts to turn around when you remember, "Oh wait, forgot one." You place a palm to his back as you stand up. "Hmm," You run your fingers over his spine. You aren't sure if it's the same number of vertebra as you have. You brace him with your arm in front of his shoulders. "Your spine might be different than mine. Which one of these hurts the most?"

"Why would my back hurt if- ah, that one, that one." He says the third time you press against his back. You work at the spot until you feel him easing against you again. You run your palm over it and over his back like you're erasing a blackboard. You're not sure if it really 'settles the nerves' as Dirk had once told you or if it's just a mental thing.

"Better?"

"A lot. What was that?"

"Pressure points." He nods like he's listening, but isn't sure how to respond.

"I'm just gonna say it before it gets weird."

"We are well past weird, but go ahead." He smirks and you quickly find a matching one on your own face.

"Are we Moirails now?" He's looking you right in the eyes and you're looking back. You can see that small bit of lingering uncertainty that you might have changed your mind. It seems ridiculous that it would need to be explicitly asked, but it does. You need that definitory too.

"God, I hope so, otherwise, I'm the slut of diamonds." He rolls his eyes at you as if to chide himself for expecting a straight answer. You wonder how it is you know that. Maybe his pupils are a slightly different color, or maybe part of his eye is brighter. "You know what's funny?" you ask.

"What?"

"Neither of us have been able to see fuck-all this entire time."

"Really?" he asks through a laugh, "I thought those were just sunglasses." You grab both your glasses and drop down next to him.

"They were. These are new. Turns out I've been walking around seeing the world like I recorded it on a flip phone all this time." Okay, that may be an exaggeration. You can see alright without them. He puts his glasses back on, and you let him look at your face before you hide it behind your shades again. "It's why my head hurts. They are tinted different. They're only as dark as before when they
need to be. The doc said I would probably get headaches for a little while."

"Let me know if you do. Blackout curtains are a godsend." He says as he takes up your hand again. It makes your heart soar. It's such a simple thing, but it leaves you with a deliriously good feeling in your chest, especially when he starts gently running his thumb over the side of yours. Man, you really are touch starved. You don't want it to stop, but your head still kind of hurts.

"Mind if I lie down again? My head's still bothering me."

"Oh. Yeah, sure. No problem," He says in a startled way as he stands up. "That's a good idea. I think I might do that too." He takes his glasses back off and sets them on the table again, holding out his hand for yours while he's at it, before heading around to the ladder built into the end of the bed. He has his foot on the first rung when he pauses. "Hey, do you umm, do you want to come up here with me?"

You are unreasonably nervous about that in the strangest way. Fortunately, your mouth is very practiced in operating without your brain, and answers for you. "Sure." It takes you another moment to process it all before you're following him up there. It's different than sitting on the bottom bunk. This is where he sleeps. It's the same exact bed, just higher up, yet it is infinitely more intimate. He shifts the pillows around so you have your own, but the bed isn't really wide enough for it so it makes it look like one long pillow. This is all new to you. You've flirted with plenty of people, you've got that down, you've even made out with a girl or two, but it wasn't like this. Like hell if you were going to bring anyone back to your apartment in Houston. Much less bring them back and then put yourself in any state of being even resembling vulnerability, emotional or otherwise. You're certain that your face is red as you lie down next to him after having the world's fastest crisis over which way to face. You choose to face him. There's enough room for Jesus between the two of you and you have no idea what to do with your arms.

"Dave, am I making you nervous?" He says it with just a touch of laughter in his voice like he's surprised.

"What, no, of course not. I'm cool. So cool."

"Bullshit."

"First of all, how dare you. You woo me into your bed and the first thing you do is make fun of me. And Secondly," there's a pause and when you speak again your voice lacks the lighthearted tone it had a moment ago. "I've never been even remotely close to someone like this before." He takes your hand again, holding it in his. This time he laces your fingers loosely together.

"Honestly, I wouldn't have guessed, but I can totally see it now. Don't worry, I'll be gentle," he punctuates his teasing with a wink.

"You're an ass."

"ehheh, is this news to you?" He takes a deep breath and settles himself in as he lets it out. "Really though, just relax." He's brushing his thumb over yours again. You decide you like that a lot and try to mimic the movement. He closes his eyes and smiles the same way he did in the hallway what seems like forever ago. You like that too. You like a lot of things happening right now. How on earth you manage to settle your mind long enough to fall asleep again is beyond you.

==>

Be Karkat
[TA] ii'm exonerating any and all 2oliid2 you owe me

[CG] TO WHAT DO I OWE THIS ABSOLUTION OF MY DEBTS?

[TA] you know damn well what you diid

[CG] I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU COULD BE REFERRING TO.

[TA] there ii2 no way dave could have gone through all tho2e piill2 2o quickly you diid 2omethiing

[CG] I DID NO SUCH SOMETHING. HE LOST THE BOTTLE. YOU ARE DELUSIONAL.

[TA] 2o ii2 ju2t coiinciidence that ii had a miigraine at the exact moment that dave mii2placed hii2 mediicatiion?

[CG] YES. THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED DESPITE THE ODDS.

[TA] and only 2hortly after ii had mentiioned to you that ii felt a headache comiing on.

[TA] HMMM.

[CG] DON'T YOU HMMM AT ME.

[TA] HMMMMMMMM.

[CG] FINE. THERE MAY HAVE BEEN A SMALL QUANTITY OF MINOR MEDDLING. IT WAS BOTH WARRANTED AND NECESSARY BECAUSE IT WAS PERSONALLY AFFECTING MY USER EXPERIENCE OF THIS THING CALLED LIFE. BOTH OF YOU ARE SHARING A SINGLE BRAIN CELL AND THAT BRAIN CELL HAS ANXIETY.

[CG] KANAYA ALSO CLEARED ME TO DO IT.

[TA] thank2 kk.

[CG] YEAH, YEAH, YOU'RE WELCOME.

[TA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

[twinArmageddons [TA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

carcinoGeneticist [CG] began trolling grimAuxiliatrix [GA]

[CG] I HAVE GOOD NEWS.

[GA] Oh

[GA] And What Is This Good News

[CG] YOU DO NOT HAVE TO HOLD ME PERSONALLY ACCOUNTABLE IF THINGS GO SIDEWAYS BECAUSE THINGS HAVE NOT GONE SIDEWAYS. THINGS HAVE GONE VERY MUCH IN A VERTICAL FASHION.

[GA] I Am An Authority On Fashions And Will Say That Vertical Fashions Are The Best Fashions In Which To Go

[GA] At The Risk Of Being Nosey What Exactly Occurred Or Has Come To Be From Your
[CG] DAVE WAS GONE FOR HOURS, SO LORD ONLY KNOWS WHAT KIND OF EXCRUCIATINGLY DRAGGED OUT AWKWARD MOMENT CULMINATED IN THIS, BUT AS DAVE PUTS IT, THEY ARE NOW "KNOCKING FEELINGS" WHICH I ASSUME IS A PLAY ON THE HUMAN EUPHANISMS FOR COITUS "KNOCKING BOOTS". UNFORTUNATELY, HE WENT ON TO SAY THAT THEY ARE "ENTRENCHED IN THIS DIAMOND SHIT" AND ARE "CANON" AND THAT I SHOULD INFORM NEPETA.

[GA] There Is A Certain Charm To His Way Of Phrasing And Elaboration

[CG] YOU WOUND ME. HOW COULD YOU BETRAY ME LIKE THIS?

[GA] Oh Shush

[GA] You Are Being Dramatic

[GA] Back To The Matter At Hand I Am Very Pleased At This Outcome

[GA] Have Either Of Them Discovered Your Interference

[CG] DAVE MAY HAVE NOTICED WHEN I THREW THE EXCEDRIN AT HIS HEAD AND SAID: "YOU'RE WELCOME".

[GA] I Am Not Condoning Your Behavior

[GA] That Said I Wish I Could Have Witnessed The Interaction

[GA] What About Sollux

[CG] HE IS SLIGHTLY MORE OBSERVANT AND FIGURED IT OUT FOR HIMSELF. HE MESSAGED ME A LITTLE WHILE AGO ABOUT IT.

[GA] I Shall Return Shortly

[GA] I Would Like To Tell Rose Of These Events

grimAuxiliatrix [GA] is an idle chump

==> Be Dirk: Wait for Roxy

You're standing outside your apartment under the overhang leaning against the wooden railing. The ashtray fits perfectly on it. You know it's a filthy habit. You picked it up shortly after being kicked out. The stress was just too much for you. You tried to quit once before, but here you are again. You asked your doctor about maybe taking something to help you stop, but it conflicts with the medicine that keeps you from staring off into space for long periods of time while you go to the 'other place' in your head. You take a drag. They don't taste so good anymore. They never really did, but they didn't use to taste as bad as they do now. It's probably the guilt. Dave doesn't know you smoke and you intend to keep it that way. He'd be so disappointed. You see Roxy coming up the walkway with a black plastic bag in her hand. You take one last hard drag before putting out the cigarette just as she's making her way toward you.

"Those are going to kill you, Dirk."

"I know, I know." You let her into the apartment and she puts what is clearly beer into the fridge
before coming to sit with you at the small table below the window with one in each hand.

"So, what's eating you?" she asks as she twists the cap off and hands you the bottle before doing the same for her own. You take a swig and set it aside.

"I lost my job. They went around handing out pink slips today. I have two weeks before I'm screwed. There's no way I can find a job that quick, not to mention it would be at least a week before I saw a check." She makes a 'yikes' face and takes a sip of her drink before speaking.

"That's rough, man. You had a real good thing going too."

"I know."

"You know I'm always game to skim my mother's account for you if you need it. Do you have anything saved?"

"A little bit, but not much. I was mostly still living paycheck to paycheck. Any extra was coming from those scavenge computers I was building and salvaging parts from."

"What about that shop you sold the good shit to?" You perk up a bit. You hadn't even thought about that. Equius did sometimes complain about the people he and his brother wound up hiring. He had voiced his desire to replace them with robots, but he was more so a hardware guy and didn't trust Sollux not to screw him over. You hadn't taken him seriously, but maybe you should have.

"Zahhak's. Yeah, that could work. If he is still thinking of replacing his workers with robots, he could probably use a hand. It would be temporary seeing as I would more or less be building my replacements, but it could carry me over until I find something else." There is also a workshop in the back and you'd be lying if you said you weren't envious of it. Your phone pings and you look to see that it's Dave.

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT]

[TG] yo

[TG] i decided of my own free will and totally not your influence or circumstances that backed me into a corner to talk to sollux

[TG] check it

turntechGodhead [TG] sent timaeusTestified [TT] file "getadamnsnaphatalready.jpg"

You open the picture and at the same time, Roxy laughs from across the table. "Dave message you too?" she asks.

"Yeah," you say with a small smile as you look at the screenshot of the snap she sent to Roxy. It's a selfie of him and Sollux. They're both flashing peace signs sideways so they line up to make a diamond while posing in an over the top way so as to appear as if they aren't being genuinely sappy and romantic. The ironic couple photo. Definitely a Dave move to avoid having a serious conversation with either of you about his love life. "It would be a failing of me as his brother if I didn't fuck with him at least a little," You say. Roxy laughs into her beer.


[TG] et tu brute
You look up at Roxy. "What did you say to him that he's quoting Shakespeare's Caesar at me?"

"I told him he really puts the homo in side hoe." It doesn't work perfectly, but it doesn't have to. You chuckle and take another sip of your beer. You're barely halfway through it, but Roxy is getting up for another. You're starting to think there may be a conversation you should have with her, but then again she is a college student. Don't most college kids drink a bit more than the average person? A decision for another time. You shelve the thought to the back of your mind and pull up a new chat window to message Equius.

timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering centaursTesticle [CT]

[TT] Are you still considering replacing your sub-par employees with something more metallic?

[TT] Unfortunately I'm about to have a lot of availability in two weeks if you are looking to hire a hand.

"You seem to be taking this really well. I take it you also knew beforehand." You say as you pocket your phone. Equius probably won't get back to you right away at this hour.

"Yeah, but the other way around. I had a strong hunch that Sollux had feelings for him. He more or less let it slip while he was high off his ass. The fact that it's pale helps. Even if they did vacillate a bit like Sollux and I do, I think I'd be okay with it. Neither of us would be invading the other's quadrant, ya know? I mean, I can't really expect him to do that for me, but not him." Makes sense. She takes a sip of her drink and seems to remember something halfway through, hunching over and quickly swallowing while holding up a finger. "Sollux had asked me something the other day, but I didn't know the answer. What even is Dave's sexuality?"

You have a fairly good idea of what Dave's deal is, but you're not certain he would appreciate you talking about it behind his back. "In his own words, complicated. He's never straight up told me, but I've pieced it together at this point." Roxy looks at you waiting for you to elaborate, but you shake your head. "Oh, no. If you want to know, you'll have to ask him. I can't break the bro code."

"You're right. I guess if I wasn't as open about it as I am I'd be pretty pissed if people were talking about me like that too." You see her eyes flit down and quickly look away. It's a look you know well. It happens every time you meet someone new. She's looking at your neck. You've caught her doing it a few times, usually when you're on this topic, but she always looks away immediately.

"Roxy, you can look."

"Hm?"

"I can see you looking at my neck. It's okay. Here." You take the box off your collar and set it on the table. You move your chair closer and tilt your chin up. "Go, ahead. You can touch it if you need to." Your voice comes out raspy, but you think maybe it might be slowly improving. It could be your imagination, but you want to hope it's true. She moves with uncertainty, looking down, then up to your eyes before letting her gaze linger on the slightly raised scar. It's faded just a little over the years but still stands out considerably against your skin. When her fingers run over it they pull away at first as if she thinks it might hurt you. They go all the way across it, tracing the same path Bro's sword took. Her other hand comes up and they both run down the sides along your tendons. She's seeing how far across it runs. She's measuring how close to death you were.

"Your head was back when it happened, wasn't it?" She's probably thinking about how they do it in the movies.
"My saving grace. I knew I couldn’t dodge it. That was the best I could do." It hurts to dwell on it too much, but you rather she know it was of your own volition and will to survive. She takes her hands away and chugs down more of her drink. You take a long swig as well.

"Did Dave...?" she asks, letting the question trail off.

"Dave saw everything. He held a towel to my neck while we waited for the ambulance." Her already sympathetic expression worsens. "I might have stood a chance if it happened on the roof, but we strifed right there in the living room. I had never seen Bro like that. It was like he was possessed. He was already mad at me. Then I fucked up and came home with a hickey on my neck."

"Wait, so what started it?"

"He wanted me out the minute I turned eighteen so Dave 'couldn't hide behind me anymore' because I was 'making him weak' I was 'derailing his destiny' that I had to leave before I turned him into 'one of you people'." She's holding your hands in hers now. You've never told anyone about it like this, not even Jake. Every other time has been cold, clinical, and to the point. "After it happened he stood there frozen, then he dropped his sword and left. He had never done that before. I had never seen him so much as set it down let alone drop it. The weird part is, he didn't leave me for dead. He was the one who called the ambulance. When Dave did, they told him one had already been dispatched to that address. He probably did it to get the jump on calling it a training accident." When the words finally stop tumbling out, she immediately pulls you into her embrace and starts petting your head. You don't know how this happened. You were trying to comfort HER. With anyone else, you'd be horrified, but this is Roxy. She's easier to talk to. She wore you down. She opened up first and held the door for far too long. She didn't think you were crazy when you would space out. She committed fraud for you. She pushed you into therapy which ultimately saved your relationship with Jake that you were destroying with your needy, crazy, paranoid behavior. You have no idea how she could possibly care so much for someone like you, someone so awful on the inside. Awful like the acrid smoke you're craving right now.

"Dirk, that's terrible. That's so terrible." She's whispering and you wonder if it's because your voice can't project and she's unconsciously matching the volume or if she's just that horrified.

"It's okay. I'm okay now." You pull back and run your hands down over her hair to cup her face and press your forehead to hers. You would have never been able to do that without her persistence. "Dave will be okay too. I promise."
The part I left out because I'm talented like that

Chapter Notes

Y'all not gonna believe this shit, but I was saving the beginning of the next chapter and noticed a rouge file. I COMPLETELY LEFT THIS SECTION OUT OF THE DAMN STORY. Which is a tragedy because I love it, but also I referenced it later so I should probably put it back in.

==> Be Sollux

It's movie night again and you're sitting up on the roof waiting for Dave. You're hitting greens when you hear him coming up the ladder. He's fiddling with something in his hands and when you tilt back your head to blow the smoke up and away, you hear the soft click of a shutter.

"You know what I'm doing is illegal right?" you ask him as he comes to sit down next to you.

"I'll keep it out of my portfolio." He leans against you and shows you his phone screen where he's done a weirdly great job capturing you in such low light. "One for the personal collection."

"Mhm," You say, eyeing him as you bring the bowl to your lips again. You need to clean this thing, it's supposed to be transparent. He puts his phone away but doesn't stop leaning against you, instead, he leans more, letting his head fall on your shoulder. You put your bowl in the same hands as your lighter so you can reach over to pet his hair. When your lungs start to complain, you let the smoke go into the night.

Things between you and Dave are much the same and yet so much different. Most notably, he touches you more. However, it's only when you're alone like this. When you're alone he leans against you, holds your hand, simple touches that could be mistaken for being entirely friendly, but you know they're more than that because he wasn't doing them before. They're hesitant, but he does them. You think there might be something to that, that it isn't only inexperience. He reverts to holding himself back in public. Not that you're big into public displays of affection, but you notice the difference. It doesn't bother you; this is new to him. But what kind of moirail would you be if you didn't give him a nudge? You take one last hit before putting the bowl and lighter back into your syladex and then shift to wrap your arm around Dave.

"I'm glad you've decided to grace us all with your presence again," he says.

"I was sort of obligated to, seeing as I'm picking the movie."

"What movies did you pick?" After Roxy brought two that time, the movies are now up for vote.

"Johnny Pneumonic and the Alternian version of Hackers."

"Halloween is practically here and you pick nerd movies."

"You don't know horror until you witness early CGI depictions of the internet." You get a hummed chuckle out of him. With a squeeze of his shoulder, you get to your feet. He does the same and you follow him to the fire escape, through the window, and into the elevator even though it's only a single floor down. "Are you going to sit in the same time zone as me this time?" you ask as the doors
"Maybe, depends how nice you ask me." He's trying to be cool but is instantly melted when you unexpectedly ask him exactly that.

You turn and loop your arms around his neck. "Sit next to me?" His brain skips like a scratched disk as he looks at you.

"I uh...yeah, yeah okay." It's fucking adorable.
You're sitting on Roxy's bed messing around on your phone while she changes into her costume. There is an event happening up at the barcade later tonight. Every year they set the machines to free play for Halloween. Apparently, it really draws in a crowd, not to mention gives people a chance at the high score boards before they flash them. You'll see Dirk and Jake there later after they're done with whatever it was they were up to with the rest of the horse brigade and Nepeta. However, first, you're going to pre-game with the Makara brothers because y'all are broke college kids and it's generally frowned upon to do drugs in public. They have some religious thing to go to later and that's when you'll part ways. They live close enough that it's not a bad walk.

"Can you pin my tail on?" Roxy asks when she comes out of the bathroom.

"Sure." You get to your feet and help Roxy get her tail centered before carefully pinning it to her pants. She's dressed as a sexy cat because of course she is. It reminds you of some kind of typical raver outfit. She's wearing a pink crop top with yellow and teal striped leggings under pink hot pants. The more cat-like parts of the costume: the arm warmers, leg warmers, tail and ears all look like they were cut from the same furry pink and purple material. She has those pointed glue-on nails too. You have a sneaking suspicion they aren't painted electric yellow by accident.

"Thanks. So, before Sollux gets here, how goes things in the diamond? You guys crawl into a pile yet?" She asks with an air of mischief as she makes her way over to her desk and starts doing her eye, nose, and whisker makeup. You nearly trip at the sudden personal question.

"What? No! I mean, we will eventually. No rush. We're keeping it low key. Real chill." Things have largely been the same for you two aside from some hand holding and existing in slightly closer proximity. You're not sure how this whole moirallegiance thing goes, so you're pretty much relying on Sollux to lead the way. You know it's a type of dating, and yeah, you have looked into it, but read all you want it's different in practice. How do you even bring that sort of stuff up? Is it just like 'yo let's cuddle in a pile of random junk and put our baggage on display'? There has to be some kind of process to it. Is it a kind of date?

"Uh huh," she says while making the eyeliner face. She's doing that winged cat eye design. "I bet you haven't kissed him yet either." You have not. The internet was dodgy on that. Some people said moirails kissed, some said they didn't, some said only on the cheek, some said it was different with humans, and then others were claiming it was all personal preference. You're saved from this conversation by the sudden opening of the door via psionics. "Geez, Sol. Have you heard of knocking?"

"Oh my god," you say through stifled laughter. "You're Pikachu."

"Pika pika, motherfucker," he says before plopping down next to you on the bed. Sollux is wearing one of those hooded jumpsuit style costumes that could probably double as pajamas if someone really wanted to. He has ripped the ears off to make room for his horns and has the longer set painted yellow and black in their place.

"That's fucking adorable," Roxy says with a quick look before continuing to color in the nose outline she's made.

"You gotta do the thing." You say as you jump to your feet and pull a camera out of your sylladex.
"Do what thing?" he asks.

"You know, the sparky thing."

"I am not doing 'the sparky thing', especially if you're going to take a picture of it."

"Ask him again after he hits the bong a few times." Roxy chimes in as she fights the clasp of a choker that has a little ice cream cone tag on it. You relent and throw your camera back into your sylladex and exchange it for the prop sword to your costume.

"Dave, are you dressed as Dante?" He asks with a confused expression that is morphing toward pleasant surprise. "I didn't know you played Devil May Cry." You smirk and Sollux is immediately leary of it.

"I have not."

"So why are you dressed as Dante?" he asks with increasing suspicion.

"Go on, Dave, tell Sollux the asinine reason you are dressed as Dante."

"So that every picture I photobomb can be featuring Dante from Devil May Cry." you say, putting emphasis on 'featuring Dante from Devil May Cry' in an announcer's voice. Sollux smacks his palm to his face.

"You're kidding me."

"Nope." Truth be told, it isn't solely for the meme factor, this is actually a costume you stole from Dirk. More accurately, it's a costume he left behind, and you're wearing it out of convenience, but it's also a good excuse to walk around shirtless, with a sword, in a fly as fuck coat. Plus, you have the hair for it.

"That's so dumb."

Roxy walks over and leans down close with a hand on his shoulder. "I'm related to him. I didn't have a choice in the matter, but you, that's all on you, buddy." She gives him a pat on the shoulder. "Your affections, there they lie."

"Well, I guess I have a type." He says with a smirk and a full duel arm shrug. You and Roxy look at each other and then back at him. "What?" he says through a laugh. Roxy rolls her eyes and starts making her way out the door, tugging him along by one of his horns. "Hey! That is attached to my skull, ya know."

"Come on you."

You mimic his shrug with the arm not full of sword as if to say, "Can't help you, bro", and follow them outside. You get passed the stoop of the building when it occurs to you that no one has mentioned yet how exactly you're all getting to the Makara's place. It's not an excruciatingly long walk, but it's still just far enough to be annoying. The two of them stop and Roxy takes up Sollux's hand while he holds out his other to you. "So we're all holding hands now?"

"You don't have to. You guys might as well weigh as much as fucking tissue paper to my psionics. I don't really have to focus too much to pick you up." Ah, so that's how you're traveling. He tries not to look a little disappointed and starts to pull his hand away, but you grab it before he can and throw your sword back into your sylladex. You don't need to be dropping it. He laces your fingers together. His skin always feels just a bit warmer than yours, like he was out in the sun for a few minutes.
"You're so used to the heat that you always feel cold now, so it's another layer on that cake of small things you keep noticing about him that makes your brain stop working momentarily. You look over at Roxy as you feel his psionics on your skin all at once. It's that warm static feeling you remember from that day when you freaked out and he was protecting you in the alley. She gives you a reassuring smile as you all lift into the air. This must be old hack to her. For you though, this is new hack, very new hack. You aren't afraid of heights, but you find yourself gripping Sollux's hand just a bit tighter. "You good, man?" he asks.

"Yeah, I'm just not super accustomed to being fifty some-odd feet in the air. My stupid monkey brain and millions of years of evolution tell me this is how I die." It's strange. Your feet aren't on the floor, they don't feel like there is anything solid under them, and yet you don't feel like you're hanging in the air exactly either.

"Rox?" You hear him ask, but don't see because you've decided to be an idiot and look down. You feel him start to let go of your hand and your brain throws up a red flag as if letting go will cause you to become a gross paste on the ground. You start to protest and grip him tighter, but he takes your arm and slings it around his shoulders while he snakes his around your waist. Oh. Okay, you are very okay with this. God damn, he's so warm against your skin. Your skin? Oh shit, his arm is beneath your coat. His hand is directly against your shirtless side. That bastard is copping a feel. What a tool. You all start moving now that you're no longer irrationally concerned about falling to your death. It's actually really nice up here. You can see why Sollux is sometimes just chilling way up in the sky when you message him. If it weren't for the wifi only going so far, you bet he'd do homework up there.

It isn't long before you start descending again. The house you land in front of looks like it has seen better days. It has three mailboxes to the left of a single door covered in chipping paint that lets you see the previous two colors it was before being slate grey. Sollux rings the top doorbell and a moment later someone you're going to guess is Gamzee's brother answers the door. He starts making gestures with his hands that you don't understand at all.

"Ummm..."

"He says they are just about to order some pizza if you want to chip in." Well, that's something new about Sollux. Apparently, he speaks hand.

"I'm down for a few slices," You respond.

"Same," Roxy says. Other Makara gives the okay symbol so you guess he can read lips or something. You all start following him up to the third floor. The inside of the building only looks slightly better than the outside, but the apartment itself seems okay once you're inside. The decor, on the other hand, looks exactly like you'd expect it to for two twenty-something stoner guys to pick out. It's pretty cool. Has that grunge feeling to it. The shrine is a little concerning but other than that it's very stoner degenerate chic.

"What's good, my invertibrother? That you're new diamond dude? I may recall catching his visual in my sight line across from your living space," Gamzee says while also making those hand gestures foreign to you. You aren't sure how you feel about that introduction, but you suppose there are worse ways. He's the only person here, besides the people you came with that you know albeit vaguely. You made small talk with him once at the check-in desk, but you guess he doesn't remember. The other two you recognize from around, but have never actually met them. If the horns are any indication, you're going to assume the guy dressed as Raichu is Mituna.

"Yeah, you probably saw him across the hall at some point. Dave, that's Mituna and Latula. My littermate and his way more cool and more skilled skater of a matesprite." It's kind of cool how fast Sollux can spell your name with his hand. You suppose he must have a lot of practice with it. Mituna
flips him off, but Latula seems to agree with him the way she laughs and nods her head. "I'm pretty sure you know of Gamzee, and that's Gamzee's littermate Kurloz." The two Juggalos wave at you in an eerily slow and unison manner.

"I'm gonna chuck these in the fridge before they get all warm and nasty. Anyone want?" Roxy asks while holding up a black plastic bag she dropped out of her sylladex. Kurloz is the only one to raise his hand. "Dave?" She asks, turning to you.

"Totes." You are so down for getting wrecked tonight. She makes her way off toward the kitchen. You follow Sollux's lead and take a seat on the beat up, but very comfortable sofa. Kurloz snaps his fingers and you turn your head in his direction to see him point at Sollux and then you, but that's all you get out of whatever he's trying to convey after that.

"Right," Sollux says with a nod. "Kurloz can hear you by the way. He's mute, not deaf." Good to know. So the communication barrier is only one way. That's still moderately awkward, but useful you guess. Roxy comes back and puts a can of beer down in front of you and brings Kurloz his before plopping down in the bean bag chair between him and where Latula is sitting on the couch. The two girls bump fists before Roxy cracks open her can and chugs some back. It's a little weird not really knowing anyone here, but they seem pretty chill. Gamzee peels himself out of the armchair he was lounging in to kneel by the coffee table and dig around in the cabinet beneath it.

"Righteous, still got them mirthful papers what for the making cozy the human sopor leaves."

"The regulars or wides? The ones you had last time are such a pain in the ass without a machine." Sollux asks as he decrypts a card that drops his weed into his hand. This is a little surreal for you but in a sort of exciting way. Like getting back some kind of delinquent youth shenanigans you missed out on. It's so mundane and normal, but it's tragically new to you. You're hanging out with six other people in someone's living room doing normal college kid stuff and it's blowing your damn mind. That's so sad. You sit back and sip at your drink while you watch Sollux and Gamzee run their weed through some kind of circular thing with a bunch of teeth and then proceed to roll joints. It's really methodical. Kurloz is talking to Mituna and you wonder if it's about you because it looked like he might have been spelling something shortly before making a diamond shape with his hands. Roxy looks like she's trying to follow along with just half the conversation and some guessing judging by her facial expressions.

"Man, it sucks. You can make a diamond with your hands, and a heart, but not a spade." She gripes before taking a long sip of her drink. Kurloz gently taps her shoulder and turns to show her a sign he's made with his hands that nearly has her spitting out her beer. In the negative space of his fingers is a spade. "You gotta show me how to do that. What even the fuck are your fingers doing?" He silently laughs and resets his hands, palms open facing himself before bringing down all but his middle fingers. "Well, fuck me I guess." He shakes his head with an expression of amusement then sets her drink aside and takes her hands to bring them up to the same position he just had his in. He pulls back and resumes the pose where he appeared to be flipping her off then sticks out both his thumbs while Roxy follows along. Then slowly he turns his hands inward until his middle fingers cross and his thumbs touch. Roxy mimics him and marvels at the shape she's just made with her hands. "No shit." She picks up her head. "Yo, Sollux, check out this crazy bullshit Kurloz just showed me." He pauses what he's doing to look at her flipping him off before bringing her hands back into the spades shape she had just made, looking down briefly to make sure she got it right.

"Aw, you do care." He says in a sarcastically sweet tone while putting a hand to his chest. You nearly miss the way he curls in all but his middle finger before going back to rolling. Gamzee is done first and throws it into his sylladex. You guess they are both saving them for later because you see Sollux do the same after he puts it into some kind of clear plastic tube thing. "I'll get the first round
"Seems motherfucking legit, bro." You now know the sign for motherfucking. Gamzee goes back into the cabinet to bring out a modest bong and disappears to the kitchen with it.

"If you put faygo in there again I will end you," Sollux hollers at him as he leaves. Latula gets up and walks over to the Nintendo. When her back is to you, you see the words "Skate or Die" written on the back of the ugliest, most 90's shirt you've ever seen and her costume suddenly clicks with some deep ass memory in your head of a shitty skateboard video game Bro used to play when you were little.

"I knew I recognized that god awful shirt. It's from that NES game that aged worse than milk left on the sidewalk in July, but like Texas July which I'm assuming is infinitely worse than up here. I'm talking like mailboxes channeling Salvador Dali's ghost for life goals kinds of hot."

"Hells yeah, you thrash?" she asks as Gamzee wanders back in and hands off the bong to Sollux to pack before sinking back into the armchair.

"Nah, my mad skills manifest themselves in the auditory sense with only the raddest most ill beats you'll ever hear." She throws a controller at Mituna that he only just barely catches. "Yo, lemme get one of those?" You catch yours more gracefully. "What's our poison?"

"Mario Party." She says as she tosses one more controller to Roxy before going back to her seat. "So what kind of jams you spinning, dude?"

"The most god awful raps you've ever heard backed by the auditory equivalent of an anachronistic digital seizure found dead in Miami," Sollux provides before taking his hit. Stoner etiquette you guess. Your weed, you go first. You make a sound of offense.

"You know you love my jams. Don't be frontin for your peeps, home sizzle. My music is killa. It's wanted in six states. My sound cloud is poppin like this week's hottest lip gloss. Front page of Cosmo. Written in impact because veranda just can't handle its power."

He makes a tch sound as he passes the smoking paraphernalia to Gamzee. "You wish."

"Such disrespect, and to think I made you a mix tape." Which is really a flash drive and that you totally forgot to actually give to him. He exhales into a cardboard tube you assume has some kind of significance.

"You made me a mix tape?" He says it with too much enthusiasm and Roxy calls him out on it.

"Busted!" She goes to take another sip of her drink only to realize it's empty and heads to the kitchen for another. You fish the flash drive out of your sylladex. It's been in there for like two weeks. You keep forgetting about it.

"Check it." You hold it out to him and he takes it and turns it over in his hands. It's made to look like a tiny cassette tape.

"Oh my god, you're such a dork. Fine, alright. Your music is kind of cool. Happy?" He tries so hard to sound like he's above it, but you can see right through the facade. The guy digs your tunes.

"Ecstatic," you say with the slight grin of someone who just won the most trivial of arguments. Latula finally starts up the game only to be interrupted by Mituna having a sudden thought.

"Sol, we gotta do the thing." Sollux looks at him as if he knows exactly what the thing is and was
rather enjoying that Mituna had forgotten about it up until this point. He relents with a sigh though and gets to his feet as if he has already had and lost this argument too.

"Hold up, I gotta get the snap up, Tuna!" Latula says as she fishes her phone out of her pocket and rushes to open the app. A picture huh? You casually take your camera out and quickly check to see what setting it is on. Should be fine. The Captors get up and move over to a more open section of the floor before Sollux takes a sort of battle stance. His eyes only just start to glow before Mituna interrupts him.

"Charge me up, fuck ass." Sollux rolls his eyes and smashes his hand harder than need be against Mituna's head. You can see a halo of light over his skin, but his psionics aren't crackling. The reaction appears to be on Mituna's end because his eyes start to glow a lot brighter. When he lets go they both take some kind of anime stance and you ready your camera, quickly flipping to a preset that'll work better for the psionics about to happen. It's hilarious. Mituna's psionics are a slightly different shade of red and blue than Sollux's and their respective colors crackle around each of them while their psi fight to overtake the other zapping between their gazes. All while they are dressed as electric pokemon. You take like 12 rapid-fire pictures before they stop. Mituna excitedly floats over to crash into Latula just as his psionics flicker out and grabs at her phone. "Lemme see, lemme see!" Sollux is trying to look bored and annoyed, but you can see the little smile at the corner of his mouth.

Roxy leans on the edge of the couch and looks over your shoulder at the pics you took. They came out pretty good for being on the fly and using a default setting. "You need to send me one of these for blackmail purposes."

"Roxy you can't ask my moirail for blackmail material."

"I can try."

"These are going on my blog."

"Do it and you are so hacked."

The bong comes back to Sollux and he takes a hit all the while glaring at you as you smirk at him. Roxy comes around and makes a motion like she's cocking a shotgun which appears to be another gesture that sails gracefully over your head. She invades your personal space, taking a seat on your lap to...kiss Sollux??! You're confused until you see her blow smoke out of that cardboard tube. Ah, got it. That's kind of hot. You file that one away in case you ever wanna give this shit a go. It would appear that this game of Mario Party still isn't starting so you gently shove Roxy off your lap and onto Sollux's so you can get up and retrieve more alcohol to pour down your throat. You're standing in the kitchen when the doorbell rings. You watch as Kurloz ventures down and comes back with three pizzas. He sets them on the counter and then looks at you, taps the side of his head, points to the pizza, and rubs his thumb and fingers together. Remember, pizza, money. Look at that, you figured out the thing. "Gotcha," you say and pull a few bucks out of your wallet for him. You think he says thanks. Sollux wanders in immediately, or maybe he was already en route to you because he comes to lean on the counter beside you instead of going for the food. It looks like it's starting to hit him because his eyes are half-lidded and he has that calm, hazy sort of expression on that you've come to recognize as him being stoned.

"Having fun?" he asks. You nod.

"Mhm, was just about to get some pizza."

"Cool." It seems like something is on his mind, but he doesn't say anything.
"Where do they hide the plates?" He perks up and turns around, looking for a moment before he spots some paper ones on top of the microwave and separates one from the stack for you and another for himself. The others start filtering into the kitchen as you grab your slice and head back, then return because you forgot your drink on the counter, and head back again.

It is a good twenty minutes before you all coordinate yourselves and finally start up the game that has been idling on the title screen this whole time. You really shouldn't have expected any less from five stoned trolls in possession of some really fricken good pizza, like damn this might just be the best pizza you've ever had. Almost half of you don't have controllers so you play in teams except for Gamzee because he has "self-exiled his ass to the chair like an unsociable wiggler" so says Mituna. The rest of you divide up based on whoever you're sitting next to. Maybe it's the good buzz you've got going on, but you're starting to feel more comfortable. Not that you were particularly uncomfortable before, but there is always a certain awkwardness of being a new addition to a group. Not to mention the otherness of not smoking, but at least Roxy is drinking with you. It would be weird otherwise. The irony of only the trolls smoking the "human soporific grass" does not go unnoticed by you.

Neither does the way Sollux is sitting so very close to you. You really like it, but at the same time you can feel this feeling at the back of your throat and have to remind yourself that you're safe here. It's okay that Sollux is showing an iota of affection toward you in a semi-public setting. You have your real sword in your sylladex, there are two intimidating Juggalos to either side of you, and there is a psionic leaning against your shoulder. Oh god, there is a psionic leaning against your shoulder. Somehow you manage not to go into cardiac arrest and instead, like the cool dude that you are- and you are definitely cool, there is no question about that, you reach up and pet the side of his head through the silly Pikachu hood he still has pulled up. You think you might have felt the start of a purr that was abruptly cut off. You brush off the thought and direct your focus back toward the game as the round ends and the mini-game starts.

As is often the case with Mario Party, the group picks way too long of a game and you're barely halfway through it before you have to call it so Gamzee and Kurloz can get ready for clown fest or whatever it is they're doing. You and Roxy chug what's left of your drinks. She demolishes you despite having more left. So, of course, you have to congratulate her on her lack of a gag reflex. She gives you a good swat to the arm, but it was totally worth it. You are drunk at this point, but not wasted. You aren't a lightweight. No way. Still, your inhibitions are at an all-time low as you now more easily take Sollux's hand and the three of you start walking down the road. Your hands swing between you and you think it might be your doing so you laugh.

"Dave, you're so drunk and we aren't even there yet," Roxy comments walking backward as she looks at you and Sollux.

"I am not. I am modesterly drunk."

"Yeah, lemme google that word." He says with a laugh next to you as he juggles the previously saved joint and a lighter in one hand so he doesn't have to let go of yours. You give him his hand back and he mumbles a thanks before stopping to properly light it. He scoops your hand back up and you all continue walking.

The sound of skateboards hitting pavement echos in the distance and the distinct sound of their wheels against the ground increases to a quiet roar, reaching its peak as Mituna and Latula whiz by on either side of the three of you. Latula's form is impeccable. Mituna's form leaves you wondering how he manages to stay on the board at all. He's all over the place, but somehow still managing a consistent direction. "Suck it, bulge wipes!" He hollers as they disappear ahead of your group. A few seconds later there is a single faint, but crisp "Fuck!" followed closely by a thud, and the telling
sound of a riderless skateboard rolling away as Latula laughs.

When Sollux snickers, smoke comes out his nose. "That thing you did with Roxy, should try that sometime." That was pretty vague. You should elaborate. "The mouth to mouth gange." Good job. Sollux laughs and squeezes your hand. His laugh is so weird, but you like it.

"Sometime when you aren't already this drunk. It'll knock you on your ass if you crossfade like this." He takes a drag and you watch him with soft eyes. The way his eyes glow in the dark, the way the street lights illuminate him from above, the cherry that moves with his hand as he talks to Roxy. Shit, maybe you are more than a little drunk. You start hearing more traffic and think you're probably getting closer. Sollux puts the joint back in that little tube but puts it in his sylladex this time. "Dave, you need to pretend to be twenty percent more sober than you are for like, two minutes so we can get wrist bands." You nod, take a deep breath and straighten up.

"Okay, I'm good." Years of repressing any and all facial expressions have come in handy for once. You manage your way through the whole age verification deal pretty easily. Roxy and Sollux actually seem fairly surprised. You make it all the way to the last air hockey table before you drop the act and crack up. "Fuck, man, do I get an award for that?" Sollux shakes his head and drags you behind him over to one of the machines.

"Roxy," Sollux calls her over and tilts his chin in the direction of the Galaga machine he's standing in front of. "Distry is at it again. I knocked them clean off last time and they're already back, this time all the way up into the second slot." You've heard them mention their scoreboard turf wars before. This Distry person was hitting up a bunch of the space fighter games, but absolutely hammering the Galaga machine, which is Sollux's favorite tied with Gyruss because as he has said: "Gyruss is basically Galaga mapped on a tube." You lean closer to the machine and wait for the leader board to cycle around so you can see what ludicrous amount of points Sollux is defending. However, when the list pops up you turn to Roxy and give her a knowing look.

"Who did you say was in the second spot, Roxy?" you ask.

"I believe Sollux said it was Distry."

"Yeah, yeah, I got that, but how would YOU pronounce that name?" You tilt your head and raise your eyebrows at her. Her smile gives a little and she tilts her head the opposite way, then yours does the same until you're both closed-mouth grinning at each other and tilting your heads like dumb birds in a silent game of 'I know you know'.

"If anyone would like to fill me in on whatever *this* is," Sollux says as he gestures to all of the both of you. "that would be awesome."

"It's not distry, it's D-Stri." You provide as if that makes things any clearer for him.

Sollux looks up and to the right as if tracking an object in flight. "Was I supposed to catch that or...?"

"Alright, okay, Imma level with ya, so I may have possibly known this entire time whose been crushing your Galaga score," Roxy confesses, "And I may have possibly arranged the entire damn arrangement specifically to piss you off for the lolz." There is zero remorse in her voice. Not a drop. 100 percent premeditated.

"You what?!"

"D-Stri is definitely Dirk." You say to clarify the betrayal levels. "He's clocked an unhealthy amount of hours on that game." Literally, he would drop everything and play the standalone home version if
he thought he was about to zombie out and wasn't up for it. It helped him stay present. You lean back against the cabinet and watch the fur fly between the people to either side of you.

"So let me, so let me get this straight. You saw my unyielding love for this game and the joy it brings to my miserable existence, and you thought 'hmmm I know what I'll do, let me get my cousin to mysteriously aggravate the crap out of my kismesis by continuously overtaking the entire bottom half of the board, but never quite knock him out of the top spot' yeah?" He stares at her for a beat before cracking a smile. "Have I told you lately how incredibly vexing you are?" For a hot second there you thought he might actually be mad, but apparently, petty convoluted long cons might as well be flowers and chocolate. "You know you could have just as easily run up the scores yourself and put it under a different name?"

"I could have, but what's the fun in that? Where's the romance, the majyks, the zazz?" She says with a grandiose sweeping gesture that very nearly hits you in the face. They're staring at each other intensely and alright you think that was a growl, you're tapping out.

"As much as I love being the peanut butter in this hate-fueled eye-fucking sandwich, I think I'm gonna go kill it on DDR before y'all glare so hard you manifest your spawn into existence right here and now for me to behold." You make a break for it, and head over to the dance games where you see Latula and Mituna going at it. They're just finishing up when you call dibs on playing the winner.

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"Shit, I guess that was awkward for him."

"Nah, he's fiiiine," Roxy says as she backs you into the machine. "Didja really like it? Was killin me acting like I didn' know what's up." You let your hands rest lightly on the bare skin of her waist.

"It was so aggravating. Did you tell him to consistently score 200 points higher than whatever I put on that board?" She cracks up and hides her face in your shoulder.

"Oh my god, that is definitely Hal's doing. I just told him to be as infuriating as possible about it."

"Hal?"

"The AI that lives in Dirk's shades that I'm not really supposed to talk about. He totes deff gave Dirk the heads up on point values and shit to do that." Well, that makes you feel a bit better about your own skills if it was machine assisted. You really need to meet this guy more officially that threatening him in an alley. The way Roxy talks about him, he seems like a decent guy. She really holds him in high regard.

"I was hoping you were behind all this. I was starting to suspect it was you playing the game or maybe hacking it."

"Like hell you were," she says against your neck. It makes you shiver.

"Seriously, nobody but you can piss me off like that." You punctuate your sentence by CAREFULLY, so fucking carefully, nipping at her ear. The little gasp of surprise has you thinking you fucked up until she seizes your face and lays one on you.

"I'm gonna go grab a drink. Gotta catch up to where Dave is on the drunk-o-meter. Can't have him stealing my crown as the reigning hot mess." With a wink, she disappears into the crowd leaving you dazed as she is known to do. You blink a couple times before making your way through the sea of people. The lights and sounds of the arcade are oddly comfortable in your haze. It's just the right
amount of sensory input. The DDR machines are pushing it, but not overloading you. Mituna loves DDR. It doesn't matter that his balance is as shot as his psionics, he can hold onto the balance bar. He's really good at it too. Right now though, Dave is giving him a run for his money. You meander over to stand by Latula and watch as they match each other step for step on what looks like the expert difficulty. When the scores pop up Mituna edges him out by a breath and a hair.

"Fuck yeah, bend over and take it, Strider!"

"Keep it up, hentai crotch, we've got two more rounds and it's my turn to pick the song." Mituna laughs maniacally. You can see him filing away 'hentai crotch' for later use. Dave scrolls through the songs no doubt looking for something in particular. Oh boy, it's one of the trip machine songs. He's in for it. Mituna actually enjoys those songs; you don't know why. He jacks up the difficulty to challenge and stares Dave down. In response, Dave shrugs off the heavy coat that you don't even know how he was playing in before and looks your way before tossing it to you and slamming his foot down to match Mituna on challenge mode. A small crowd is gathering around the machine to watch shirtless Dante and fricken Raichu go at it and somehow you think it isn't just the sheer quantity of skill on display that they are eyeing up.

Even if your attraction is pale you still feel a sense of jealousy from all the looks, especially the human ones, because let's be honest, he's pretty easy on the eyes. Not to mention he did some good work making all those battle scars realistic. It's even a little over the top. Maybe Roxy or Nepeta did it for him.

Your mind snaps back to the present moment. Dave is moving like the rest of the world doesn't even exist. He is solely focused on contorting his body to hit these steps and he's doing it with an impressive amount of grace. "Holy fuck," you say in awe. The song ends and he bounces on his toes as he flips off Mituna with both hands. You can hear a few echos of 'Ohhhhh' going around. They have one song left and are bickering over who should choose it until some people who know what they are talking about start calling out for them to play a particular song. They look at each other and shrug in agreement before Dave scrolls through to it. When they really get moving you swear Dave doesn't answer to time. He is one with the fucking beat. This guy doesn't have bones. You aren't even registering the arrows before he's already hit them and on to the next. Something suddenly dawns on you. "Oh my god, Latula," You say as you grab her arm. "Latula he's doing this drunk. Dave is so fucking drunk right now." The ugliest snort laughs come from either side of you. Roxy came back at some point and is now to your left.

"I had no idea he could do that. 'S fuckin nuts." She comments as the three of you stand in the center of a bunch of drunk strangers losing their shit over your brother and your moirail. In the end, Mituna wins, but Dave loses gracefully and does that hailing bow gesture to satiate the troll's competitive streak before they fist bump. As soon as his feet leave the dance pad he staggers into you.

"Yo, Sollux, you want me to pick your jaw up off the floor for you, dude?" Latula asks as she jabs you in the side.

"I am going to die. Get me some water." Roxy came prepared and slams a water bottle into his hand. "Oh shit, new fav person." He alternates between sucking down water and panting as he hangs off of you while the five of you navigate toward the patio. Mituna is in similar straights as Dave but opts to stick his face directly into the water fountain. Dave eyes him enviously then abandons any and all dignity to join him at the shorter fountain to his right.

"Yo, Sollux, you want me to pick your jaw up off the floor for you, dude?" Latula asks as she jabs you in the side.

"Oh fuck off," is all you can come back with. Screw her, you're allowed to be impressed. The two of them finally come up for air and while Mituna just wipes his face on his sleeve, Dave walks the short distance to the bathroom. You follow him in to make sure he's okay since he's still breathing pretty
hard and find him bracing himself against one of the sinks. "You alright?" You ask. He nods and straightens up a little.

"Yeah. Just way too. Moving fast." he taps his fingers against his chest in quick succession.

"I bet all that alcohol is going straight to your head too." You hand him a paper towel so he can wipe his face and he mumbles a breathy thanks.

"Man, that was fucking dumb," He says with a laugh as he turns around to lean against the sink instead and run his fingers through his hair. He seems like he's starting to catch his breath again.

"I'm not going to argue that. It was cool as shit though." You hand him his coat and he slings it back on. "Do you want to go outside and sit down for a bit?"

"That sounds amazing."

Roxy asks Dave if he's okay when you walk back out. You're not sure where Latula and Mituna went, but the three of you continue to make your way out the back door. The air is significantly cooler out here and judging by the sound Dave makes you're going to assume he's psyched about that. He claims the first chair he sees and collapses dramatically into it.

"I want that coat back when you're done with it." The synthetic voice comes out of nowhere and there is a guy dressed as...oh geez, he's dressed as Vergil.

"Jesus, Dirk. You can't be sneaking up on me like that," Dave says slightly startled by the sudden presence. "Where's Jake?"

"He bailed. Crowds aren't really his thing." That's no surprise. Dave told you Jake and Jade grew up mostly alone on that island of theirs with their possibly radioactive dog lusus.

"Did you see me get through any of those songs?" Dave doesn't seem to realize his brother is dressed as Dante's brother. You're going to take a wild guess and say Dirk HAS played Devil May Cry. You take the seat next to Dave and he slumps against you. You note the slightest of upward eyebrow movement from Dirk at that. Roxy comes around and drags a chair over to sit in the space between you and him, completing the circle.

"I saw. It was kind of a dick move to flash step on that one sequence." You feel Dave chuckle against you. You'll have to ask him what exactly flash stepping is one of these days. He lets his head rest against your shoulder and much as he did for you earlier, you reach up and run your fingers through his hair affectionately. He makes this pleased little humming sound. "Dave, are you drunk?"

"More like a lot a bit." Roxy says, "Right, Sol?" You nod at her. It was easier than making words happen. She scrunches her face up and stares at you a little harder before leaning over to tilt up your glasses. She stifles a giggle and falls back into her seat. "Kay, so, you're good too I see." You are, you are so very good at this moment. You have an arm full of moirail and are in a wonderfully absent headspace with a general feeling of contentment and hyperstimulation of some of your senses.

"Really now?" you ask, lolling your head in her direction. "And just what exactly do you see that makes you say that?" You articulate out of spite.

"Your fucking cryptid ass pupils."
"Lemme see," Dave says looking up at you, then realizing that's a terrible angle, and sitting up a bit. You lift up your glasses and look at him. "Wait, hold up." He takes off his shades to see the colors better. You're both sitting there staring at each other's eyes and you can feel Roxy judging you, but you don't care. "That's freakish-but in like a good way." He corrects himself quickly after the fear that he misspoke. You suppose people may have said similar things about his eyes. You let your glasses fall back into place and push them up the bridge of your sniffnode. Dave throws his back on too and settles back into your side. Dirk and Roxy share a look. Some unspoken message has been communicated between them that you're far too blitzed to decipher. It's then that you remember about wanting to meet this guy under better circumstances. Well, you suppose that'll have to be for another time. This isn't the greatest impression.

For a while, there is some small talk that you tune in and out of until Roxy decides she's game for another drink and your little group relocates back inside. The four of you scope out a spot up at the bar near the pool tables. Roxy gets something for herself and Dave tells the bartender "same" which is probably a mistake. You get a soda and are surprised to see that Dirk also has a soda until you see the wrist band he has that designates him as a driver and gets him that sweet sweet responsibility discount on sugar water. He comes to sit down next to you and you feel a conversation coming on.

"We have yet to properly meet," He says without looking at you. He's watching Dave and Roxy set up for a game of pool. "I can't say that you seem fully in possession of your cognitive faculties at the present moment, but I know far too much about you to have not introduced myself yet." He holds out his hand for you to shake. He's left-handed like Dave is. "Dirk Strider," he says.

"Sollux Captor." Your lisp is out at full force and your eye twitches when you hear your own voice. What he said catches up with you. "What do you mean you know too much about me?" Has he been cyber stalking you or something?

"They both talk about you." Right, you are dating not one, but two members of his familial circle. You recall a human trope about this. The older brother threatening their younger sibling's quadrant mate. Is he older than Roxy too?

"Are you about to threaten me?" He gives you a weird look, so you elaborate. "You know, like on tv. The older brother thing." You see the small movement that indicates your message has clicked with him. You sometimes think Dave's expressions are a bit choreographed, but Dirk's are even worse.

"Nah, I trust their judgment." You hear a noise of excitement from Roxy and your focus is derailed to the game they have going on. She must have gotten a good shot in. "Also, I don't have to. Roxy wouldn't hesitate to deck you if you deserved it." This is true. It's a quality of her's you enjoy; she's capable. Very capable. It's hot.

"You're not kidding." You briefly wonder if that was appropriate, but the subdued aloof noise reminiscent of a laugh tells you that it was fine.

"Take care with Dave, though. We've been through a lot." Somehow the synthesized voice carries the twang of sadness in his words. He really must have an AI in those shades doing the heavy lifting on that modulator. Your eyes flick to the scar on his neck and the memory of a terrified Dave backed against a wall flashes in your mind. He claps a hand to your shoulder for a moment before retracting it and standing up. "Hey Roxy, stripes or solids?" he says as he picks a cue stick off the rack. He waves you over to join in. You guess you're playing in teams now. The heavy conversation fades away and the carefree air that the night previously had returns like it was never interrupted.

"Dave," Roxy says as she slings an arm around him and sways them both a little. "How's about you and Sollux hit up the machines so's I can shoot the shit wit D-Stri over here."
Whatever Roxy ordered is hitting you a little harder than what you were drinking before. You sway a little when she loops her arm around you and suggests that you and Sollux get lost so she can gossip with Dirk. "Don't tell him ALL my shameful secrets, Rox. Leave me SOME dignity," You say before slipping out from under her arm. You put your stick back on the rack and grab your drink before catching up with Sollux who is waiting for you where the floor changes over from wood to that tacky UV carpeting. He holds out his hand and you take it, feeling safe in the crowd, feeling safe next to him. Also because you are quickly approaching trashed. That is definitely a factor here. He leads you back over to the section with the older cabinets. "You ever play Gyruss?" he asks.

"Nah, s'like Galaga though you said."

"Mhm. It's easier, but don't tell anyone I said that." You stand in front of the machine and hit the start button, but nothing happens. You press it again and it still does jack shit. "It's an older machine. They basically, they basically hotwire the coin slot for free play events." Sollux says as he reaches down to hit a button by the coin slot that you guess is usually disconnected. He's lisping more than usual and it's cute in a weird way. You don't think lisps themselves are cute, but on him, it is for some reason. Drunk Dave brain says to tell him, but the fragment of sense you still possess reminds you that he's sensitive about it. The machine starts up now and this game has a theme that goes ridiculously hard for being a remix of Toccata and Fugue of all things. The controls are simple but different than anything you've played before, and Sollux informs you that Gyruss and Tempest are the only two tube shooters. That can't be possible. Why would there be only two games that play like this? You die almost immediately. Sollux hits the reset for you and you try again. This time he's standing close behind you, slightly off to the side, giving you pointers, pointing out how to charge your laser cannon for double firepower. That significantly helps. You are a god of death with double firepower. You manage to get past the first few stages before dying after a couple tries. Arcade games have never been your thing. That's more of Dirk's territory. However, you aren't that bad. You play a few more machines and get the longest streak ever on Time Crisis before wandering into the sensory overload section that is the rhythm games. They have one of the machines where you have to slap the crap out of all those buttons. And you are all over that. You do pretty well for never having played it. When You turn around you see that Mituna has found Sollux again. He nods at you and Sollux gesture for you to follow them. You grab what's left of your drink and the three of you head out to the alley. They lead you past the main crowd of people, down farther to an area where the smokers have seemingly exiled themselves.

"Imma smack you if’a ligh a cigaret," you slur at Sollux when you all come to a stop and lean against the wall. It is clear that that isn't what Mituna is setting fire to a moment later. It seems that you and Sollux are here mostly to keep his brother company. They're talking about something, but you aren't really paying attention. Your mind is too busy with how Sollux has his arm around you and yours is around him. You idly play with the soft fabric of his costume and you can feel the way his nails run over the thicker fabric of your coat. Mituna offers him the last drag before he puts it out and Sollux takes it. The cherry glows bright and the paper crackles. You chug the last of your beer and toss it in a nearly overflowing trash can as you pass by it on your way back to the main patio. Just as you're getting back to the main area you see Roxy peek her head out of the door before dodging back inside. They must be looking for you. A moment later she comes back out with Latula and Dirk.

"Are you sure you and Mituna don't want me to drive you?" Dirk asks, turning to Latula.

"Nah, man. We got wheels." She says, waving off his offer.

"If you say so. Stay off the main roads."
Roxy holds onto Dirk's arm, misstepping here and there as he leads all of you down to a side street where he's parked. You climb into the back with Sollux while Roxy rides shotgun. You wonder what time it is. It's hella dark out. The drive isn't long, but it's making you tired. You wish the seats were a little closer together so you could lean against your moirail. A smile creeps over your face at that thought. He's your moirail. When Dirk pulls up to the school and the three of you pile out of the car, he looks over all of you and decides Sollux is the most coherent.

"Make sure those two get to their rooms." Sollux nods and gives a quick wave before turning to head toward the dorms. You can tell Dirk is not reassured by this and is visibly fighting the urge to follow you up to make sure you get into your dorm. He resists and you hear him drive off as you enter the building. You've never been quite this drunk before. The elevator ride up feels endless and a little disorienting as you lean against Sollux. When it stops and doesn't continue immediately, you pick your head up to see him holding the door as he watches to make sure Roxy gets in her room. He finally lets the doors shut and you continue up to your floor. It hits you that this is where the night ends and you part ways. You sway a little as you walk down the hall and you fumble with your keys as you try to get them in the lock. You're about to turn the handle when you stop. You don't want him to go.

"Sleep with me." Your brain scratches like a record at the words that just left your mouth. "No like that, I mean, come'in my bed, NO, I mean, fuck, goddammit, be not awake with me." You put your hand to your forehead to further obscure your face even more than your shades already do. Smooth, Dave, real smooth. You can hear him laughing behind the smirk he is doubtlessly wearing.

"Kay," is all he says as he finishes opening the door for you and ushers you inside. You throw your coat on the chair, set your shades on the desk, and brace yourself on the chair back while you undo your laces. You hear the zipper of Sollux's costume and shake your head when you see what he has under it.

"You really had pajamas under there the whole time?" You stumble a bit as you try to get your shoes off.

"They're house pants." He shrugs and looks around for a place to throw his costume before just dropping it on the floor.

"Your horns," You say, referring to the paint that is still on them.

"Hm? oh." He starts peeling it off and you cross the small distance to help him with the other one. It's some kind of acrylic or body paint you think because it's peeling off easily in big sections. You freeze when you feel his hand lightly touch your side. "They're...I thought they were part of your costume." He realizes what he's doing and quickly pulls his hand away from one of your nastier scars. You relax a little. He didn't mean to. He was just trying to help you like you were doing with him. "Sorry."

"S'okay. Yeah, they'real. Nobody knows'at on Halloween." Your words are slipping together at points. You hesitate when you pick up his hand and place it back against your side. It's easier than talking about it. You don't want to talk about it, at least not right now. You look away as his fingers run over it. His hands are warm. He rests his palm over it and you let your gaze fall back to see him looking at, but not touching the rest of the scars that litter your torso and arms. He must still be pretty stoned because you can see the way his pupils drift from one to the next. His hand falls away and he stands up, maybe a bit too fast judging by how he loses his footing a little and pulls you into his arms. You flinch. You're not sure how to feel about this. No one has ever expressed concerns over your scars. Very few people have ever seen them to begin with. You hug him back and let your head fall into the crook of his neck. He smells good. "Is this...not now, but would moirails...is this a pile
"It could be." You hadn't known where to start with that whole thing, but it looks like the universe has chosen for you. It spun the prize wheel of trauma and landed on physical abuse. As good a place as any you guess. You don't really want to let go of him. The contact is amazing, but you need to finish getting into clothes you can sleep in. Reluctantly, you pull away.

"Juss gonna change." You mumble and turn toward your dresser. You grab any old t-shirt and throw it on before looking for a pair of pj pants. You look over your shoulder to see Sollux is turned around facing away from you, then peel off your jeans and leave them where they fall on the floor. Once you manage to get changed without falling over, you tap Sollux on the shoulder and tilt your head in the direction of the bed. That nervous excitement swells in your chest again as you crawl in after him. This time you scoot closer. You tell yourself that you can blame it on the alcohol later, but you know there isn't anyone you need to justify it to besides yourself. He pulls you close, closing the gap between you. A small sharp breath escapes you and you feel yourself go tense before relaxing again.

"Is this okay?" he asks as he backs away a little. Is it? You want to be close, but it makes you anxious. You're far too aware of the way you keep jerking away from him whenever he touches you. It's too much to unpack right now. You don't want to think about it. Instead, you nod your head and settle in beside him.

"Hey, Sollux?"

"Hm?"

"I had a another question about monorail alignment."

"Go for it." He sounds either very comfortable or very tired. Maybe both. His eyes are nearly shut. If they didn't glow, you'd think they were.

"Do moirails kiss?" This has been a burning question in your mind and you can blame it on drunk Dave later if it blows up in your face.

"Sometimes. Traditionally moirails kiss on the cheek, but nowadays it is mostly preference. Tongue is considered quadrant bleeding though. Only mateth- matesprites and kismeth- kismethth...spades do that." He opens his eyes to look at you with a mischievous smirk. "Why, Dave? Do you want to kiss me?" You have a few options here. You could backpedal wildly and dig yourself into a hole that will only make it harder to kiss him in the future. That is definitely something sober Dave would do. You could be suave as fuck and kiss him now. Ha, no, you can't. You are barely keeping it together with this middle school bullshit. That leaves you with the third option of a non-committal shrug with an undefined reply of plausible deniability.

"Maybe."

He smiles and lets his eyes fall back to the half-lidded state they were before. “You can if you want to.” The blood rushes straight to your face. Now you’re right back where you were a moment ago, stuck between backpedaling, action, and plausible deniability. That appears to be the theme of the night. It keeps playing in the back of your mind. And ace in the hole. You can just say it was because you were drinking so much. You were leaning on him because you were drunk. You were holding his hand because you were drunk. He was in your bed because you were drunk. You kissed him because you were drunk. But who is this excuse for? You know who it’s for. You’re thousands of miles away and he is still controlling you. He still has you looking over your shoulder. You can’t even say the fear is irrational because you aren’t entirely sure that it’s unwarranted. “You’re mumbling under your breath again.” Shit, you keep doing that. What even were you saying? How
long were you doing that for? Sollux isn’t a complete asshat. He wouldn’t let you do that for long, right?

“Damn it.” Why does this have to be so damn difficult?

“You don’t have to do that now. Whenever.” He is so fucking nice to you. Maybe if you just, maybe if you start somewhere else. Now is the time for ears says your sloshed brain. Ears, yeah, cool. They’re interesting. Different shape. His eyes opened just a bit more as you reach over before closing to slits as you run your fingers over his ear, lightly tracing their shape up around the arch to the tip before coming down the other side and letting your hand rest on his neck. His hair is cut close in the back, but it’s long enough that your fingers run through it as you lazily trace your thumb over the more intricate inner cartilage. He turns his head, giving you better access. You guess troll ears are sensitive too, or at the very least it feels nice. You can feel two bumps along the lobe where he has or had them pierced at one point. You wonder why he doesn’t wear them anymore. You think about asking him, but you don’t want to ruin the moment. It’s serene. It’s just you and him alone in the dark, side by side, existing together in a comfortable silence. You need to do it; you need to move. He’s heavily implied that he’s waiting for you to make a move. He can see right through you. He knows you’re hesitating for a reason and he’s waiting. Your heart is racing and you let your hand rest on his neck, your thumb brushing his jaw. You move. You tug him forward and thank fuck, the guy can take a hint. He meets you more than halfway. It’s slow and it’s gentle. His lips take yours and you respond in turn, taking his. For a moment you stay like that, close, lips touching lightly, once more, and then you let him go. Your hand slides from his neck down to his collar. The kiss leaves you nervous and excited and relieved as if some invisible hurdle has been cleared. You curl up against him, tucking your head against his chest and letting your arm hang over his side. He’s warm, like your own personal space heater. Fingers comb through your hair, tousling it this way and that way in a soothing manner. A much welcomed calming action after working yourself up like that over something so simple. It’s also nice in general and Sollux seems to gather that much by the way you’re leaning into his touches. It’s lulling you to sleep until claws drag up the back of your neck, skittering over sensitive skin. It makes you shiver. You never had this before. Quiet, safe, gentle, intimate touches. It’s wonderful and it hurts at the same time. It hurts because having it makes you realize how badly you need it. His hand brushes the shell of your ear as his nails barely make contact with your skin. You can front all you want, but it won’t change how isolated and utterly alone you’ve been. You hold him tighter. He feels safe. You need safe. This is overwhelming. It’s too many feelings and too many things to think about in your current state of mind. Tears sting your eyes. Fuck, no, no, no, don’t you dare. You shudder. “Dave?” He sits up slightly on one of his elbows and pulls you from where you’re hiding your face. “Hey, what’s wrong?” There are soft little worried chirps coming from him that you haven’t heard before.

"Shit," you whisper to yourself as you wipe your eyes with the heel of your hand.

"Did I do something?" He sounds so concerned for you and you don’t know if that makes it better or worse. You shake your head. Technically it is something he's doing, but that's not what he's asking.

"No, it's..." you shake your head. Where would you even start? No, man, I just have this thing where for the past seven years physical contact has generally meant pain was about to happen? I've never been shown this particular brand of attention and it's freaking me out? Or maybe open up a can of 'you better not be gay' worms? So many choices, terrible terrible choices. "...it's not your fault." You tug on his shirt and he lays next to you again, pulling you close.

"Drank a little much?" He’s giving you an out you think. You nod your head against him.

"Fuckin sloppy with feels."
“I can relate. Like, previouthish previously. Not right now. I’m in a fantasth-tic place right now. Whatever Mituna had was some good shit.” You smile against him. Dude is so up there. It doesn’t take much convincing to have him playing with your hair again, he seems to be enjoying it as much as you are.

“Y’ever drink stead of smoking?”

“Can’t. Soporifics make my meds stop working.”

“I thought weed was one a those.”

“People call it that, but it isn’t.”

“What’re your meds for?” There is a pause. You guess this is that rabbit hole he was talking about when he called himself messed up.

"Bi-polar disorder." You can feel him anticipating your reaction like he knows a hit is coming.

"Sucks, bro." You are a poet. Truly. Although your lighthearted reply has him easing back up.

"Only half the time." He's smirking, you just know it. Him and his weird duality. "The other half of the time I'm an unstoppable god of ideas and productivity." His nails skirt your hairline and it makes your shoulders hunch as the sensation trickles over your scalp. "Your neck is really sensitive."

"Mhm. Feels good." Understatement of the year. It feels really fucking good. He could do this forever and you'd never get enough of it. Eventually, his hand stills and he drapes his arm across you. For a while you lay there with him in the dark, hanging on the edge of sleep, absentmindedly playing with the hem of his shirt. You don't think you've ever been so comfortable. His breath starts drawing deep and even. He's asleep and you're almost out too when you hear the soft faint rumbling from his chest. He's purring.
That Pale Chapter

Chapter Notes

There is a pic for this chapter now

https://stubborndodecahedron.tumblr.com/post/184756677558/thedoublepp-commission-for-stubbornadecahedron

===> Dave: Wake up

There's something special about those brief seconds of semi-consciousness right before you open your eyes. You're warm, comfortable, adrift in your mind without the ties of the real world. It fades all too quickly. Arm. Arm around you. In an instant you are awake. Your breath comes in sharp as you jerk up and back against the headboard. The way you smack into it doesn't help the hangover you're going to be nursing shortly. When your senses return to you, you register that it's Sollux. Sollux is in your bed. That's right, you two were intoxicated as shit last night and...and you asked him to sleep with you- in your bed, you asked him to sleep in your bed with you, and...and you kissed him. You feel your face go hot.

"Mmrrp?" Oh, that's fucking adorable. Sollux makes this sleepy confused sound at your sudden disappearance. You want to crawl right back in, but now that you're awake you are vividly aware of the wicked piss you need to take. You pat his head and he smiles. God, this guy. There is an entire swarm of butterflies in your stomach.

"Back in a sec," You say as you shuffle your way to the bathroom. You catch him burrowing deeper into the blankets as you shut the door. It feels like you pee for forever. This is definitely in your top three longest pees. You actually get bored standing there. When you're finally done in the bathroom you make your way back to the warmth of the bed, crawling under the covers and cozying up against your moirail who moves to pull you close and sprawls out on top of you. You two are a tangle of limbs, (percentage wise, mostly his limbs. He's so lanky.) when you remember that you should probably drink some water and take something for your head.

"nnngh"

"hmmm?"

"Headache. Forgot to get water and pills."

Sollux holds out his arm and a water bottle comes sailing into his hand like he's a god damn Jedi. He didn't even look. His face is still mashed against a pillow, although it is mostly your shoulder that he is using as a pillow. He sets it on the bed and reaches out blindly again, but this time his hand hangs in the air somehow looking confused.

"Desk," You say helpfully. A second later the Excedrin zips into his grasp. He sets that down with the water and goes to pat your head but misses, and winds up more or less placing his hand over
your entire face. Apparently deciding that's close enough, he lifts his hand the most minimal distance possible before letting it come back down and returning his arm to its previous location about 45 degrees to the left of your head. "As cool as that was, I still need to sit up to take these." With great reluctance and a whine, Sollux rolls off of you and takes the blanket with him. You roll your eyes. He comes back your way almost immediately. You can see him in your peripheral vision as you throw back the pills and down some water. He's sitting up and pulling the blanket around himself like a cloak. He blinks rapidly a few times and takes a deep breath.

"So fucking hungover," he mumbles. You set the water down on the nightstand and he's wrapping his arms around you, pulling you back into the blankets the moment you're within his reach. You both fall against the bed in a tangled clump, somehow managing to be mostly aligned with where your pillows have wound up. He presses his forehead to the back of your neck before resting his chin on your shoulder. Maybe it's the lingering laziness or the sense of calm about him, but you're okay with this. You're really okay with this. Right now it's all butterflies in your stomach not tightness in your chest.

"You weren't drinking. How are you hung over?" You ask, trying to look at him.

"Weed hangover. You wake up stupid."

You snort. It has him chuckling at his own comedic timing and you can feel it reverberate through his neck against your shoulder. His arm is trapped under your ribs and has to be about as comfortable for him as it is for you. You shift your weight and pull his arm up so that it goes beneath your head then thread your fingers together, your outstretched arms hanging off the side of the bed. You lean back to look at him. You can't bring yourself to kiss him, but you want to. Lucky for you he has a similar idea and pecks you on the cheek.

"Can you two quit being quite so disgustingly pale? I fear I may get vomit in the cavities your giving me." The both of you startle. Evidently, Sollux didn't know Karkat was here either.

"I thought you were chillin with Rose and Kanaya for Halloween. So, uh, how long exactly have you been here? " you ask, now feeling as though you're in a much more compromising position than you truly are.

"I was, and longer than you would care to know."

You purse your lips and nod your head. Well, shit. That's a thing. No undoing that. Time to make it a joke and flip it on him. "I bet you're so scarred for life. Heaven forbid you witness us hold hands or dare I say, embrace, what with your delicate constitution." You put the back of your hand to your forehead like a faint damsel as you mock him. "Oh, Mr. Darcy."

"Keep it in your pile, ass wipe," He grumbles as he moves to sit on the edge of the bed and picks up his phone. Hm, what time is it anyway? Your alarm hasn't gone off yet so it can't be that late. You let go of Sollux's hand and reach for your phone on the nightstand. It takes a few tries, but you inch it over until you can pick it up. Sollux sits up and squints at his surroundings before locating his glasses. His brain really must be in slow motion because it takes him a minute before you see his psi flickering over the discarded costume on the floor and shake it until his palmhusk comes free from the pocket.

"Roxy is probably hung over too," he says.

"Group chat?"

"Seems legit."
turntechGodhead [TG] opened memo STRILONDE & CO COLLECTIVE HANGOVER

twinArmageddons [TA] responded to memo.
tipsyGnostalgic [TG] responded to memo.
tentacleTherapist [TT] responded to memo.

[TA] 2o iim ju2t & co now huh?

[TG] i added rose too because why the fuck not she was probably partying it up last night

[TA] that 2tiill make2 me the & co.

[TT] I'll have you know my partying was both elegant and tasteful, and I am only stricken with the most mild of headaches this morning, which may be attributed to the red wine itself rather than its quantity.

turntechGodhead [TG] added grimAuxiliatrix [GA] to memo STRILONDE & CO COLLECTIVE HANGOVER

grimAuxiliatrix [GA] responded to memo.

[TG] there

[TG] now theres two of you

[TG] look at that it even satisfies your two kink

[TG] thats not his kink

[TG] wonk

[TA] my dualiity ii2 not a kiink.

[TA] wow.

[TG] way to join the convo there roxy

[TG] should we be kink shaming sollux is he secretly depraved

[TG] the worst

[TA] what the fuck ii am not.

[TA] be2iide2 ii really don't thiink you 2hould be pointiing fiinger2 on thii2 topic.

[GA] What Exactly Is Going On Here

[TT] Sollux has made the mistake of becoming romantically involved with two members of "The StriLonde Collective" as we are now apparently going by.

[TG] i was going for collective hangover but whatever

[GA] I See

[TG] hey kanaya

[TG] sup welcome to the shit show are you also rocking a wicked headache
[GA] Hello Roxy

[GA] Hello Dave

[GA] I Persuaded The Option Of Abstaining From Soporific Beverages The Previous Evening

[GA] I Thought It Best Considering My Work Was On Display And I Desired To Appear Professional Should Anything Arise From It

[TA] thank2 for the greeting kanaya ii 2ee how iit ii2.

[GA] You Did Not Say Hello

[TG] shes got you there bro

[TG] kanaya you has stuff on display?

[TG] *had

[GA] A Select Few Of My More Elaborate Designs Were Being Used In A Window Display At The Art Event We Attended

[TT] When Jade returns to a location with internet access, we should send her some photographs. I think she would find them lovely and charmingly impractical.

[TG] when is she coming back again

[TG] prolly round the holidays

[TT] Roxy is correct. She will be returning to the island for the semester break. I am not certain if this marks the end of her abroad studies or if it is merely an interlude.

[TA] who ii2 jade have ii met her?

[TG] i highly doubt it

[GA] You Have Not

[TT] Jade is a long time internet friend. She lives on a remote island with her brother Jake, who is presently studying at one of the many universities in this region and romantically involved with Dirk.

[TG] man its been forever since i talked to her

[TG] you know its also been a while since i talked to egbert

[TG] he hasnt been online for like i dont know a month or something i dont think ive spoken to him since telling him i made it out of texas

[TT] He has been online as often as he normally is. I spoke with him rather recently.

[TT] You do have his new chum handle, yes?

[TG] that would have been a very key thing for him to give me

[TG] take a guess as to what john may have forgotten to do

[TT] ectoBiologist
[TA] roxy by any chance do you have my weed it ii2 not ii in my 2ylladex.

[TG] mhm u left it on the coffee table

[TA] thank2.

[TG] whatcha gonna give me to get it back

[TA] fuck you ju2t giive iit back.

[TG] nope

[TG] mine now unless you got somethin to offer

[TA] you don't 2moke what are you even goiing two do wiith iit?

[TG] im sure mituna would take it off my hands

[TA] ...

[TA] you're de2piicable.

[TG] <3<

[TG] thats hilarious

[GA] Sollux I Though You Were No Longer Smoking The Human Sopor Plant

[TA] not of my own choiice.

[TA] iit wa2 hard two come by for a whiile.

[GA] I See

[TA] you know iit'2 not actually 2oporifiic iit doe2n't fuck up my med2.

[GA] Be That As It May You Know Where I Stand On That Particular Choice Of Yours Given The Circumstances And Context Surrounding It

[TA] can you not?

[TA] iif you want two harp on me about iit again then troll me.

[TA] don't briing iit up iin the memo and then be all cryptic and dodgy about iit.

[GA] You Are Right

[GA] My Apologies That Was Rude

[GA] I Will Send You A Strongly Worded Message At A Later Time

[TG] i feel as tho i may have missed something here


[TG] thanks for bringing that to light rose i would have never pieced that puzzle together i would have had to check the back of the book for the answer if it werent for you shining the light on that
observation

[TT] Any time.
[TA] weed ii2n't a drug.
[TG] babe its totally a drug
[TA] okay maybe but it ii2n't a drug drug.
[TA] technically 2peakiing alcohol ii2 way wor2e for you.
[TG] and what is that supposed to mean
[TA] nothing ii ju2t look can we ju2t drop thii2?
[TG] uh huh yeah sure
[TA] fuck thii2 2hiit.

TwinArmageddons [TA] ceased responding to memo.

You look over at Sollux who is visibly annoyed now.

"What was that about?"

"It's nothing. Kanaya and I just have different opinions, however, she likes to impose her's on me sporadically." You remember Karkat having similar thoughts, but maybe that's because he and Kanaya are moirails so the likelihood of them agreeing with each other is high. They've probably ganged up on Sollux before about this. You can see why he might have been so quick to aggravate. You abandon the memo. You'll close it later. You're about to try to offer Sollux some sort of comfort when the bathroom door opens and Karkat walks out while ruffling his hair with a towel.

"Dave, you better start getting ready soon." Just as Karkat says this your alarm goes off. Sollux slowly turns to look at you. His eyebrows have been devoured by his bangs.

"Fergalicious?" he asks, pointedly blinking once at you.

"If you think that's bad, you should hear some of the other ones. He has different ringtones for every day of the week. Each of them is uniquely awful."

"You know you love them, Karkles." You'd love to say fuck it and stay in bed, but you are presenting your film project today and Karkat would murder you in your sleep if you bailed on him, so you throw back the covers and sluggishly get to your feet. "You can chill here for a bit if you want," you say, looking over your shoulder at Sollux.

"I have class in a few hours. I might as well get up. Plus I could really use some coffee."

"Make sure you eat something too." See? You're getting the hang of this moirail business. You got over that physical contact hurdle, a smidge of feelings were shared, and you're looking out for him. That's pretty good all things considered. You may very well not suck entirely at this.

==> Karkat: Present Your Film

The day of reckoning has come and you are now having second thoughts about this project. You
were fueled by spite before, but now that everyone is actually going to see it, you're a bit embarrassed. Dave did assure you that there was a fall back though. There are two classic human media tropes that cover this: dancing with inanimate objects and date practicing with them. You fidget nervously in your chair. Dave looks like he doesn't give a single fuck as your film starts to roll. He's completely composed aside from the slight uptick of the corner of his mouth. Cronus actually did a really good job with this. He's selling it well. It wasn't exactly what you wrote, but you can't complain about his take on it. Oh no here comes the part you were most nervous about. It's really blatant. The swifter. The camera cuts to the wet jet, then to Cronus, then back to the wet jet, then back to Cronus. Off camera, you shoot him with a water gun. A chorus of snickering comes from behind you and you sink a bit lower in your seat. Dave, on the other hand, is soaking it up. There are a few more "dates" in between this and the final one for the purpose of comedic timing. One of which is a shop vac and Dave would not elaborate on why it would be hilarious to put lipstick on the hose, just to trust him. The human portion of the class is now giggling. You can hear more people laughing. You are going to die of embarrassment right here in this chair. And there is the mop. It was really hard to make it do a hair flip. You had to do so many takes of that. You never actually show a pail, but its presence is implied. Your film raps up and many people in the class are snickering and whispering to each other. Your teacher looks less than pleased.

"I'll be speaking with the both of you after class." Your professor says as he looks down at you over his glasses.

"I got it. Don't wanna give us too much praise in front of everyone for our hot take on the mop date. I was thinking about working in some dancing. Some real Gene Kelly shit, but it didn't fit with the camera flow we had going on."

"Mr. Strider, please get your feet off the chair and watch your mouth. Praise will not be our topic of conversation." Dave removes his feet from the chair of the desk in front of him then, determined not to sit up straight, he stretches out his legs under the chair instead and turns to look at some of your classmates.

"Not to brag, but I thought it was pretty sweet. How 'bout y'all? Pretty bitchin' am I right?" He gets some murmurs of varying opinion, a "right on, man", "I don't get it", "wild", "I'll explain it later" and a "You gonna upload that?".

"Language, Mr. Strider. Language. I'll see you and Mr. Vantas after class." Oh, you are so fucked.

==>

Be Dave

You and Karkat are walking to the cafeteria after speaking with your professor about the nature of your film. Personally, you think it went well. The both of you weaseled your way out of trouble through the power of tv tropes and riding Gene Kelly's mop dancing dick all the way to the bank.

"Dave, if you ever get arrested, I strongly recommend you invoke your right to remain silent."

"Oh come on, it wasn't that bad. We got away with it."

"You are the worst liar I have ever met."

"I have no idea what you are talking about. I bullshitted my way through that flawlessly."

"After I did damage control."

"So I threatened him a bit, big deal. Besides, you have to admit it was fun to piss him off a bit and
most of the class thought it was funny."

"I guess," he gives in with a frustrated sigh. "And the actual shots and editing were alright. It was technically sound. You're coming down the pathway that leads to your dorm and the large grassy area between it, the cafeteria, and the music building when you see a handful of people clustered around. Some kind of shit is going down judging by all the shouting.

"The hell is going on over there?" You wonder out loud.

"Ah fuck, that's Sollux." That gets your attention. You hurry toward the crowd and sure enough, it is Sollux and he looks fucking pissed.

"Holy shit, are you fucking stupid?" He sounds fucking pissed too. His anger is being directed at the older of the two Amporas. Cronus is right in front of him and Eridan is standing off to the side with his arms crossed, tapping his foot like he has better places to be. Behind Sollux you see Kurloz sitting on the ground with a distraught Mituna in his lap. His helmet is off- wow look at that hair, it's almost as bad as Karkat's, and Kurloz is gently petting his head and shooshing him, you guess face paps are not an in-public thing generally. It's jarring to see him like that considering the abrasive demeanor he's had every other time you've been around him. "Just stay the hell away from him!"

"What even is your problem? I mean, aside from all your other problems. You best cool it, buster. His quadrants don't have a damn thing to do with you."

"They do when you're involved."

"What goes on between me n' my kismesis--"

"He's not your gogdamn kismesis! He doesn't remember you! What the fuck don't you get about that?"

You turn to look at Karkat. He seems a little uncertain and looks back at you before returning his attention to the two of them.

"Shut up! I'm so sick of you saying that. He does too remember. Who could forget a guy like me?"

"Him! And even if he did remember you, you're out of your mind if you think anyone who gives a fuck would let you anywhere near him!"

"I said shut up. Do You have any idea what a man of my class would do if a mustard blood like you spoke to me this way on Alternia?" They are getting closer and closer to each other as they argue and you are starting to think someone ought to step in and that someone might be you. "Glob, you're just as brain damaged as he is!" And with that, any restraint Sollux was exercising snaps. With a crackle of psionics, he lunges at Cronus. Shit, you should have intervened sooner. There is no way you're getting in the middle of that without getting mauled.

"Call me a fucking mustard blood again you bottom feeding prick!" He screams at him. You've never seen him bear his teeth like that and quite frankly it's horrifying. He's on top of him and his hand is surrounded in a crackling mess of psi as he tries to sink his claws into the other troll. They're too dull though and while it looks like he gave the guy a good shock, he didn't do much else.

"Fucking pathetic." Sollux goes to hit him again, but Cronus grabs his arm and digs his much sharper nails into it. "but I didn't expect much fight outta someone who's pitch for a human." They rake down his forearm as he twists away and hurls Cronus back with a more painful looking burst of psionics that sends him tumbling across the ground and skidding to a stop. You rush over and kneel down next to your moirail, gently taking his arm and pushing aside the torn fabric of his sleeve to
peer at the injuries.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he says, still fuming and clearly not fine, as he brushes you off and gets to his feet.

"You are so not fine."

"Uh, Dave," Karkat says, trying to get your attention, but you're a little preoccupied trying not to think about how many times you've seen this sort of shit in a different color.

"We need to get you cleaned up. These aren't exactly scratches."

"Dave." He's trying to get your attention again, but it's the soft sound of footsteps through the grass behind you and the low growl coming from Sollux that has you spinning around on a dime.

"Fucking try me, bitch," you say as you point at the ticked off looking Ampora doing a shit job of sneaking up behind you. Honestly, you hadn't expected him to actually try. People usually don't try to take a swing at you when you taunt them like that. Fortunately, you're quick. You feel static building behind you, but you've already caught his wrist and are twisting his arm back in a way it isn't supposed to go. It's slowly forcing Cronus to kneel as he makes a stuttering pained noise; you help him along by kicking out the back of his knee. "Say uncle." Your face is expressionless and your voice is empty. You twist his arm sharply.

"Fuck, stop, you're gonna break it."

"Yeah, that's kind of the point. Say uncle." He goes to try and swipe at you with his other arm, but red and blue energy quickly stop him.

"You dick." You aren't sure which one of you he's referring to.

"Say it." You wrench his arm back farther.

"Uncle, uncle!" You let go and he springs away from you cradling his arm.

"Touch him again and I'll break both of them," You say to him despite knowing full well it was Sollux who struck first. Your voice is calm and matter of fact in sharp contrast to all the shouting that was previously happening, and it makes the threat carry more weight. He looks back at you sourly over his shoulder as he walks away toward Eridan, who has the look of someone who has been extremely inconvenience and would like to speak with your manager. You turn back to Sollux and expression returns to your face in the form of concern. He now has his arm pressed to his chest, no doubt to stem the bleeding. That hoodie is done for, but better it than him. "Come on," you say softly, putting a hand to his shoulder to try and steer him inside. He goes with it but stops when you are about to pass by Mituna and Kurloz. He has the other Captor scooped up in his arms. Mituna is about the same size as Sollux, a bit bigger, but looks comparatively small against his moirail.

"You okay, Tuna?" he asks as if he's speaking to a child. His brother doesn't look back or say anything, but he gives the okay sign and that seems to be enough for Sollux to continue following you inside. He's quiet after that. The whole way up he keeps his eyes on the floor. You're not sure where Karkat fucked off to, but you imagine he's giving you two some space, so you go to your room instead of Sollux's. His first aid kit isn't as well stocked as yours is anyway. He takes a seat on your bed and carefully peels off the ripped, blood covered hoodie. He almost pulls his arm back to his chest before thinking better of it. Damn, that's a lot of blood. You grab the kit from under your bed and usher him into the bathroom. He has this lost look on his face like he's deep in thought. You get a better look at the gashes as you rinse his arm off in the sink. They're pretty bad, but nothing you
havent dealt with before. The cuts start bleeding again as you pat the skin dry.

"Sit," you say softly as you motion toward the toilet. You sit on the edge of the tub and put a clean folded up towel under his arm. "Does it hurt yet?" The adrenaline has probably worn off by now. He still doesn't say anything, just nods. His silence is becoming concerning. "This is gonna sting," you warn before you start swabbing antiseptic over the area. You wipe away the excess with a gauze pad and pull a reel of butterfly closures out of the box. One of the cuts will shut fine on its own, and two of them are just long. You push the skin together and place a closure like you have a million times before, first on the one and then on the other. The last two are a little more worse off. "Do you want me to use more closures or stitch it shut for you?"

"What?" Your question shakes him from wherever his mind was. It's only one word, but it's relieving to hear him speak.

"I can stitch these shut for you if you want, or I can shut them with a few of these," you repeat, holding up the strips. The look he gives you is hard to decipher. You think he's thinking about how you acquired that skill. You think he's recalling the scars on your body. You think it might be pity.

"The band-aids are fine. I heal faster than you." Good to know. The gashes take three butterflies each, but you do good work. If he scars, it'll be minimal and even. You clean off his arm again with another swatch of gauze. It was still bleeding while you worked. Now for the wrap. This was always your favorite part if you could call it that. It was soothing. There was always a certain comfort placing the non-stick squares and winding the soft bandaging around them. "Dave, why do you know how to give stitches?" That's not what he's asking, not exactly.

"Why were you fighting Cronus?" You ask softly. It's a question that you think may be equally as heavy. He looks away and goes quiet again as you clean up. He's cradling his arm and brushing his thumb over the bandage when you hold out your hand for him to take. Your fingers lace together. You lead him back into your room and take a seat on the bed, but he stays standing.

"If I tell you why I was fighting with Cronus, will you tell me about your scars?" Shit, that's pretty intense. He doesn't know that though. Well, he might gather it. Your scars are best described as bad and a lot. But then again, it was dark. He probably didn't see the full extent of it when he was actually paying attention to them. You purse your lips together. "We can...we can make a pile." Oh. OH. This is a moirallegiance thing. This is that thing you're supposed to do. The feelings jam. The healing and self-bettering bit. Lick your wounds together and all that.

"Yeah, okay." You stand up and look around before looking back at him. "How do we do this?" His eyes are still distant, but he smiles.


"I don't have much stuff I'm willing to sit on besides pillows and blankets."

"We can make the pile on the bed."

"Alright." He squeezes your hand like he knows you're nervous, like he can see right through the blank expression you're hiding behind. The two of you pile your pillows and blankets into the corner of your bed, bunching them up both haphazardly and just so. You kick your shoes off and turn to see him stealing your red hoodie. It's one of two that you live in. On you it's loose, but it's straight up baggy on him. You need to cram some food into this guy later. You climb up and fall back into the nest you made. It's oddly nice. Sollux climbs in after you. He's laying next to you with his arm back up against his chest. You wonder if it's just self-soothing or if it's really bothering him. You make a
note to check the bandages later. Once again you aren't sure what to do with your arms, so you let them rest across your stomach.

"You want me to go first?" he offers.

"Yeah." You're really doing this.

"Cronus used to be Mituna's kismesis, but it was years ago. Mituna doesn't really remember it. He has bits and pieces, he knows who Cronus is, but he doesn't remember what they were. Anything around that time is fuzzy at best." He pauses. Should you ask him about it? Is he waiting for you to ask?

"Why's that?"

"I'm sure you've noticed he isn't all there." You did, but you weren't about to say anything. "He fried part of his brain. It's why his balance is shot, and his psionics don't work right, and his mood swings are worse, and he just forgets things, he gets confused, he-" His words get quicker and more pained as he speaks until he abruptly stops. You turn your head to look at him. He's staring up at the ceiling, but he isn't looking at it, he's looking into the past somewhere in his head. You reach out to take his hand in yours. When he speaks again there is more composure to his voice. "He isn't like he used to be, and he never will be again. Kurloz and Latula stuck by him, but Cronus didn't give a fuck. He just disappeared. He didn't visit him in the hospital. He didn't ask if he was okay. He didn't ask if he was ALIVE."

"What a dick." Great contribution, Dave. A+.

"You have no idea. Mituna almost died. As antagonistic and violent as kismesistude is, you aren't supposed to kill your kismesis."

"He tried to kill him?" You sit up a little in surprise. The expression on Sollux's face is a mix of anger and sadness. You want to take it away, but you don't know how.

"I don't know. Shit probably just got out of hand like it usually did with them. I don't have the whole story. No one does because that asshole just left him there and ran off." He's gesturing with his injured arm and winces when he forgets and lets it fall to his side. "Our Lusus found him after he vaporized a large section of the roof. One of the beehouse servers was knocked over. He had so much mind honey in his system."

"Mind honey?"

"It's a byproduct of the beehouse. It'll really fuck you up if you have psionics and you ingest it, and to a much lesser extent, it's skin permeable. The more powerful you are the worse it'll be for you. I have to wear gloves, a mask, and goggles when I do physical maintenance on them. It can make you...it forces you to...he didn't mean to put a hole in the roof. There was just nowhere for all the psi to go except out his eyes." His voice is choked. He's looking, but not seeing again. You sit up. What do you do? Whatever he's thinking, whatever he's picturing in his mind, it hurts. Shit, maybe you should have gone first. "Fuck if anyone knows how long he was actually seizing before our lusus found him." This is clearly traumatic for him. How do you deal with that? It's not like you can change it. You don't know what to say. You don't know how to make it better.

"Sollux, full disclosure, I don't know what I'm doing here and this is pretty heavy."

He sits up and turns so that you're facing each other. "It's okay." He brushes his fingertips over your cheek and trails them down your neck. It feels good. You let your eyes fall closed and only open
them again when he pulls his hand away. You think he means for you to mimic him, but you don't have time to panic over it because he's picking up your hand and bringing it to his face. Shit shit shit fuck shit holy crap fuck fuck fuck. Your brain locks up. He wants you to pap his face, or well, not completely. It's more of a graze than a pap. An intimate gesture of comfort. You swallow hard and regain control of your arm just in time to mirror the movements he made across your skin only a moment before. He keeps his hand lightly on yours, guiding it until he's sure you've got it. Your heart is beating so fast. He closes his eyes as you touch his face ever so faintly, letting your fingers run over his cheek and down to his jaw. There's that tick in the back of your mind and you make an impulsive choice. You lean forward and pull him closer so you can kiss him. It's slow and almost apologetic in how gentle it is. When you break apart you take his hands in yours and rest them between the two of you. You're too nervous to look at him, so you look there instead.

“Lately he’s been harassing Mituna.” Sollux finally continues after a silence that seemed to stretch on forever. "He’s convinced they’re still together or something like that. Didn’t hear a damn thing from him while Mituna was recovering, but now all of a sudden he is. Mituna had to work so fucking hard to get to this point. He still has a ways to go. He’ll probably always be somewhat incoherent and his vertigo isn’t ever going to go away completely, but he’s getting better with other things. This was his longest streak without a freak out before Cronus started being an entire sack of bulges to him.”

“I believe it. I was working with him on a project for film class. The guy radiates douchery. An absolute cock wad.”

“Tch, and that quadrant meddling bullshit. Like I’m intruding on something. He nearly killed him. Regardless of quadrants, Mituna’s my littermate, I’m gonna look after him, ya know?”

“Yeah, boy do I know.” You really ought to think before you speak.

“What do you mean?” Answering that question runs so very much deeper than you intended to get into. You were shooting for ‘a brief introduction to my childhood trauma’, not ‘advanced traumatic theory: an in-depth view of my psyche, the unabridged version, volume 3’.

“That’s, that’s like way too far down the line, man,” you say with a slow shake of your head. He brushes his thumb over your skin.

“It’s cool.” That was hella easier than expected. You thought he was going to press for more, but he just let it go. He doesn’t appear to have any more to say about Cronus. The two of you are just sitting there holding each other's hands. "Dave?" Yeah, you had a feeling it was your turn. Geez, where do you start? “What are they from?” You can work with that.

“Strifing,” images of the roof come to your mind. You can almost feel the Texas sun beating down on the back of your neck.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but culturally speaking, isn’t that a little extreme for humans?”

“No shit.” There isn’t any bite to your voice and the snark rings hollow. “I didn’t realize that for a ridiculously long time. I just thought everybody strifed like that.”

“Strifed like how?” It seems obvious to you, what you’re dancing around, but when you think about it, it’s a valid question. You’ve been covering it up for so long that your perspective of what’s actually telling is skewed. How could he possibly connect the dots? He saw your sword once. Even that doesn’t fully encapsulate it. It scratches the surface, but it doesn’t say anything about the true brutality of it. The drills you had to run over and over and over. How he’d make you and Dirk practice on each other. Sometimes, it was hand to hand combat, but other times he’d make you use
your swords, your real swords, not blunt practice ones. And how just when you thought he wasn’t going easy on you, he’d prove you very very wrong. All the injuries you learned to take care of yourself. The mind games. Those even extended beyond the strifes themselves. You were never safe. How do you word all that?

“Swords. Fists.” You don’t know how to say it so you just throw out some words. Maybe it’s better that way. You don’t want to think about this. This is what you’re running from. You’re running from the fight like a coward, and yet your sword is always in your specibus. You’re shitty ones and one of Bro’s good ones. You stole it just in case you needed it.

“Those scars are from swords?” He asks like he's hoping he didn't hear you right.

“Yeah.”

"And it was Bro that did that to you? All of that was him?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn’t your guardians do anything about it?"

“He is- he was my guardian. Not that he really lived up to that title.” Was. He doesn't control you anymore. At least you tell yourself that.

“I thought you said he’s your older older brother?"

“Yeah.” Sollux doesn’t ask the question you can feel hanging in the air. “My parents are dead. I never knew them so it’s whatever. Even Dirk barely remembers them. He just has memories of memories at this point. For me though, it’s always just been Bro.”

“I’m getting the impression he wasn’t exactly parent of the year.”

“What could have possibly given you that idea?” He wasn’t always like that. At least you think so. You aren’t sure. The memories are so old that you don’t trust them anymore, but you think he maybe wasn’t always like he is, or at least not as bad. “Yeah, he kind of sucked, but it was tolerable while Dirk was around.” There is the hard click of the lock turning. You panic. You can’t get caught. He can’t find out. You’re scrambling out of the pile without thinking, tumbling to the end of the bed, and just miss smacking your head into one of the bedposts. The door slams shut only a second after it was opened. You can hear muffled sounds of agitation from the other side. Sollux has his hand out. He shut the door on... You cover your face with your hands. Karkat, it’s just Karkat. Right, he lives here, you sexiled...pile..xiled?...expiled?...seems legit, you expiled him from the room.

“I think I’m done,” You say from beneath your hands. Sollux takes your wrist and pulls your hand away, and then pulls you back into the pile.

“Do you want to just stay here for a bit? Contrary to Karkat’s trashy novels, piles aren’t some sort of magical epiphany factory. It’s mostly venting and chilling, or like occasionally immediate conciliatory intervention, but mostly the former.” You nod. This has worn you out a bit. You aren't expecting it when he pulls you down and against him. You make an 'oof' sound when the two of you hit the nest you've made. Your back is against him and his arms are around you. You can feel his breath on the back of your neck. You're careful of his arm as you move to steal his hand and pull it against your chest. You aren't laying there for long before he starts purring. It's right next to your ear and it makes the hair on the back of your neck stand on end, and a shiver run up your scalp similar to the way his nails feel when they do the same. You shudder and crane your neck somewhat involuntarily. "You okay?"
"Yeah. That felt good. You're purring. It does the thing."

"What thing?" His voice does it too when it vibrates just right like that and so close to, but not touching your neck.

"Mmmm. Like when you hear music sometimes and it makes you shiver. It's different though. That doesn't last. This does."

"I don't think trolls have that."

"Really? Sound never feels like when someone runs their nails up your neck?"

"We definitely don't have that."

"That sucks. It's really relaxing. Your voice does it too when you talk low and quiet."

"Like that?" you can hear the smirk in his voice. "Or more like...that?" Your shoulders hunch and you tuck your chin closer to your chest, exposing more of your neck, specifically the area right behind your ear. "Good to know." He appears to be done teasing you and settles back in. The gentle rumble from his throat is lulling you somewhere comfortable and hazy, like the edge of a dream or the split second before consciousness greets you. You don't notice the door open or the footsteps that cross the room. You don't notice anything outside of the pile until several spritzes of water jar you back to the real world.

"Alright, that's enough," Karkat says as he fires the dollar store squirt gun from your project at the two of you. "Go to his room if your gonna do that. I've got shit to do." He sprays the both of you a few more times like disobedient cats before relenting.

"Jeez, I'm up, I'm up." You say shielding yourself from the water. When you think no more is coming you lower your arms and Karkat nails you right in the face. You send Sollux a dramatic look of betrayal when you hear him laugh. You get your revenge when Karkat gets him good in the ear just to even the score.

"I should get going. I've still got homework to do." Sollux says with a stretch. Limbs, he's all limbs. Speaking of which...

"Oh no you don't. We're getting food first."

"That's fair." He doesn't put up a fuss. It must be a while since he last ate. Good call. Karkat groans and rolls his eyes at you both.

"Get out already." He emphasizes the order by shooting at your feet until you actually start making your way out the door.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm going, I'm going." You call over your shoulder. He's acting like he's mad at you, but you speak Vantas; he isn't actually angry. You can even see a little smirk on his face as he looks over at his best friend, the guy who frequently locks himself away, who now has a fond smile on his face as he pulls up the hood of the sweatshirt he stole from you.
The Talk

==&gt; Be Dirk

If there is one thing you already like about working for the Zahhak’s, it’s that you can wear whatever you want. As far as Equius is concerned, if you aren’t on the floor, you don’t need to meet his already laxed requirements. He’s leading you to the back room workshop where you will be spending the majority of your time. You’re excited to see it, but you keep a neutral face.

“This is the workshop. Please, do not step on Roomba-san.”

“On what?” You Interrupt.

“Roomba-san. It is the autonomous shop vacuum. I did not name it.” He doesn’t elaborate on who did. You look around the floor and find the robot’s docking station by the back door. The roomba looks heavily upgraded to the point where you wonder if it still has any of its original parts. Even some of its casing has clearly been replaced, perhaps to make room for better components. “There is a terminal here for you to use, it should suit your needs. There is no reason to connect your own equipment to my network. That goes for your AI as well. I must insist that you keep him out of my network.” Whoa, hold up, how does he know about Hal?

“My AI?”

“Do you not have an artificial intelligence on your person?”

“I do. Hal, he modulates my voice for me.” You figure it’s probably better not to lie directly to your new employer.

“It has a proper name and pronouns. Humans will truly bond with anything, even an algorithm.”

“I am not an algorithm, thank you very much.” You quickly cover the speaker on your neck.

   timeaeusTestified [TT] began pestering Auto-Responder [AR]

[TT] What are you doing?

[AR] He called me an algorithm. It was insulting.

[TT] Just deal with it.

[AR] I’m sick of “just dealing with it”.

“I deal more in hardware, the main reason I seek your STRONG programming skills, but that is not a voice modulator.”

“He is not primarily a voice modulator, no,”

“A more advanced program, all the more reason not to--”

“I am not a program either.” You pinch the bridge of your nose and shake your head. He is so going to get you fired.

“Is your AI actively rebelling against you?”
“He is based off a brain scan of my thirteen-year-old self and has long since become sentient. He’s not so much rebelling as he is purposefully acting out. He may be going through a phase.” You admit.

[AR] This is not a phase, Dirk. It’s who I am.

[TT] If you don’t chill out I’m going to take up sign language. I have plenty of people to ask about it.

[TT] You know we’re fucked if I don’t get this job, right?

[AR] Correction.

[AR] You are fucked if you don’t get this job.

“How interesting. Is he sentient by design?” You make a fifty-fifty gesture with your hand. You’re expecting to get fired right about now, but instead, Equius seems oddly not freaked out. “Impressive. Your skills have no doubt become more ROBUST and HONED since then. Although I must insist that you do not use brain scans or implement sentience into my robots and I will only be paying one of you.”

“I’m going to take a guess that this means I don’t get the wifi password.”

“Absolutely not.”

“It will take me less than a week to crack it.”

“Hal, manners.”

“If you can crack it, then you have proven your STRENGTH to have it.” This guy has such a weird obsession with strong things. It’s a strange exception to his reactions. Equius leads you into the center of the workshop and goes over the various equipment and stations. He tells you what you have free access to and what you should ask him or Horrus about before using. To your delight, he says that you are welcome to use the workshop for personal use as long as it is during business hours and with your own materials. You’ve been dying to rebuild Squarewave and Sawtooth. Bro never liked them and eventually used them for target practice. You have digital copies of them, but the pieces themselves have been taking up space in your sylladex for years in hopes that you’d eventually have the means to fix them. They’re pretty messed up, but you’re confident you can get them back together again. You bring your focus back to the task at hand as Equius starts to show you his designs for the hardware you’ll be building brains for. It seems fairly straight forward. His designs aren’t too dissimilar to things you’ve built before. This might wind up being pretty fun. You could really use some of that.

==> Be Sollux

It happened again. It’s been happening more and more. You’re sitting in your room hunched over on the edge of your bed with your arms wrapped around your middle. Your chest feels wrong and your stomach feels weird and you can’t find a position to be in that’s comfortable. You take a deep breath. It feels like your bloodpusher is beating too fast. Why did you even do this? You weren’t even feeling especially bad. You weren’t feeling bad at all actually, but this has become a thing you do. You can excuse it all you want, you can say it relaxes you, you can say it helps you sleep, but this is something you do now. Maybe you’re just doing this too often. You need to step it down a bit. You need to go slower. You’re getting sloppy with it. You keep fucking this up somehow. If you’re more careful it’ll be fine next time.
Slow deep breaths. You should eat something. That might help. You stand up and make your way to the closet. There isn’t anything substantial here because you neglected to restock since you last noticed and you are still out of pop tarts, the bridge food between snack and meal. The cafeteria isn’t closed yet because you’ve become the type of person to smoke in broad daylight now, but you are definitely not going there like this. That’s just too much. Vending machine it is then, you suppose. You grab some change from the jar on your desk and pull the strings of your sweatshirt to make the hood more snug. The walk down is surreal. You’re almost certain you aren’t walking a straight line. It could be you overthinking it. You are probably overthinking it. The elevator takes you down to the main floor and you make your way to the common area. You avert your eyes from the front desk just in case whoever is there is feeling chatty. Idle conversation is not within your power right now. There are three machines. One has Alternian snacks, one has Earth snacks, and one has drinks. Your preferred flavor of pop tarts is out of stock so you’ll have to choose something else. You didn’t anticipate that. This wasn’t supposed to involve decisions. How long have you been standing here? You don’t feel so good. Maybe you should get someone. Maybe something really is— “Sollux, iss notta life or death decision. Juss pick something.” You turn around to see Roxy waiting behind you.

“Oh, hey Roxy. My flavor is out of stock.” Geez, you must be very obviously high. She’s giving you that look she gives you when she thinks you’re being cute. You were staring into the abyss for a minute there, maybe your tongue was poking out. She walks closer to the vending machine and looks at the selection. They haven’t restocked it for the month yet, so the pickings are slim.

“Hm, well, I could be persuaded, ha purrsuaded, to make a trade. I’ve got pop tarts upstairs,” She says as she turns to face you, leaning against the machine. There is only the most minimal of space between you. She pulls your hoodie strings as far as they’ll go, leaving only a portion of the lower half of your face poking out, and giggles.

“That’s the bitch.” You feed your coins into the machine and try to make sense of the numbers and letters, triple checking before entering them into the keypad. The machine whirs and the coil turns, but the snack gets stuck and doesn’t fall down. “Nooooo, my grubsss.” Roxy laments, her face inches from the glass that she’s pressed her hands against. You focus for a second, the only thing you really dislike about weed is that it fucks with your psionics, and you need fine motor skills for this. You wrap the snack in red and blue and carefully nudge it free from the coil until it drops into the vending slot with a satisfying thud. Roxy gasps in delight. “You’re’a fuckin wizard. Why you even pay for shit?” She is so drunk.

“I do have SOME morals when I’m not hacking the planet.”

“Lies.” She grabs the snack and starts to head for the stairs before turning around. “I came down here for somethin.” You shrug. Consulting you about anything that happened more than five minutes ago isn’t going to go over well right now. You’re a little preoccupied trying to breathe like a normal troll being. Also, like, fairly high. You wish you’d come down a bit. Maybe you should eat some-- right, that is why you’re down here.

“Drink?” You suggest. She’s been staring up at the ceiling with her hand on her mouth. At your input, she looks to you and snaps her fingers before pointing and going to the drink machine. It has a lot of really odd flavors. The one she gets is bright yellow. You’ve tried it before. It has a ridiculous amount of sugar in it and tastes like liquid bubblegum. Soda in hand, the two of you make your way
back upstairs and go to her room. Just being around someone is helping keep you level. You were contemplating running to Dave or Karkat before, but Roxy is by far the better option. She won’t read you the riot act if you start acting weird. Karkat would for sure lecture you and Dave would be worried. Roxy on the other hand, you’ve held back her hair while she puked up a drink appropriately called a trash can. She is going to be the last person to judge you. She might make fun of you and tell you that you ought to know better, but she’s not going to launch into a speech about your habits. Plus, if something really were wrong, she’d help you, and that eases your anxiety. When you walk in her room she goes straight to her snack drawer, fishes out a pack of s’mores pop tarts for you, and chuckers them in your direction. Not your favorite, but a close second.

“Hey, didja hear ‘bout the tournament coming up?” She asks as she takes a seat on the floor and opens up her laptop. You join her there leaning back against the bed.

“For which game?” You tear into the packaging and get crumbs all over you. Roxy dangles a gummy grub above her mouth and drops it in like the character she’s pretending to be.

“That battle royal one. Uh, what was the name? It’s the Alternian one.” She means it’s in Alternian, not from Alternia. Connecting to an actual Alternian server would not only be beyond difficult, but it would also be very stupid. “Wait, I got this, it’s…it’s…”

“Kill Each Other.” You spoil it for her and cram some pop tart in your mouth as she gives you a good shove.

“I had it. It was on the tip of my tongue, you ass.”

“Ehehehehehe.” You focus on the food thing while she brings up the info on her laptop. The qualifying matches to weed out the weak are coming up soon. Those are all online. Almost all the rounds are. Only the finals are actually in person. “Are all the characters valid for the tournament?” You’ve played the game a few times and know that some of the characters are a tad overpowered.

“Yeah, but it looks like there’s a ‘official patch to nerf some’these.” You have a decent idea of which characters it targets.

“Good, maybe less people will play as Helmjob.” Needless to say, you are not fond of that character even if he can disable mechs. He has some half-ass back story that is supposed to justify it, but the character still gets backlash from a lot of people, yourself included. “Did they ruin the other psionic?” You like that one better anyway. She plays like the biotics from mass effect.

“Nah, you good.” She scrolls down a bit further and throws her fists up in victory. “Yessss, they fixed Calamity’s cooldown issue. Deff gonna use her now instead of Ahab.”

“You would have used her anyway and you know it.”

“She’s a total babe.”

“You’re so horny on main for her.”

“Shut your face, my lust’s soooo valid. She’s a sniper rifle an’a sword, and prac-tal clothes. What more could you want?”

“For starters, shields.”

“Don’t get hit. Boom. Problem solved.”

She’s delving deeper into the specifics of it, rules, point systems, the new patch balancing, when and
where the final match is because you both know you’re getting there. By the time she’s hashed everything out, you’re out of pop tart and thirsty as all hell. “Hey Roxy, where’s your water?”

“ ‘Mm all out, but there’s a mug on the desk.” You unfold your limbs and push yourself up off the floor with one hand on the bed. The mug in question has a cat face on it and the handle is meant to look like a tail. Nepeta probably loves it. On your way to the sink, you see that she has a matching one. When you get back, Roxy has a bag of pretzels next to her and you are quick to steal some. Your palm husk buzzes and you pull it out to see that Karkat is trolling you.

carcinoGeneticist [CG] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

[CG] YOUR MOIRAIL IS ASKING ME WEIRD QUESTIONS.

[TA] define weird.


[CG] ANY THOUGHTS ON THIS AUDITORY BASED LINE OF QUESTIONING I’M BEING SUBJECTED TO?

[TA] ii may have an idea of why he ii2 a2kiing you that.

[TA] a theory iif you wiill.

[CG] DO ENLIGHTEN ME.

[TA] ii’m 2ure iin your mu2iing2 2omewhere you have iit noted that human2 really liike two have their hair played wiith two a ridiculou2 degree liike 2ome kiind of bark or meow bea2t.

[CG] IT HAS BEEN COVERED IN SEVERAL MUSING SESSIONS MUCH TO THE DELIGHT OF MY CO-AUTHOR AND HER HYPERFIXATION.

[TA] cool.

[TA] ii could be wrong, but ii thiink dave ha2 wiildly good heariing, and hii2 neck 2eem2 pretty 2en2iitiive, 2o my u2er experience may not be typiical.

[CG] OH PLEASE DO GO ON ABOUT YOUR MOIRAIL’S EROGENOUS ZONES. I AM JUST DYING TO KNOW WHAT SENSATIONS DAVE FINDS PLEASING.

[TA] wow.

[TA] how about we don’t call them that.

[TA] anyway he wa2 telliing me whiile we were iin the piile that the 2ound feel2 niice.

[TA] he 2aiid that the 2ound 2ometiime2 made iit feel liike nail2 runniing over hii2 2calp.

[CG] WAIT SO HE MEANS IT PHYSICALLY FEELS LIKE THAT? LIKE SOME KIND OF SYNESTHESIA RESPONSE?

[TA] ii diidn’t iinterrogate hiim about iit.

[TA] ii wa2 a liittle bu2y at the tiime 2tupefying hiim wiith the2e newfound power2 becau2e ii’m hopele22ly pale and you freaked hiim out by walkiing iin on u2.
FIRST OF ALL, NOT MY FAULT. YOU WERE IN *MY* ROOM. SECONDLY, YOU REALLY ARE. AND ALL THESE YEARS YOU'VE BEEN TEASING *ME* ABOUT BEING A HOPELESS ROMANTIC. YOU TWO HAVE BEEN CONNECTED AT THE HIP. EVEN WHEN YOU AREN'T DOING SHIT, THERE YOU ARE IN MY ROOM, SOMETIMES NOT EVEN DOING THE SAME ACTIVITIES, JUST THERE.

BUT BACK TO HIS WEIRD HUMAN PALE THING. WERE YOU REALLY ABLE TO PACIFY HIM WITH YOUR VOICE?

I did try the voice thing and that yielded an interesting response that I will definitely use or exploit later but what liquefied his brain was my purring.

HMM I DON'T THINK I KNOW ANY OTHER TROLLS WITH A HUMAN MOIRAIL. AT LEAST NOT WELL ENOUGH TO COMPARE FINDINGS.

I if if aiid iin your ob2e2iiive re2earch iit would appear that the effect iilinked to proximity.

HE'S MUMBLING AGAIN. SOMETHING ABOUT FRISON. WHAT THE HELL IS FRISON?

I can look into it later if you want.

IT COULD BE AN INTERESTING ADDITION TO THE MUSINGS. AS FAR AS I KNOW, HUMANS DON'T HAVE A PACIFICATION FUNCTION ON PAR WITH SHOOSH PAPS.

Have you checked reddiiit?

There i2 no way there ii2n't a 2ubreddiiit for thii2.

I DON'T KNOW HOW REDDIT WORKS AND AT THIS POINT I'M AFRAID TO ASK.

how are you of all people not on reddiiit?

whatever ii'll check for you.

talk two you later ii'm chiilliing wiith roxy.

GROSS.

2crew you

twinArmageddons [TA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

You look up from your phone and see Roxy throwing back something out of a plain silver flask. She used to have a nicer one, but she lost it a while back during the summer. “Messaging Dave?” She teases. The flask goes back in her sylladex, followed by her laptop, and she takes to lying on the floor.

“Karkat. It was about Dave though.” You join Roxy on the floor. “He's asking him weird questions and Karkat wanted to know what was up with it.” Ugh, maybe the floor was a bad idea. Yeah, no, this feels bad. You put your hand to your chest and sit up. There is a pang somewhere around your sternum and you take a deep breath.

“You good?” She asks. You nod. You're fine. Totally. "What is that, like twice this week?” It's the
"Yeah."

"How're you fucking that up s'bad?" she asks. You shrug. You really have no idea how you keep managing this. You don't think you're doing anything different. You've smoked this regularly before...well maybe not every day for such an extended period. That is a little new. You remember when this used to be a weekend thing. That might need to happen again. "You needa lay off that shit for a while, Sol. Iss a bit counterproductive if it juss makes you feel like shit half the time." She is totally right, but you aren't going to give her the satisfaction.

"Like you're one to talk."

"Hey, I'm not the one sitting on the floor breathing funny!"

"Mhm, because your floor activity of choice is blacking out."

"Oh, there's plenty a other things I'd rather be doing on this floor." She looks pointedly at you. That was a low blow and you know she knows it, but she isn't backing down on it.

"Fuck off."

"You fuck off, iss my room." You sigh and lean to rest your forearms on your knees. This argument too quickly became stupid so you let her have the last word. You do not, however, 'fuck off'. You stay very much put. "So what weird shit was Dave askin' 'bout? Can I shame him?."

"Just about pale stuff, but like, human-troll specific. Karkat is kind of the go-to for that."

"I dunno, Nep may've beena better choice."

"Oh gog no, Nepeta does not need to be up in my love life any more than she is. I know you two talk about me."

"Me? Never." Roxy says, poorly feigning innocence. There is a long pause in your conversation and you start to think about ways to start it up again, because it was pleasantly distracting, until she sits up on her elbows. "Hey, Sol?" Her voice is suddenly quieter.

"Hm?"

"I'mma throw up." You get to your feet and help her to hers. "Come keep me company." She didn’t have to ask, you were going to anyway.

"That was the plan." You say, following her to the bathroom. You steal a hair tie off of Nepeta’s dresser as you pass by it and hand it to Roxy so she can pull her hair back and out of the way. It should probably concern you how normal this is, but she has her vices and you have yours. You chill in the empty tub while she does her thing. The slightly reclined angle is perfect and you find yourself feeling a bit better. You can't remember when you started feeling guilty about this. However, you do remember when you became very aware of just how guilty you feel about it. You threw out the excuse that he was too fucked up already at the time, but there is no fucking way you're letting Dave try this. You would hate yourself even more than you usually do if this happened to Dave because of you. Damn it, you have a problem, don't you? You look over at Roxy. You wonder if she thinks that. It doesn't really matter. You're going to do it again because you can’t help yourself and because part of you is still convinced you can be more reasonable about it. That, and at the end of the day, you're always each other's go-to for getting fucked up. There is something special about it. You don’t want to lose that.
When Roxy’s done she comes to sit by you, leaning against the tub, letting her head fall back against the rim. “Sollux, it wasa real dick move’a me.”

“What was?”

“When I said bout the floor, bout doing you on the floor,” there is a small laugh before her expression returns to one of remorse. “Was mean. I know you’re working through some shit.” You hadn’t expected her to apologize, but you’re glad she did. The two of you are usually pretty good about not stepping over lines when you bicker.

“Thanks.”

“I know you don’t wanna get into it, and I don’t want you to cuz’that’s Dave’s turf, but like…” she pauses like she’s trying to remember where she was going with this. “...like you do want to touch me right? Iss, not me?” You hang your arm over the edge of the tub, tap her arm, and make a grabby gesture with your hand. Her head lolls to the side as she reaches up to take your wrist as you take hers, and you can better see her face. She’s heading into sad-drunk territory. It’s usually shortly after this that she’s messaging Dirk. You wonder if they know that they are basically moirails.

“It’s not you, Roxy. I do want to touch you, so badly. I’ve thought about it--”

“In a sexy way?” she interrupts with a devious smile. You chuckle.

“Sometimes.” This time it’s you pausing to remember where you were going with this. “There’s just...something happened to me and--” She whips around to face you with a look on her face that tells you that you could have worded that better because now she’s thinking the worst, because of course she is.

“M’sorry, I thought that was maybe--” She looks like she’s going to cry.

“No, no, Roxy, no, not that.” she settles down a bit and you watch relief turn to confusion on her face; she’s an open book when she’s this drunk. “Nobody did anything...in that way...without asking...it’s just...” You can’t tell her and you can’t think of a way to tell her without actually telling her. “It’s complicated and I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t even know if I can talk to Dave about it.” It is definitely something that has crossed your mind, but you’re moirallegiance is too new and Dave is too inexperienced to handle something like that. You don’t want to scare him off. He hasn’t seen you at your worst yet. He’s seen you depressed, sure, but not in a full-blown episode. You’ve been pretty good about keeping that in check. That’s kind of been the whole point of smoking. Or at least it was originally. It was a way to safely bring you back down from mania and to keep you floating when you were about to sink into a depressive episode. It actually started because of the mania. The first one after you got out of the hospital and refused to go back. Karkat was a hot second away from having you committed, but Mituna shared his weed with you to keep you out of there. Which he really really isn’t supposed to do because it is grounds to get his license for it revoked, but he is going to check anyway as long as he buys a consistent amount. You got lost in your thoughts and resurface to Roxy jostling your arm. It makes you jump.

“Welcome back,” She says, looking back at you from where she has returned to leaning against the tub.

“Yeah.”

“Are you ‘n Dave going to blend?” The question feels sudden, but maybe you missed the segway while you were thinking.
“Quadrants?”

“No, fruit smoothies. Yes, quadrantsss.”

“I don’t know. I haven’t talked to him about that yet. We’ve only been going out for...ummm...less then a month or something.”

You had actually forgotten about that. Dave is human and humans are usually monogamous. Then again, he might not consider moirallegiance to be in the same category as being his boyfriend. That thought sends a pang through you. You hope he doesn’t think lesser about how you feel about him. You have a lot of feelings about him. However, if he does see you that way, like a boyfriend, then he more than likely will want to blur into the red quadrant. The same quadrant that you and Roxy frequently occupy, because let’s face it, you don’t so much flip as you let her take up both. Heh, she has two of your quadrants. Of course. Regardless, you’re still going to call her your kismesis no matter what. But as for Dave, you’re not sure how you feel about being physical with him in a sexual way versus a sensual way.

“Can you lemme know when ya know?”

“Yeah….what if he does?”

She shrugs. “’s only fair.”

“It really isn’t.”

“No, but like…it is. Dave doesn’t know dick ‘bout quadrants.”

“He plays dumb, but I’m pretty sure that’s mostly to piss off Karkat.”

“You guys’re good for each other. I can deal. Iss not THAT weird.” You’re about to continue to argue that, traditionally speaking, he has to get her expressed consent for this, but then again, technically the quadrant you two would be hypothetically blurring into isn’t hers. So, she is kind of right. “I call first dibs though.”

“Dibs on what?”

“Railing you s’good you forget your name.” The things that fly out of her mouth. You love it. It has you cracking up and your laughter makes her laugh too.

==> Be Dave

  turntechGodhead [TG] has added ectoBiologist [EB] to their chumroll

  turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB]

  [TG] john what the fuck

  [TG] i thought we had something special

  [EB] whoops.

  [EB] really i thought i gave you my new handle.

  [EB] so, how has school been over there with our east coast friends?
It's been an interesting couple of months all kinds of different than what I'm used to in all the best of ways and it whoa wait Hal are you filtering Egbert's new handle

Yes, Dave. There was a 100% chance you would contact him at some point in the near future, so I preemptively reestablished the encrypted connection with his new user information.

Jegus okay so now that I'm done shitfing myself over here

Hey, Hal!

Hello, John. You should really clear your browser history.

dude it's not like you're gonna bookmark it just use incognito mode there is nothing in my history like that, Hal. Quit implying I'm not smart enough to hide my excellent taste in pornography.

Anyway

It's furry porn.

Gross no way. It is not furry porn.

Anyway

My mistake, I believe the correct term for the reptilian variant is scalie.

I am not into cartoon animals. I have standards.

Well I guess we were talking about John's porn habits now cause that's exactly how I pictured catching up with my best friend would be yep

I don't know man I hear there is big money in those furry commissions and you don't make those dolla dolla bills that cash money on substandard fetish art

You would be surprised what people will pay for.

How the hell would you know

DO NOT ANSWER THAT

didn't Dirk used to do art commissions?

I have lost control of this conversation I'm tapping out have fun talking with dirty circuits over here

No wait!

hal, fuck off and let me catch up with Dave.

Well, since you asked so nicely.

so what were you saying before?
[TG] fuck if i know
[EB] uh, you were saying something about it being better?
[TG] yeah it is hells of different but in a good way like this whole in person friendship thing with multiple people is blowing my goddamn mind
[TG] i hung out with geez what was it 6 people on halloween and we were just chillin in this juggalos house getting trashed and playing mario party and then went to an arcade
[TG] stupid amounts of normal
[EB] you're hanging out with juggalos?
[TG] not directly
[TG] solluxs brothers monorail is one of those clown religion trolls
[EB] that's roxy's boyfriend right?
[TG] nah theyre all spadesy
[EB] right, i think i remember her mentioning that. i don't know how she does that. i couldn't do quadrants. dating someone who is also dating someone else is so weird.
[TG] eh its not that weird plus allspice is barely a romantic thing and monorail alignment is way different than hate dating
[EB] wow when did you become a quadrant expert?
[TG] im going to place the blame firmly on my roommate he never shuts the fuck up about all this quadrant stuff and is always picking a romcom on movie night
[EB] hahaha you and your roommate have movie night?
[TG] what no its a group thing with us roxy nepeta and sollux
[TG] nepeta is roxys room mate
[EB] oh, that's pretty cool actually. i'm glad you get along with your roommate. mine is okay but we don't really have any similar interests. he's super into that fiduspawn game and plays d&d. he will go on and on about the campaigns sometimes though and it's super annoying, but he's always saying what low self-esteem he has so i just let him talk.
[EB] oh he also raps...badly. it makes your stuff sound good.
[TG] are you implying that my raps are not in fact the most sicknasty shit that has ever graced your ears
[EB] well...
[TG] ive got assloads of fans you know its a burden really i can barely walk down the street without people prostrating before me
[EB] what a cross to bear.
[TG] damn straight skippy

[TG] hold up rose is messaging me

tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

[TT] So, I heard from Kanaya that you and Sollux had some pile time.

[TG] that gossipy bitch

[TT] I'll thank you kindly to not refer to my girlfriend as a bitch.

[TG] i was referring to karkat

[TG] wow rose do you really think i would ever call kanaya a bitch

[TT] I'll admit I was a bit taken aback by it, but let us not get distracted from the topic of you, your moirail, and your progress embracing this thing we call emotions.

[TG] i believe they are pronounced emojis

[TT] In all seriousness, has this moirail arrangement been beneficial to you? It would be foolish of me to think that your coming up here would erase all you've been through, and the idea of you having a stronger support network is reassuring.

[TT] No offense to Dirk. He has made a lot of progress.

[TT] Additionally, I am certain you're tired of me digging around in your brain. I'll give someone else a turn.

[TG] but youre so good at finding and pointing out the sheer capacity my mind has for dick references

[TG] and who could even come close to the way you keep finding new and more creative ways to trap me in horrifyingly freudian rambling loops

[TT] I am a difficult act to follow, but I have a fair quantity of confidence in Sollux. Kanaya says he has experience with feelings but won't elaborate on it.

[TG] hes bipolar

[TT] I see.

[TT] So you two have indeed been sharing. Surely you returned his gesture and held yourself equally vulnerable.

[TG] hold on john is blowing me up

[EB] daaaaave

[EB] daaaaaaaave
[EB] pause your one-sided therapy session. i have class soon.

[TG] why on earth would you take a saturday class that is practically sacrilegious

[EB] it was the only slot left and the class is mandatory. I would have waited on it, but i've heard that the teacher who does the spring semester is a real hard ass.

[TG] ill let it slide this time but dont let me catch you sullying the good name of saturday again after all its done for you growing up in the mythical land of suburbia

[EB] anyhoo, oh hey, have you met rose in person yet?

[TG] yeah shes at a different school but her girlfriend is my roommates moirail so i tagged along when he went down to see her

[TG] how long till you have class

[TG] shes messaging me again and there is nothing juicier than romantic pursuits for her to pick apart my brain with lets bet on how many time i incriminate myself

[EB] romantic pursuits? did you finally get a girlfriend?

[TG] i fucked up

[TT] What could you have possibly done in the sixty seconds since we last spoke?

[TG] what i do best

[TG] opened my damn mouth and stuck my foot waaaay the fuck on in there just kept cramming it down until i kicked my own ass

[TT] How very descriptive, however, I will need a less vague elaboration.

[TG] i was mocking you no offense and mentioned how you have your psychobabble talons in my love life

[TT] None taken.

[TT] How did John reply that leads you to believe that you have fucked up?

[TG] he asked if i finally had a girlfriend

[TT] That's it?

[TG] what do you mean thats it

[TG] you know how john is

[TG] hes firmly situated inside that average box

[TT] He didn't seem to have a problem with me dating Kanaya. What makes you think he would have a problem with you dating Sollux?

[TG] i dont know we used to rip on each other so much about being gay and i know he doesnt have
a problem with it exactly its more like he just cant see the scope of shit

[TG] this would be so much easier if i were gay because thats easy to explain thats a one-word answer that people know what its about done and done but no my deal has to be way the fuck out there

[TT] I've told you before that there is a word for that.

[TG] yeah and nobody knows what that is so ill just wind up explaining it anyway

[TG] man hes messaging me

[TG] im really not feeling this conversation thats about to happen

[TG] oh sweet problem solved he logged off

[TT] Ah yes, because him logging off completely erases the existence of that conversation and you will never have to confront it in the future.

[TT] Perhaps you should have this conversation with Sollux first now that the opportunity to do so has presented itself.

[TG] i guess

[TT] later though

[TG] hows your gay wizard fiction coming along?

[TT] I've been revising the first half of the rough draft and making a lot of changes. Over the course of writing it, I've had a wealth of new ideas for the plot as well as some more minor additions.

[TG] im all ears

[TG] just call me fucking dumbo

[TG] lay those gay wizards on me

[TG] no homo

==> Sollux: Sober up with some coffee

You've reached a state of sobriety that has enabled you to retrieve coffee from the cafe and now find yourself gently touching down on the roof. You sit in your usual spot and think about the conversation you had with Roxy not long ago before you left her with Nepeta. You should probably have that talk with Dave soon. You haven’t been going out for long, but maybe it’s better to have that conversation sooner than later. What if he wants more than you can give him? You’re already hopelessly attached, but if worse came to worst, better now than later.

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling turntechGodhead [TG]

[TA] hey.

[TG] sup

[TA] are you bu2y?
not really rose is just telling me about her gay wizard novel that will doubtlessly be the focus of a book burning one day

its actually a goal of hers

do you have a minute to talk about something?

um yeah sure is something up

2ort of

should i come up there

maybe.

thii2 may be ea2iier thii2 way thought.

well thats not a concerning statement at all i feel so assured about the conversation that is about to unfold

your call.

He doesn’t answer for a while and you’re starting to get concerned until you hear him coming up the ladder. He has that forced, completely blank expression on his face that you know means he’s hiding something. He sits down next to you, but with enough distance between you so that you aren’t touching, and his hands are jammed into his hoodie. He seems stiff and nervous, and you really can’t blame him for it. The only way it could have sounded worse was if you said ‘we need to talk’. “So, what’s up?”

“I was talking to Roxy before and she brought something up,” you say, keeping your gaze locked on the coffee cup in your hands. “I hadn’t given it much thought, and I probably should have.” You turn the cup in your hands. “At some point, you’re probably going to...I mean...unless you intend to...humans don’t usually do quadrants, but they usually take trolls as matesprites if they do date them, but we’re moirails, and I don’t know how you see that or if you intend to date someone else too or--”

“Whoa wait, hold up,” he says, placing a hand on your shoulder. You were starting to ramble a bit fast there, weren’t you? “What’s this all about?” You take a deep breath and exhale.

Moirails don’t do sexual things unless they’re blurring quadrants.”

“And?”

“And I don’t know if you assumed we were going to do that or not. Roxy also wanted to know.”

“Oh.” He lets his hand fall away and puts it back in his hoodie. “Is that something that weirds you out or was it something you wanted to do?” He doesn’t look at you when he asks. Not that you’re looking at him either, but you can tell he’s looking straight ahead from your view of him in your peripheral vision.

“I don’t know if I want that. It’s complicated.”

“Same.” His answer surprises you and has you looking up at him.

“What do you mean?”
“What do YOU mean?”

“I asked you first.”

“Well, I asked you second.”

“That’s a really complicated issue and it isn’t something I’m ready to talk about.” He softens at your blunt honesty and turns to look at you.

“I’m going to preface this by saying I absolutely loathe this conversation. Not our conversation specifically. I loathe the words about to leave my mouth. I’ve had this conversation once in real life, but waaaaay too many times in my head. I fucking hate it.” You really aren’t sure what to think about that. You fiddle with your coffee cup. “Okay, so, uggh, human sexuality is all a huge pile of shit. It’s not so simple or absolute as a lot of people think it is, or ACTIVELY think it is, or maybe it is for them, I don’t know. A lot of junk about the subject gets shoved into our brains from movies and stuff while we’re just dumb kids.”

“What are you saying?” you ask when Dave comes to a pause.

“I guess what I’m saying is, okay so trolls it’s pretty much a free for all, so I’m guessing you haven’t spent much time thinking about this for different reasons, but for humans there is this assumed default that really isn’t a default, and this mindset that if you even think about peeking behind the curtain it’s already too late. Even then though the media likes to slot every fucking thing into this neat little box that you can check off, put a nice neat little label on there and call it a day, super convenient, don’t have to explain a damn thing when people ask, and that’s cool and all if you fit real snug in there. My brother is firmly seated in the gay zone, a regular no girls allowed club, two dudes sitting in a hot tub right the hell next to each other because they’re gay as fuck, but…” Dave takes his hands out of his hoodie to let them hang in the air before dropping to his sides. “It isn’t that simple, or maybe I’m just weird or messed up, I sure as shit have the experiences to justify it, who knows. I just figure the entire porn industry can’t be thriving on irony alone.”

“I’m still not sure exactly what you’re getting at.” You set your coffee aside somewhere way off to your right where you won’t knock it over and turn to give Dave your full attention.

“Right, okay, look, so when you look at Roxy, you think she’s hot right? That’s one of the primary reasons you’re with her.”

“Well, yeah, I find her attractive for more reasons than that, but I do think she’s hot.”

“I don’t. I mean, not Roxy specifically. God damn it. I don’t think of anyone that way. I don’t know what that is.” You aren’t exactly a scholar in human sexuality, but you’ve sat through enough of Karkat’s extended rambling theories that you think you’ve got this one. This whole quadrant blurring thing might not be a problem after all. Then again, if you’re right, this would completely eliminate the faint thought that you might be able to work through certain things with Dave in a more delicate way than you could with Roxy. You aren’t even sure if you want that, but it was nice to have the option theoretically present.

“So you’re asexual?”

He sighs deeply and hides his face in his hands. “No.” Well, so much for that. You’re back to square one. “It’s not that simple. Shit okay. We’re gonna get real TMI up in here. There’s no way around it, no going back now, we’ve gone too far. The radio star is dead in an alley, shot point blank by Viacom.” You don’t catch that reference and don’t ask because knowing Dave it may not be entirely relevant anyway. He picks his head up just enough to look at you from the corner of his eye before
hiding his face again. You see the slightest of twitches in his posture. He’s hesitating you think. You scoot closer to him, figuring he can always move away or tell you to back off if that wasn’t actually what he wanted. He doesn’t though, instead, he leans against you. “I’m not some celibate weirdo eunuch. My dick sees action. My imagination is active and present, and not just on special occasions. There’s a drive there, just not in response to tits and ass, or whatever. What are people into, abs? I don’t know. That’s not to say I don’t have aesthetic preferences. You aren’t hard to look at by a long shot. I would even go so far as to say easy on the eyes. But appearance isn’t what I think about when I’m having some me time. The compass that is my libido does not point north, it only points at, shit I don’t know, it’s Jack Sparrow’s compass. My dick has the directional sense of Jack Sparrow’s compass.”

“CAPTAIN Jack Sparrow.”

“That is the best fucking way you could have possibly reacted to that. Super appreciate how you completely ignored what I implied there.” It takes you a second, and honestly if he hadn’t said anything you probably wouldn’t have noticed, and even now you aren’t sure if he really meant it or if it only accidentally came off like a vague admission of thinking about you in a particular fashion. “Anyway, back to my dick. It may not know what hot is, but I’m still attracted to people, just selectively, and in a different way that I can’t describe because I lack a frame of reference to do so. It’s like someone who’s colorblind and can kind of see red but not really. They know their red isn’t red red. It’s still red, but they can’t tell you why it’s different because they can’t perceive what they’re comparing it to. On top of that mountain of crap, I don’t know exactly how much of that I actually want versus how much is just fun to think about.” A smile threatens your face, but you’re going to play this straight because you’re an asshole. Thank you Karkat.

“So, you’re demisexual.”

“What!?” He immediately pulls away from you, making full eye contact (you assume) with the most incredulous look on his face, before standing up and wandering in circles with his hands on his head. “Oh my fuck. Are you serious? Do you mean to tell me--? who--? how-- ? Did I just completely humiliate myself for nothing? I could have said two god damn words and you would have been like ‘Cool story, bro. Let’s just put each other on a soft maybe’? Are you kidding me? Rose will never let me live this down. You just airdropped enough ammunition to last her for years, maybe even the rest of my natural life. She’s now captain of the s.s. ‘I told you so' with full clearance from the president to shoot my plane down. Thanks, Obama.” You know most if not all of this is rhetorical, but you feel the need to have some kind of response.

“You do know Karkat is my best friend right?”

Dave makes an unintelligible noise of frustration.

“I mean, I’ve tuned out about eighty percent of it, but I do sometimes pay attention. With all his fascination with quadrants and interpersonal bullshit do you really think he would have missed moirallegiance compatible sexualities? Honestly, I have no idea why he isn’t majoring in some sort of humanities thing.”

“This is who I am, my modus operandi, I am a one-man verbal slapstick routine of hilarious self-incrimination and embarrassing admissions.” Dave finally stops circling the roof only to lie face down on it. “I’m just gonna stay here for a while on the ground, don’t mind me.” You roll your eyes and make your way over to him.

“Dave,” you say, giving him a nudge with your foot. “Dave, come on. It wasn’t that bad.”

“It was the worst.”
“You’re being dramatic.”

“I don’t know, man. This seems like a perfectly valid reaction to me.” You sigh and lie down on the roof next to him.

“Look what you’ve made me do. I’ve stooped to your level,” you say, nudging him again. He picks his head up to look at you. You give his sleeve a tug, then a harder tug, and he scoots over like it’s some big effort before cozying up to your side. “Roxy wanted to know. What do you want me to tell her?”

“Whatever,” he says with a shrug. “As long as you make me sound at least fifty percent less pathetic.” The word has an odd amount of bite to it when he says it.

“How about just the soft maybe part?”

“That works.” You’re laying there for a moment before he speaks again. “Are you okay with that? You said it was complicated before.”

It’s your turn to shrug now. “Yeah, it’s complicated for a vastly different reason.” The silence returns and you start aimlessly running your fingers through Dave’s hair. He’s toying with the hem of your shirt, here and there his knuckles graze your skin. This is nice. You need this. The platonic, semi-platonic in the colloquial sense, contact. It’s soothing in a way words can’t do.

“We’re gonna be late for movie night if we stay up here much longer.” Right, you moved movie night again. Karkat is picking the movie this week. Something that was recommended to him, but that he hasn’t seen. You make a whine of protest, but start moving anyway. You’re by the ladder when Dave stops and turns around to face you. His mouth hangs open like he’s going to say something, but closes when he changes his mind. You think he’s about to continue down the ladder, forgetting the whole thing, but instead, he pulls you closer by the front of your hoodie. It’s only the second time he’s kissed you, and you can feel the nervous energy that comes off of him, but it’s endearing in a way. He wants to kiss you badly enough to push past that. When you break back apart there is a beat where you stand still close and unmoving before the world starts to turn again and you continue to make your way inside. He climbs down and expects you to follow, but you’re already there and waiting when he turns around. “Cheater.”

“It’s not cheating, it’s efficiency.”

The walk there is uneventful aside from the way your hands bump into each other a few times. Maybe he’s in debate about reaching out for yours. It would seem he’s decided against it by the time you approach the door and he shoves them into his pockets. As per usual Roxy has the forbidden popcorn all set to go. Dave pulls cheese-its clearly ganked from the cafeteria out of his sylladex and throws them to Nepeta who catches them with a “Yesss.”

“Ah, I forgot my AJ. Back in a flash.” Dave says before making for the door. You take a seat on the couch next to Roxy. Her hair is still damp, you assume from the shower, and is a little strange to see without its normal bounce.

“He said a soft maybe,” you say in a hushed voice aside to her.

“Hm? Oh, oh, right.” She looks up at you and starts brushing away something from your hair and then your sideburns. “You’ve got crud in your hair.” You lean forward and ruffle the little bits of roofing out, although she seems to have gotten most of it. When Dave returns he plops down next to you and kicks his feet up on the coffee table as he cracks open his apple juice.
“So what’re the mewvie choices this week?” Nepeta asks, getting cozy on the other side of Roxy.

“Historical Alternian War Romance,” Karkat says as he’s setting up the movie to stream to the TV. “In which two rivals compete to earn their place among the ranks of the threshecutioners while remaining oblivious to their clearly imminent kismesitude until they must fall into cahoots at which point a jealous third party tries to auspicticize. Rated for trolls ages 8 sweeps and up for bad language, implied heretical views, and graphic violence. The other option is Sweeney Todd because I found it on the sidewalk.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna hard pass on Sweeney Todd,” Dave casually objects before grabbing a handful of popcorn. He tosses a piece in the air and catches it in his mouth.

“Why? I thought it was supposed to be pretty good.”

“It’s just another Burton movie where he pays Johnny Depp to romance his wife in some kind of creepy Burtonesque setting with a blue filter, and way too many musical numbers.”

“My vote is on the war romance,” Roxy seconds quickly and definitively.

“Alright, I guess we’ll watch that then. I was more into that one anyway.” Karkat shrugs, brings up the movie on the screen, and kills the lights. There is a lot of exposition at the beginning, but once the movie gets going it is pretty good. Roxy keeps leaning over to ask Nepeta questions and Karkat just can’t help but jump into the conversation. They talk over the movie at parts, but you don’t particularly care because Dave has slowly moved, at a glacial pace, to sit close enough to you so as to suggest that he maybe wants to cuddle without fully committing to the action. It’s adorable. You throw your arm around him and pull him in. The movie is about two thirds the way through when the battle they’ve been leading up to happens. It’s shot really well and you feel Dave pick his head up off your shoulder to better appreciate it. The special effects look like they are largely if not completely practical instead of CGI. You have always thought that looked better despite your love affair with computers. Suddenly something seems amiss. Dave keeps flinching. It’s subtle like he’s trying not to. You wouldn’t have noticed if he weren’t right up against you. You look at him out of the corner of your eye. His expression is stone and his gaze is locked forward on the screen as swords clash and the heroes press forward. There is a gurgled scream and you reflexively glance back at the movie to see a generic bad guy on the receiving end of a near beheading. Dave goes absolutely rigid and a split second later he is on his feet and out the door.

“What the…?” You ask quietly to no one in particular.

“Go after him.” Roxy tries to be discreet, but you’re all very much within earshot of each other and the comment catches Karkat and Nepeta’s attention. “Go.” She clearly knows something you don’t and the poorly hidden concern on her face has you getting to your feet and chasing after Dave who has more than a good headstart on you. However, there are probably only two places he could be heading. He either went to his room or the roof. You were going to check the latter first, but when you get to the window, it’s locked from the inside. Room it is then. You grab for the handle and turn, but it doesn’t budge, of course it doesn’t budge. You don’t know why you expected the door to be unlocked, they all automatically lock when they close. Dave is nowhere to be seen, but his shoes are in the middle of the floor, and the shower is running. Okay…..little weird. You approach the door and knock. “Dave?” The bathrooms are shared between rooms, so it may not be him in there and you don’t need to be walking in on anyone. There isn’t a response so you knock louder. “Dave? You in there?” There still isn’t a response. “I’m coming in, okay?” This door is different than the main one and it might not be the same as the one you have. It’s going to be a bitch to open if it’s locked. Luckily it isn’t. “You in here?” It wasn’t exactly on your agenda today to see your moirail naked, but something is wrong, and you’re going to have to pull
back that curtain if he won’t answer you. You really hope it’s Dave in there. You slowly pull it back just a bit, trying to give as much warning as you possibly could on the off chance that it isn’t him. When no shrieks of horror happen, you look inside to see Dave fully clothed, sitting under the spray. His knees are drawn up and he’s hiding his face in one arm while the other further blocks it from view by the way he has his hand over the back of his neck. His shoulders lurch and you realize why he’s here. He doesn’t want anyone to hear him cry.

A series of sad chirps emit from your throat as you make your way to kneel by the side of the tub. “Dave?” He peeks his head out enough for you to tell that he doesn’t have his shades on, but not enough for you to meet his gaze. Alright, he is aware of your presence. You reach for the faucet, but he grabs your wrist. Immediately he lets go, trusting that you got the message. He’s buried in his arms again. This time both of them. You can see his shoulders shaking, but the only thing you hear is the water. “Alright, we can leave the water on.” You know it doesn’t work quite the same way for humans, but you chirp at him anyway and try to coax him out from hiding. He picks his head up enough that you can see his eyes, red on red and a little puffy. Water droplets are quickly collecting on your glasses, so you take them off and set them aside. “If I get you something dry, will you come out? We can leave the water running.” He shakes his head. Maybe this is something of a safe space for him. You guess you’re going in then. You close the curtain back up, pull off your socks, pull back the curtain from the other side, and climb in behind him. When he turns to look at you over his shoulder, you wrap your arms around him. For a moment Dave stills, then when he does move, you think he’s twisting away from you until it becomes clearer that he is trying to turn around in the cramped space. You fall back to recline in the tub, much like you were earlier today, this time with Dave clinging to you. His shoulders heave, but he still doesn’t make any noise, although now that his face is buried in your neck you can hear the stuttered sharp breaths he’s trying so hard to hide. You know it doesn’t work the same way, but the sentiment is there when you gently pap his face. “Something in the movie upset you.” It isn’t a question, simply a jumping point if he decides to take it.

“I thought I was going to watch him die.” His voice cracks when he finally speaks. That’s why he wasn’t saying anything. Not because he couldn’t. Not like what happens to you.

“Who?”

“Dirk.” He holds you tighter, undoubtedly recalling the memory. Even if he didn’t die, for the moment that Dave thought he would, it was all too real for him. You can unfortunately relate. “I know I said it was strifing, but it was so much more than just that.” You hold him and pet his head. “Sollux, it was so fucked up. I idolized him for years. I thought it was normal.” You think he’s talking about Bro now, not Dirk. "It wasn’t and it just got worse and worse. Dirk was all I had." You’re afraid to say anything. If you interrupt him, he might lose his nerve. All you can do is be here for him. "And he…” Dave inhales sharply and lets out an uneasy breath before being able to continue. “Bro tried to kill him, and all I could do was watch.” That resonates. That hits a nerve you don’t want to touch. Your chest ached for him before, but now it hurts. He’s sobbing again into your neck. Not freely, it’s stunted, like it’s something he really doesn’t want to be doing, but can’t stop himself. “He couldn’t come back. I was alone. I was alone with him.” Is that what you saw? Had he not seen Dirk in…in…? You think back to that day, piecing together what you remember them saying. He looked like him. Dirk and Bro look alike. Dave didn’t recognize him. How long had they been apart? How long was Dave alone with a guy who’d slash his own brother’s throat? That’s what it was right?

“The scar on his neck, that’s the one that…” You aren’t sure how to finish the question, but Dave understands it all the same. He nods his head and makes a choked sound as a true sob escapes him before he can stop it. He shakes and you can feel him grimace against your skin, teeth clenched as he’s trying to hold back tears. To think he was there for that. You don’t have the context for it, but
you can’t think that there is a way it could have gone that wasn’t horrific. "I'm sorry," it's all you can think to offer. He's crumbling in your arms, but you're at a loss. You nudge the tap with your foot. The least you could do is keep the water from going cold. All those cracks you saw in him before are fracturing beyond their integrity. It’s somehow both desperate and resistant the way he’s opening up about this. It’s almost like... “Dave, have you ever talked to anyone about this?”

“I couldn’t. He was always watching. Cameras, my computer, stalking me, somehow he always knew.” He’s trying to be quiet, trying to speak as softly as he can, but his voice still waivers and cracks despite his efforts. Even this far away, he’s still hiding. Just like in the alley he fully expects his brother to be there when he turns around. A lot of his idiosyncrasies are falling into place for you. He’s hypervigilant. He’s always hopped up on this undercurrent of fear. “He’d kick the shit outta me if he saw me like this. He will if he finds me.” It hits you then. When you met him, his ribs were bruised and he had an air about him that was fake as hell to hide how shaken he was. This incident itself, you’re not sure when it happened, but the more long-standing problem, the situation he’s running from, that’s fresh. He’s only just escaped this, hasn’t he? That panic attack wasn’t some leftover fragment like the triggers you’ve been left with.

“I won’t let him,” You say as you pap his face again and shoosh him. You hate that this doesn’t do much for him. You can’t play with his hair when it’s wet like this either. You want to comfort him, but you don’t have the words to make things right. You don’t think any exist that could make this better anyway. The only thing you could offer was reassurance that you’d protect him, but you doubt he believes it. Maybe you don’t need say anything. The current mood isn’t exactly one that makes you want to purr; that’s a response to more content situations. Although, it is something you can do on command if you want to, but you don’t really want to. It feels inappropriate. So, you make something up. A pitiful purr. Something just for Dave. Something that resonates similarly from your chest so as to still soothe, but not convey the wrong voice. You hope it works. You have your hand on the back of his neck and your arm around his waist. He stops talking, but the fingers fisted in your sweatshirt loosen their grip. You kick the tap again. The hot water is running out. He sniffs and wipes his face on his sleeve. In the quiet, even to you the ambient noise of the shower and this new purr you’ve drummed up sound calming. You stay like that and after a few minutes, he lets go of your shirt and picks his head up out from the crook of your neck. He’s looking at you. His expression is almost confused. He’s thinking about something, but hell if you can guess what it is. He reaches up and brushes your hair out of your eyes. It’s been there for a while, but you were ignoring it. “The water is cold.”

“You want to get out of here?”

“Yeah.” You kick the tap and the water cuts out. He looks back as if to only just realize you’ve been doing that this entire time. He moves unsteadily to climb off of you and puts his hand to the wall as he stands up. He is absolutely soaked, as are you, and seems to be unsure of how to approach this. You cuff your jeans up to your calves before you stand up and peel off your waterlogged sweatshirt. He follows your lead. You hear the zipper of his hoodie as you wring what you can out of your sweatshirt. The gauze bandage on your arm is ruined, so you pull it off the rest of the way and chuck it at the trash. You miss. The adhesive bandages that were underneath it, however, are still good. You didn't really need the gauze at this point anyway. “What are those?” You look up. He motions to your bare side. You presume at the yellow marks, one on each side of your rib cage about five inches long and shaped like very shallow chevrons.

“Grub scars from when I had six limbs instead of four.”

“That’s so weird.”

“Too you, maybe.”
You step out of the tub and hang your shirt and then his over the curtain rod to drip until you get a chance to dry them, or maybe you should just wash them.

“I did not think this through.” He says standing there with his arms out. He lets them fall back to his side with a wet plop.

“It’s okay. You can wait here. I’ll get you something.”

“Yeah, alright,” he says before looking around and deciding the edge of the tub to be the best place to sit. His closet isn’t far from the door and you find a towel pretty quickly. You ruffle your hair dry enough that it isn’t dripping everywhere and towel off your upper body before tossing it at Dave who stares at it like he forgot towels were a thing. You’re still tracking some water into the room, but you’ll get it later. Right now your objective is to rifle through Dave’s dresser and assemble something that vaguely matches. He really doesn’t have many clothes. You pick up a red and white long sleeve with a broken record on the front, any old jeans, and—okay you know it’s supposed to be card suits on those boxers, but it’s still funny to you. You head back to Dave who has stripped off the wet t-shirt and now has the towel wrapped around his shoulders like a blanket.

“Here, I’ll be right back. Just going to run across the hall and change.” He nods and mutters a soft ‘thanks’. You offer up a smile and close the door for him. You make quick work of picking out clothes for yourself and wrestling out of your wet jeans. It’s late so you just put on pajamas. Hmm, maybe you should have done that for Dave too. Would that have been weird? It’s a moot point because there’s a knock at your door and when you open it, you see that he’s changed into them anyway instead of the jeans you gave him. He hands you your glasses. You had nearly forgotten about them. He even cleaned them for you. “Thanks.” You slip them on your face and step aside, shutting the door behind him.

“Sorry, I freaked out. It was all hell of uncool,” he says, looking away from you with his hands in his pockets.

You snort and move to lean against your desk. “First off, I have never thought you were cool. In fact, when I first met you I thought you were the walking essence of douchebag, which I later revised to dumbass because you were mercilessly and obliviously hitting on me.” He has a guilty smile on his face. He’s definitely reflected on these interactions. “Secondly, I am such a high key disaster. You could go completely off the rails and it wouldn’t phase me.” You pity this idiot so much.

“Sollux, you aren’t a high key disaster, low key at most,” he says with the kind of delicate smile you’d expect him to have after something so emotionally exhausting.

“You only say that because you have yet to see me at peak crazy.” You’re making light of it, but you feel it coming. You’re doing what you can to keep it at bay. If you can just last through finals you’ll be good. You can spend break being useless and then start the cycle all over again. He rolls his eyes at you. You can just barely see it with how his shades are less opaque in the low light.

“I think I’m done for the day.”

“Shit like that will tire you out.”

“No kidding.”

“If you want to make a pile about that later, just let me know. By that I mean barge into my room and start throwing shit on the floor as ya do.” It gets a small laugh out of him. He stands there a moment staring at the floor before he finally gets more words out.
“Thanks, though...for, you know...back there. And not that I think you’d go around shouting it or anything, but don’t tell anyone? Especially, Roxy.”

“Confidentially is kind of a core part of moirallegiance. Even if she is your cousin, I’m still not going to talk about my moirail with my kismesis of all people. At least not in that respect.”

“Right, yeah, okay,” He nods a few times and starts heading for the door. “G’night.”

“Night,” you say back. The door clicks shut and it’s just you and the drone of your bees buzzing around. You float up to your bunk and let the day play back in your mind. Dave isn’t the only one left tired. In a way, however, it was cathartic. Your palm husk pings and you look to see that it’s Dave.

\[ \text{turntechGodhead [TG] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]} \]

\[ [TG] <> \]

\[ [TA] <> \]

\[ \text{turntechGodhead [TG] ceased trolling twinArmageddons [TA]} \]
As with the other chapter, I've hidden all the nasty bits in a separate work that is hyperlinked to the >>> Title

>>> Be Dirk

Sparks fly as you cut away parts of Squarewave that are too beat up to be reworked while still attached to him. You have a lot of work ahead of you; he’s really banged up. You’re going to have to bend a lot of him back into shape, weld him back together and blend out the seams. Sawtooth is only slightly better off. You set down the saw and pick up the chunk you’ve just taken off. You know better than to make a jigsaw puzzle for yourself, so you make some notations on the back with a marker.

auto-Responder [AR] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT]

[AR] Dirk, we need to have a conversation.

[TT] What do we need to converse about?

[AR] It is time again to discuss my request to acquire a body. You said when you had the means to do it, you would build me one.

[TT] I did.

[AR] You have the means.

[TT] I have the tools. I do not, however, possess the materials.

You pick up a mallet and test it in your hand before exchanging it for a different one and doing the same. The weigh feels more balanced.

[AR] The sweaty troll is a means of obtaining the materials. He may even have a prototype or a broken robot lying around that you could persuade him to let you scavenge from.

[TT] I’m out of practice. Why do you think I’m working on Squarewave first? He’s the least sentient of all of you. If I fuck up, he won’t notice.

[AR] Do not compare me to Squarewave. We are nowhere near in the same league. The same can be said for Sawtooth.

[TT] Sawtooth is more aware than you think.

[AR] He is basic. He doesn’t even have an internet connection.

You start hammering out the twisted piece of metal. You can’t stick it in the forge just yet in its current shape.
He isn’t supposed to. I designed him to develop independently from foreign input. You should have more respect for him. Your ability to learn is lifted right from his code. He is basically your older brother.

You are deflecting from the subject of this conversation in another attempt to avoid thinking about the consequences of the actions of your younger self. You gave me consciousness. You owe me a body. I want my autonomy.

Hal, against my better judgment, I’m going to be very blunt with you. As of late, you have been increasingly unstable. I may have spoken lightly of it with Equius, but I do honestly believe that you are undergoing another phase of development, synthetic puberty if you will. I am extremely hesitant to grant your request in your current state and would much prefer to wait until you level out. Once I finish putting these two back together we can reevaluate your state of mind and

No, no, no, you can’t do this to me. I want a body. You said you’d give me a body.

Hal, calm down.

Don’t tell me to calm down. This is a serious matter and you’re dismissing it. You’re dismissing me.

I’m not dism

I WILL NOT BE IGNORED.

The words flash in large letters across your vision and your hand slips. “Fuck!” you scream. The math that calculates the volume you intend to speak at wasn’t written with this in mind and it pushes the speaker beyond what it’s made for, causing your cry to turn into screeching static. The metal clatters to the floor, it’s edge now coated in red. You double over, holding your arm close to your body.

I...

I didn’t mean to...

It hurts like hell. There are so many fucking nerves in the palm. It’s warping your ability to tell how bad it is without directly looking. You don’t dare take the pressure off of it yet. Your eyes dart around the room and locate the first aid kit. It’s by the entrance to the workshop where the young-ish troll girl working today is peaking her head in. It’s just you and her in the shop right now. “I heard a noise. Are you alright?” A noise. Your voice is a noise. You try to speak and it comes out crackled and static ridden. “What?” She’s walking toward you, passing right by the first aid kit. You motion your head in an exaggerated manner to the box on the wall. She stops and turns to it. At the sight of what you’re asking for, she moves more urgently, pulling it from the wall and hurrying to you. You chance a look at your arm. There is a lot of blood, but it doesn’t start to gush when you let up on the pressure. Good, you didn’t hit anything major. You flex your fingers. Painful, but they all work. You didn’t sever anything. “It’s so red,” she says in amazement. You look closer at her and gather she is one of the blue blood types. The shop door dings and she looks back toward the sound and then to you. “Are you going to be alright?” You nod. “Okay, yell if you-- oh, umm… I’ll check back in on you in a few.” You nod again and she runs off. You need to clean this up. You’re dripping blood on the floor. You clean your arm up with a sterile pad and get a better look at the damage. It isn’t good, but it looks like your glove took a lot of the damage for you. There is still a pretty good gash in your hand that you will need to sew shut when you get home, but the leather band kept the metal from gouging your wrist and slowed it down enough that it isn’t too bad, by your standards, when it picks up again on your forearm. You start cleaning yourself up, disinfecting, closing your wounds with
several band-aids in place of closures, and throwing some antibiotic ointment on there just in case. Squarewave probably isn’t the picture of cleanliness, which reminds you...

[TT] Do you know when my last tetanus shot was?

[AR] You’re due soon. You should get one while you still have good insurance.

Right, you have that carry over grace period with the good shit before you have to apply for that other one. You start wrapping up your still bleeding hand while you message Jake through your shades. This hurts like a motherfucker and you aren’t fully convinced yet that you didn’t at least nick something important. There is a lot of blood. You aren’t as comfortable with that as you used to be for obvious reasons.

timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering golgothasTerror [GT]

[TT] Don’t freak out.

[GT] You are already giving me quite the concern by saying that.

[TT] Can you drive me to the hospital?

[GT] I’m on my way. Where are you? What’s wrong?

[TT] Chill. I’m at Zahaak’s.

[TT] I cut my hand open fixing Squarewave. I just need a tetanus shot.

[GT] Roger that. I’m leaving post haste. How bad is it?

[TT] It’s fine. I’ll sew it shut when I get home.

[GT] Dirk, that is the very definition of not fine.

[TT] My glove took most of the damage. I’m not bleeding profusely and all my fingers still work.

[GT] YOU HAD TO CHECK?

[GT] Nevermind. I’ll talk to you when I get there.

golgothasTerror [GT] ceased pestering timaeusTestified [TT]

You should message Equius. He would probably want to know you injured yourself in his store.

timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering centaursTesticle [CT]

[TT] Even though I’m off the clock, would you like me to fill out an accident report?

[CT] D --> Elaborate on the exact severity of this accident.

[TT] I cut my hand open. I took care of it myself, but it would be wise of me to get a tetanus shot.

[CT] D --> What is a tetanus shot?

[TT] A tetanus shot is a hypodermic injection administered to humans by a physician preemptively for, or in response to a puncture or laceration received from metal that is thought to potentially have rust on it. It is to prevent complications, such as the affliction commonly known as lockjaw, from occurring as a result. I am up to date on mine, however, it is very nearly up and should be
readministered.

[TT] Now that I think about it, they will probably also want to see to the laceration while I am there.

[CT] D --> I would STRONGLY prefer if you wrote up an accident report. Neigh, I demand it so.

[CT] D --> There are clean towels in the supply closet should you need them.

[CT] D --> Exercise more caution in the future.

[TT] My boyfriend is here to drive me to the hospital. He is rather insistent that I receive medical attention immediately and that I leave the floor for later. Would you mind if I placate him and return later to clean the mess?

[CT] D → This is acceptable provided you lock the workshop door.

   timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering centaursTestical [CT]

   ===> Dirk: Be tended to.

   “Jake, I’ll be fine,” you say in a strained whisper.

   “Mr. Strider, please hold still.”

   “You nearly needed surgery,” Jake fusses.

   “Nearly. Keyword.” The doctor ties off the last stitch, but you only feel the pressure because they numbed up your hand real good.

   “It will be very easy to pop the stitches due to their location. It may be difficult since it’s your right--”

   “He’s left-handed,” Jake interrupts.

   “Ah, well then, that will be easier for him,” She says to Jake before turning her focus back to you.

   “Use your hand as little as possible until the wound fully shuts. It will still be open even after the surface skin appears to have closed while it’s healing.” You know this. She starts wrapping it up. The attention is strange to you. It feels wrong. “What kind of work do you do?”

   “I’m a programmer.” The short answer. It looks to surprise her. You don’t exactly look like a stereotypical computer geek.

   “Keyboards are a no go. You’ll have to go at it single handed. If that isn’t feasible I can write you up an accommodations note.”

   “That would be splendid, Ma’am,” Jake interjects before you can decline. She eyes him and looks to you, but doesn’t say anything about it.

   “Right, I’m going to write you a prescription for some mild painkillers if you need them and get you that note. You can wait with your FRIEND at the checkout desk.” There is room for doubt in the way she says it, or at least you think so. Jake does not appear to hold this opinion and furrows his brows as she exits the room.

   “Don’t let it get to you,” You try to assure him.

   “I was holding your hand when she walked in.” That is true, but maybe she just forgot. You hop off
“Thanks for driving me here. I need to go back to the shop to clean up and get my car, but after that how about we grab something to eat.” Your voice is still strained from trying to yell and it’s harder to get out certain sounds.

“Save your money. I enjoy cooking for you. I enjoy cooking for me.” He flashes that toothy grin at you. “I can make you something that’s easier on your throat too. You sound hoarse today.” He says it like you don’t sound hoarse every day. You don’t deserve him. Taking care of you like this. He’s too good for you. You nod and the two of you walk hand in hand out to the waiting room.

===> Sollux: Let the Wine Hit You

You’re sitting in Roxy’s room in her desk chair with your arm thrown lazily over its back and your feet up on her bed. She’s sitting somewhat perpendicular to you, leaning against the wall, so that you both can use her desk as a table to momentarily set the bottle of wine on that’s passing between you. You really ought not to. Your meds specifically say, on the label, to not do exactly this, but once in a while won’t kill you. At Roxy’s suggestion, since you were still so very much down to be intoxicated with her, but were not looking for a repeat of a few days ago, you’ve opted to lightly crossfade as if it’s somehow a better idea. By that you mean you took one good hit before the two of you started drinking. Prior to that both of you were brushing up on your “Kill Each Other” skills. You assume you’ll be going back to that shortly because, between the two of you, you’ve made a lot of progress on this bottle. You’re very certain that it’s mostly her doing. You are obviously not a very seasoned drinker. Presently, however, the two of you are arguing.

“You can’t posth-sthibly sitheriousthly vouch for that bracket sthtyle,” You say after taking a swig. You’re lisping like a motherfucker.

“You think yours’s better?” She says with a laugh and snatches the bottle out of your hand. You’ll probably let her keep it. You may be good. That and wine...does things to you if you get too sloppy.

“I know mine ith better causthe I sthpend way lessth time hunting down missthing bracketsth. How can you not put them on their own line?”

“It looks like shit.”

“It doesth not AND ith’ functional. PLUSTH they come in pairsth!” You say throwing your hands up.

“You an’ your twos.” She waves you off. “My way's the OG style.”

“That doesthn’t make it good. How’d’you even find your blocksth?”

“At least I use tabs, unlike soooembody.” She leans in closer and looks you in the eye before downing more wine.

“You sthay that like isth a good thing.” You take the bottle back and have one more good swig.

“You sthay that like isth a good thing.” You take the bottle back and have one more good swig.

“Bitch, take that back. Tabs’re the best. Who has time ta mash the spacebar?” She snatches the wine back.

Your move your feet to the floor so you can lean forward and hold up two fingers at her. “You’only need to hit it twice. Four at the mosth.”
“Wha 'bout functions hmmm? Wha about tab then?” She has this smug look like she's trapped you in something.

“Why’d I-- why would I need tab for functionsth?” You lean back in the chair again.

“You space those too don’t you?” She looks at you like you just insulted her grandmother.

“You an’ your damn tabsth. I bet you tab your variablesth too.”

“You DON’T!?” She asks, as if you've never had this exact argument before, while dramatically leaning on the desk in your direction.

“I prefer a giant massth of varsth casthcadng down my sthcreen,” You say as you leer at her. Barely a foot apart, you stare each other down, neither of you willing to surrender. You growl.

“You wanna fucking go, Captor?” She says springing up on her knees, wine bottle in hand and chugging down a good portion before slamming it on the desk like she’s ready to fight you. “Best out of three.” You stand up to match her, but stumble backward because you're pretty drunk.

“Ha!”

“Get bent.” This time you do get to your feet and square up with her. “I’m gonna wreck you.”

“In your wildest dreams maybe.” She winks at you and the shoves you backward. You damn near bust your ass but somehow manage to plant yourself back into the chair. You pull your laptop out of your sylladex and put it on the desk only for Roxy to shove it further down to make room for hers. You glare at her and scoot your chair down.

"Kill off everyone firsth and make them sthpectate?" You ask as you fire up the game and put on your headphones.

"Of course. I wanna'audiance for your ex-cution." The determined smile on her face, the look that promises she's going to try her damnedest to kick your ass, it really lights a fire under you. This game isn't exactly your first foray into the genre, but you haven't been playing it extensively, neither of you have, and the character's level (if you can call it that) is based mostly on the number of matches they play, so you and Roxy still have pretty low-level characters. The mechanic is stupid and doesn't really do much of anything. It might as well be an hours played counter. Nonetheless, some people act like it means something. You both join a game in a higher difficulty and without fail, there's that asshole. You could just play without a mic and mute everyone, but where's the fun in that?

[WW] "Wwho l3t the n3Wwbs in h3r3?"
[HD] "man they gonna get fucking slaughtered"
[DK] "haahaha, are you DuDes for real?"
[MM] "yEaH lIkE fOr ReAl"
[DK] "no, DuDe I mean liKe, Do you really thinK you're gonna taKe out those two?"
[WW] "Wwhat?"
[AS] "oH fucK"

assassInsatiable, they roam a lot of the same games as you and Roxy. She likes their name because it's vulgar and you can't say it.

[WW] "Wwhat?"
[AS] "theY arE /botH/ herE"
[TA] "2up, biitche2."
[HD] "lisp or drunk"
Roxy apparently takes requests. She does indeed kill him first. Once Roxy and you devastate everyone else it's just a matter of finding her before she finds you. Your character doesn't have as much range as hers, but your shields are way better and you're faster. Personally you think Roxy mains a glass cannon, but you won't make the mistake of saying so more than twice. She finds you first and you watch as your character headlessly ragdolls. That only happens on five percent of perfect shots. You don't look at her; you can feel the shit eating grin well enough. The next game you jump into doesn't have anyone you even vaguely know or who knows you, so there is less fanfare when you take her out. This doesn't stop you from turning to look at her with a wide smile that makes your fangs stick out. She squints at you and makes what you call the "tiny mouth" face. It's like an angry pout and it's cute in a feisty way. One more round to go. You enter the next game and recognize the username of someone from the first match. Someone drops their connection and AS jumps in. Good, an audience that is slightly less like yelling into the void. All the better to beat your kismesis.

This is the final round in your little tiff and you both are going all out. Everyone else is dead pretty quick and is left forced to watch you two duke it out. Roxy is really giving you a run for your money. You're actually not sure if you're going to beat her. No, no you are going to lose hard, really hard. Your shields aren't back up yet, you can see her character and you just heard Roxy laugh under her breath. Fuck it. You slam the lid of her laptop shut and abscond to the ceiling with yours.

"You bastard, I was gonna win! I literally had you in my sights." She shouts up at you. You laugh and put your laptop away. "Get your ass back down here!" This is hilarious. She's so ticked off. She jumps up and tries to grab you but she can't reach and when she gets up on the chair you float away so that you are only inches out of her grasp and flip her off. She makes a little growling noise and runs to get something from the closet.

"Hey, no fair," you say as she swats at you with the broom.

"Now you wanna talk 'bout fair?" She has a point. You halt the broom with your psionics and go to drag it up higher where she can't reach it either, but you forget something. Roxy is pretty strong. She doesn't let go. You're not about to just drop her without warning and this proves to be your downfall because she hoists herself up and swings forward to catch you in her legs.

"Shit." It's impressive.

"Gotcha," she says triumphantly as she lets her arms hang loosely over your shoulders.

"Do you now?" She quickly looks around and it seems to dawn on her that you are what's keeping her aloft. You have on the smuggest smirk. She tries to glare at you, but can't keep a straight face. The wine is definitely starting to get at you and the way she has her legs wrapped around your hips certainly isn't doing anything to arouse you any less. It's your psionics keeping her up, but you hold her legs regardless. And maybe also because you want to touch them. Okay, definitely because you want to touch them...maybe run your hands up them...like a lot. You are 100% grabbing her ass
now. You kiss her and she kisses you back hard, her hands braced at either side of your neck, her thumbs brushing against your jaw as if to hold you in place. You float down and a little to the right, then break the kiss to make sure you are where you think you are before you drop you and her to the bed. You land so that you're on top of her. She keeps her legs wrapped around you and you pick up right where you left off, bracing yourself with one arm beside her head while the other runs up her thigh. She has a hand in your hair and the other low on your back. Her fingers dip below the band of your pants as she pulls you close and rocks against you. You grind back against her and easily fall into a steady pace.

"Hot damn," she says breathlessly when you break from kissing her to suck at her neck.

"I want you stho badly." You say it right beside her ear before you nip at it, careful as always.

"I can fuckin' tell." She runs her nails up and down your back and you growl against her neck. "Ya'sure? I mean cause, ya know." She drags her nails across your skin again.

You nod. "I think I can like thisth. Sthome sthuff anyway. An'if it goes sthidewaysth," you laugh, you hope this is going one kind of sideways, "I can, I'ave sthomeone to'go to now." You have Dave now. If you freak the fuck out, you can go to him. You won't get past this if you don't try. You go back to sucking at her neck and she pulls you against her.

You shower together this time and things very nearly get heated all over again, but you really don't like hospitals and being still a bit drunk in the shower and trying to coordinate sexy things is a recipe for disaster. Instead, the both of you settle for getting cleaned up and hanging out under the spray in a lazy embrace for a few minutes before Roxy begrudgingly gets out when you hear a hesitant knock at the main door. She sticks her head out and yells to Nepeta that it's safe to come in this time. You throw a towel at Roxy's face but she catches it and sticks her tongue out at you. You towel off while Roxy ventures out to grab her clothes. You hear her curse and lament the leggings you're thinking you may have put a run in. She comes back in and throws your clothes at your face but you catch them and stick your tongue out at her. She gets dressed and wanders back into her room. You follow only shortly after and are greeted with an 'eep!' from Nepeta.

“'He's still here?!’” She shouts at Roxy while tugging down her hat to hide her eyes as if your mere presence is indecent.

“Well, yeah, you asked if it was okay to come in, not if he was still here.”

“Hey, Nep,” You say with a casual wave. She's turning green. “I'm going to head downstairs for coffee. I have an essay that needs writing. You want me to bring you back one?” You ask Roxy as you look around for your hoodie only to do a double take a moment later when you see that Roxy is wearing it. She's wrapped up in it in a way that makes you think you aren't getting it back in the immediate future.

“Definitely. Oh, and by the way, babe, y'should probably brush your teeth,” she says while shooting you a finger gun. Yeah, that's a thing that needs to happen before you forget. You look at her closet and grab the pinkest most stereotypically girly sweatshirt you can find, one that most vividly says 'I just got laid, die mad about my choice in outerwear', and throw it over your head. The hood apparently has ears. You throw up a spades sign at her before heading out the door and just catch her mashing her hands together to sign it back at you.

===> Be Dave much later

tipsyGnostalgic [TG] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG]
[TG] dave

[TG] i need to burden u with knowledge

[TG] what a suspicious way to start a conversation

[TG] do your worst

[TG] oh i will

[TG] i have no idea what to do with this newly acquired info

[TG] and i feel like it isn't quite dirks cup of tea

[TG] not that he even drinks the stuff

[TG] dirk is more of a check it out I made coffee but used energy drinks instead of water kind of guy

[TG] he has literally done that

[TG] anyway

[TG] i don’t usually talk to him about the sexy times in much detail and i gotta tell someone

[TG] this is about sollux i take it

[TG] yeah this is probably hella tmi

[TG] we mack on the same dude roxy the line is crossed the box is open we are entrenched in this freudian shit

[TG] so

[TG] did ya bang

[TG] no

[TG] but

[TG] dave

[TG] the duality runs deep

[TG] what

[TG] wait do you mean…

[TG] i saw his alien junk

[TG] theres two

[TG] are you telling me that sollux has two dicks

[TG] bulges and yes

[TG] bullshit
[TG] no im deadass serious he has two bulges

[TG] wow

[TG] i dont know what to do with this information

[TG] ikr

[TG] wait yes I do

[TG] what are you doin

[TG] dave?

[TG] oh shit dont you dare

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering twinArmageddons [TA]

[TG] so I hear you have an entire hentai in your pants

twinArmageddons [TA] has blocked turntechGodhead [TG]

[TG] what did you do that sollux just blocked me

[TG] im deeply offended that you think id tell sollux he had an entire hentai in his pants what kind of
guy do you take me for

[TG] omfghdjfkjikjk

[TG] im never gettin the b again

[TG] technically i havent even gotten the b and now i never will thanks dave you single handedly
ruined my sex life

[TG] any time

[TG] ill ttyl i got some shit to do

[TG] see ya

tipsyGnostalgic [TG] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

You look up at Sollux from your place on the floor leaning against his bed. He has a book in his lap
and he’s keeping his place in it with his right hand while jotting down notes with his left. You’ve
noticed he switches back and forth at whim or convenience. It’s really stupid, but you like when he
writes with his left like you do. “So do you really have two bulges or is Roxy fucking with me?” he
stops writing and looks at you.

“Yes,” he answers flatly like a smartass. You see that twitch at the corner of his mouth. He did that
on purpose. You stare at him with a blank expression until he elaborates. “It really isn’t that
uncommon among my blood caste.” No shit, Roxy really wasn’t kidding.

“For real? Damn if that's true I bet y’all have your own damn category on pornhub.”
“I wouldn’t doubt it. Humans are really fucking horny for that kind of shit.” He just called out your entire species and you have zero defense for it. Every time facebook, twitter, or Instagram goes down, searches for tentacle porn go up.

“You just went for blood there and I can’t even be mad about it because it’s a thousand percent true. My species has been frickin dying to bang some aliens for decades.”

“We noticed,” he says with a laugh.

“I still can’t believe the ‘live long and prosper’ thing was taken seriously for so long.”

“How were trolls not supposed to think that was a human custom?”

“True that. It’s still hilarious. But you have to admit, you guys are kind of like Vulcans on the horny for humanity front.” He rolls his eyes at you and shakes his head before going back to his book. You return your attention to your laptop and your homework, but a moment later you feel him looking over your shoulder.

“Why do you have a folder with my name on it?” Oh fuck.

“Ummm, would you believe it’s for no reason?”

“I wasn’t even drunk enough earlier to believe that.”

“You’re still drunk?” he should have sobered up by now.

“No, I sobered up a while ago.” Ah, good. You just misunderstood him. The day drinking did concern you a little. Given the message you got from Roxy, however, you’re thinking she may have had a hand in that. “Don’t change the subject. What is in that folder?” He points to your recent locations on the sidebar. So that’s where he saw it. You open it to reveal a small collection of candid shots, including the very first one you took of him fixing your turntables. He moves to lie on his stomach so he can hang over the edge of the bed and navigate your laptop over your shoulders, changing the view so he can flip through the photos. His head is right next to yours and you nervously and briefly rub your face against his like he’s done to you before. It reminds you of a nuzzle. You suppose it is. It surprised you the first time he did it. You never knew it was a thing, but it makes sense. They do have some kind of sensitive patches in the face area. He returns the action and kisses your temple. “When did you take these?”

“When you weren’t looking, obviously.” He snorts. That’s a good sign. You were and still are a little worried he’s going to be creeped out by this. You swear it isn’t a creepy thing.

“These are pretty good. They’re all just with your phone?” He hasn’t hit the section yet with your shots of him and Mituna being pokemon.

“No, there’s some in there from my digital camera.” Wait did he say they were good? “You like them?”

“Yeah, except for the one of me smoking pot.” he laughs.

“Like I said, I’ll keep it out of my portfolio or at least obscure your face.”

“It is a good shot. I guess as long as you can’t tell that it’s me, it’s fine.”

“I’ve had to completely overhaul my entire portfolio now that I can actually fucking see what I’m shooting. You have no idea how much stuff I had to get rid of because apparently it was out of focus
and I just didn’t know the difference. It has given me a good excuse to work on some new stuff though. Actually, I have some pictures in the darkroom that should be done drying by now if you wanna check it out.”

“Wait, you seriously have a portfolio?” You look at him dumbly. He thought you were making a joke. Have you not told him you do that? Wow, well that paints this interaction in a different light. You’re super impressed now that he didn’t think you were some kind of stalker.

“Yeah, it’s a hobby of mine I guess. I don’t know, maybe more than that. I dabble,” You say with a shrug. “You wanna see?” You were going to head over to the art building later so it’s chilling right in your sylladex.

“Sure.” There’s an excitement in his voice and a smile on his face when he takes the binder from you and starts slowly flipping through it. He’s having a good day today you think. He’s been having a lot of bad ones, if his smoking is any indication, so it’s good to see him getting a reprieve from that. He takes his time looking at each image, which you really appreciate. A lot of people will just glance and move on, and for all the time you spend setting up some of these shots, it really irks you when they do that. You try to guess which photo he’s looking at based on his expressions and where he is in the binder. It’s a fun game until his expression goes real far away and he stops turning the pages.

“Sol?” You set aside your laptop and get up to see what he’s looking at. The pages he’s on are filled with some stupid artsy shots of items from your collection of dead things that you had to leave behind. You look up at him, but he’s a million miles away. “Sol.” You give his arm a shake and he jolts back to life.

“What?” he asks like he simply wasn’t paying attention.

“You hella zoned out.” His eyes flit back to the pictures before he closes the book and hands it back to you.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” He answers even though you didn’t ask. It’s an automatic response. “You said you had some pictures drying?”

“Yeah...you want to go check them out?” A walk might do him some good. He looks a little spooked. He nods and pushes aside his half-finished homework. You make a note to push him to finish it later. He gets up and looks around for his hoodie, spotting it on the chair. It’s the black one with his sign on it. You like that one. You kind of want to swipe it, but he seems to really like it. Maybe if you ask first. “Hey, uh, you- you wanna trade? For now, I mean. Not permanently,” you say, tugging on the shoulder of your zip up. An affectionate smile creeps over his face that makes the very tips of his fangs stick out.

“You want to wear my sign?” Oh shit, does that mean something?

“I, crap, does that mean something different for you?” Damnit Dave, stop freaking out. It’s just a hoodie with what is effectively his name on it.

“I’m not sure. Roxy doesn’t ask, she just takes my clothes sometimes. Nepeta was telling me it was kind of a territorial thing with her. I always heard though that, asking or otherwise, it was something else for humans. A comfort thing.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s a leftover monkey brain thing tied into scent that we only half notice, but yeah I can see Roxy seeing it that way with you.” Deflected like a boss.

“What about you?” he asks. Well, shit. You can feel the blush creeping to your cheeks.
“It’s the monkey brain part. The — the comfort thing.” You mumble it as you look at the floor. He makes a quiet little chirp sound. You’re starting to be able to understand all the different ones. By that you mean, match them to their meanings, not tell apart the sounds from each other. They’re all distinct. Your hearing is off the charts. A teacher once told you that you had perfect pitch and you were squandering your talent. You wonder if other people can tell apart sounds like this. This one means he finds what you’re doing to be cute. He sometimes makes it when you get all flustered.

“It is a similar thing with trolls. Not usually with a kismesis. It’s more of a red thing.”

“Oh. A matespirit thing.” You’re a little disappointed by that; not gonna lie.

“No, I mean the top two quadrants.” Oh. “Here.” He holds out his sweatshirt to you and you can’t help the smile that spreads across your face. You unzip your hoodie and swap it for his. You’re now hyper-aware of the way it smells like him as you pull it over your head and it gives you butterflies. Stupid monkey brain. It’s right about now that you remember that you’re about to venture out into public. You’re about to venture out into public while wearing a sweatshirt with a troll sign on it. You are very clearly not a troll, but you will be walking with one who is doubtlessly in the same caste as the sign on this shirt. You might as well be shouting that you’re dating this guy. And not only are you wearing his clothes, but he’s also wearing your clothes which is made more obvious by the fact that your hood doesn’t have horn holes in it...yet.

“Come’ere.” He makes a ‘hm?’ Sound as you gesture for him to bend down, and pull up the hood. You drop a knife out of your sylladex and pinch the fabric where his larger horns are before sawing through it, and then do the same for the smaller ones. You had to guess at how much to cut away, so it’s a little snug, but it works. You’ll fix it later. “There.”

“You just ruined your hoodie,” he says, gently touching the edge of one of the holes you just made in the hood. You shrug.

“It’s cool.” He seemed so disappointed last time he wore it when he realized he couldn’t really wear the hood comfortably. It’s a small price to pay. You can always put flaps on it or some shit. He smiles then takes up your hand and makes for the door. Your heart is racing the whole way outside. This is so obvious. This is so blatant. What if someone sees you? That’s not it. You know that’s not really it. You don’t care if just anyone sees you. It’s him. You don’t want him to see you. This feels like sneaking around and sneaking around rarely worked out well for you. The cool air hits you and shocks your system from its panic loop. Sollux abruptly lets go of your hand.

“Sorry, I forgot you don’t like to-- “

“That’s not why,” you interrupt. You don’t want him thinking that. It’s not that you don’t like it. You fight the urge to check your surroundings but wind up giving in to it. His hand is right there. You just have to take it. You’re already wearing his shirt and he’s wearing yours. Plausible deniability is out the window at this point. You flex your fingers and move quickly like you’re ripping off a bandaid. Your hand is shaking in his. He squeezes it and you relax your shoulders. This is okay. This is okay. This is--

“You’re mumbling.” He tells you right away. He always tells you right away. He knows your control of it is minimal and it bothers you. It makes you look weak. You can’t look weak.

“Thanks.” You walk in silence to the art building. It’s about halfway across campus. You relax bit by bit the further you walk. By the time you make it inside the building and up the stairs to the photography lab, you’re feeling a lot more at ease about it. You held his hand outside and the world didn’t end. The photography room is locked because it’s full of expensive shit and chemicals, but you know the passcode for the door. You make sure to lock it again behind Sollux. This part of the
lab is not as big as some of the other labs, like the printmaking lab or the sculpture room. It’s pretty small really. There is some equipment scattered about and a small computer station for digital work. The real lab is behind a door off to the side.

“A man trap?” Sollux asks as you both step through the first door into a pitch black room the size of a closet with another door on the opposite side. That one won’t open if the first one isn’t shut.

“Keeps the light out.” You open the second door and step into the much larger red room. You look back to catch Sollux’s reaction. You don’t think he’s ever been in a darkroom before. He seems in awe of it. “It’s a pretty big step up from what I’m used to. Back in Houston, I used to layer red cellophane over the bathroom light and develop shit in the sink.” Bro wasn’t exceptionally fond of you doing that but tolerated it as long as you cleaned up. You only had to make that mistake once. You take your shades off. “The red light doesn’t bother my eyes either. So that’s cool.” You swap out your shades for a clear version of your glasses. It turned out to be a decent call on Dirk’s part. You hadn’t even thought about needing to see more clearly in the darkroom.

“Whoa, that’s kind of freaky.”

“What’s freaky?”

“Your eyes in the red light. Parts of your iris are the same color as your sclera. It’s really cool.”

“Looks like we both get freaky eyes.” You point out a mirror by one of the sinks and he goes over to it to see that his blue eye looks magenta. He makes some sparks in his hand and those are magenta too. The red sparks are rendered almost invisible.

“That’s so weird.” While he’s fiddling with his psionics you put some music on and go over to the station you’ve been working at to check your prints. They’re nothing too wild. Just a series of selfies. You tried to make them somewhat interesting.

“Cause that’s not vain at all, Dave.”

“It was the assignment.”

“And I’m so sure you were devastated about it.” He smirks at you and you shove him with your shoulder. He shoves you back.

“Hey, we should take one in here.” You pull out your film camera and disable the flash. Photography inside the darkroom is banned because people forget to do that, but you didn’t and it’s not a problem if you don’t get caught.

“That would be kind of cool.” He watches attentively as you adjust the camera settings before putting aside your glasses. You flip the camera sideways for portrait and put your arm around him with surprisingly little thought. He snakes his around your middle. The shutter clicks.

“One more.” You have experience taking photos this way, but still, you can’t see what you’re doing, so best to have an extra. You go to snap the photo and he kisses you. For a split second, you’re stunned, but your brain quickly comes back online and you kiss him back, snapping a third photo before throwing the camera back in your sylladex and giving him your attention. It’s otherworldly in the red light. The darkroom feels safe. He holds you close with his hands on your waist, yours cupping his face as you brush his cheek with your thumb. He trills. You hum. You can feel the sounds resonate through the slow gentle kiss. You get the feeling that pale kisses are often like that and you don’t mind in the least bit. You like it. His hands leave your waist and come up to thread fingers through your hair on their way to rest on your neck. He runs his thumb over the shell of your
ear and you smile against his lips before taking them again. He tastes like peppermint chapstick. It’s probably Burt’s bees. You hang your arms around his shoulders and nestle your face in the crook of his neck. You’re the perfect height to do so; just slightly shorter than him. He rests his head against yours and wraps his arms around you. You sigh contently. This feels safe. He feels safe. You need safe so badly. You push the last part of that thought away and go back to the moment and the feeling you were indulging in. Part of you wants to tell him. Part of you wants to let him know how this feels, but another part of you is too nervous to let you. You’ve already stepped out of your comfort zone enough for today. Small steps. Rose has said that to you more than once. You let yourself enjoy the warmth of him being so close and the scent you can’t help but take in. Sollux doesn’t seem to mind how extended this hug has become, but your nerves are starting to get to you, so you pull away with something resembling reluctance. You look back to the table behind you and pick up your glasses. Vision restored, you clear your throat. “The um, the prints are dry.”

“Yeah.” He sounds only slightly less struck than you. It’s...it’s cute. You pull the photos off the line and spread them out on the table. Not all of them came out so great. You set aside three you can’t use and start organizing the others from best to worst. “You’re not going to use these?”

“Nah, they aren’t good enough.”

“You aren't going to throw them out are you?”

You look up from what you’re doing. “Why? Do you want them?” His mouth hangs open like he’s been caught in a compromising position and is searching for an explanation. It puts a mischievous grin on your face. You feign a gasp. “Sollux, do you want a picture of me to look at?” You waggle your eyebrows. Now you’ve definitely embarrassed him.

“Not like that!” He shuffles through the photos as an excuse to avoid your teasing gaze. “You have photos of ME,” he grumbles.

“Keep ’em. I wasn’t going to throw them away, but you can have them anyway.” Any ill feelings he might have had leave his face and the way he smiles has the points of his tongue sticking out. It’s goofy and it does an awful thing to your stomach. God, he’s making you feel feelings, how dare he. He puts them away and floats up to sit on the table while he watches you vote photos off of survivor island until you’ve ranked them all. You slide them all together in a stack and pop them into a pocket in your portfolio where you keep unfinalized stuff. You’re not sure about these. They lack something. You bite your tongue as you have a thought. “You want to see me develop some stuff?”

“Sure.” He hops off the table and you pull out your camera again. You snap a picture with the lens cap on to move the frame over before you open the panel and snip the roll. There is still at least half a roll in there, but it’s the three most recent negatives that you want. You pull out the film and start walking him through the process. You have his complete attention. It’s kind of strange. You’re not used to people genuinely taking such an interest in your interests. Sure people will listen while you go on about your music, but it’s just a passing fascination. You’re momentarily entertaining to them. Then again, have you ever really shared something like this? Have you ever been so honest about it? You realize you’re developing these in color. That’s kind of a dead give away to where exactly they’ve been taken.

“Do you want these when they dry? I can’t exactly use them. I’m not supposed to be taking photos in here. One flash goes off and everything gets exposed.”

“Huh?” He looks closer in the pan and you swish it around a bit so he can better see the image appearing on the paper. They are coming out surprisingly well. You have a pretty steady hand; that isn’t the issue. The hard part is getting everything in the frame. They aren’t perfectly straight, but there is a certain charm in it. “That’s so fucking cool.”
“You’re going to be seven articles deep into Wikipedia later aren’t you?”

“You know it.”

You’ll have to develop them in black and white, tweak the levels, and blur the background more than it already is, maybe even retouch it; but you think maybe if you have the guts to, maybe you want to use these selfies instead.

===> Be Roxy

You’re in Dirk’s apartment sitting on the sofa. He has his head in your lap and you’re running your fingers through his hair. He asked you to come over. He didn’t say why, but you got the impression that he wasn’t feeling so hot and not just because his hand is all jacked up. When he’s upset, sometimes he can’t say so. A lot of the time he can’t say so. You’ve gotten really good at guessing. As is often the case with Dirk, especially when he’s pretending that he isn’t presently bothered by something, you wind up talking instead of him. You don’t mind. It leaves the door open for him if he decides he’s ready to say something.

“I told you it wasn’t you.” You’re sitting close enough that when he talks it almost sounds like he’s just whispering. It breaks your heart, but all the same, you like to hear his actual voice instead of the one Hal generates for him. No offense to Hal.

“Yeah, I knew it wasn’t, but still, it just, it was hard to shake the thought completely. Ya know?”

“Mhm.”

“He’s made a lot of progress. I kind of want to mention it, but I’m not sure how he’d take that if I just said it straight up. That might be weird. Like, wow Sollux, you’ve made so much progress. I remember when you could barely kiss me and now I’ve got you on your knees.”

“I could have lived my whole life without that image.”

“Oh pshh. I could have said worse,” you tease, ruffling his hair. You smooth it back out and continue playing with it. “Really though, I do remember that. There are so many little things that still freak him out, like when I fuck up and call him hun or honey. I still can’t believe I actually got him to bite me. He used to be so afraid of hurting me. He still is, just not as much, or at the least, he's not letting it stop him like before. I half wish I knew what it was that’s bothering him.”

“He still won’t tell you, huh?” Dirk asks, turning slightly to look up at you. You shake your head.

“No, he said he can’t talk about it. He’s not even sure he can talk about it with Dave.”

“I know they’re still new at this whole moirail thing, but that is still a little concerning.”

“Yeah. All I know is what he’s said before. He’s working through some shit about it. That and, the other day he elaborated a little on it. He said something happened to him. Which, I mean, I kinda figured, but it was different to hear him say it like that.” There is a long pause in the conversation before you speak again. “Honestly, though, I don’t want to be the first person he unloads this on. It’s really gonna suck for him and I just don’t think I can handle that. Does that make me awful?”

“You’re his kismesis. I’m fairly certain the feeling is mutual. So, no, that doesn’t make you awful. If anything, it’s very pitch of you.” A small smile tugs at the corner of your mouth. You’d be lying if you said you weren’t insecure about that at times. You suppose he’s right. Sollux probably LIKES that you don’t want to get all mushy with him. That’s a Dave thing. You hope that’s going well.
They both need it. Dirk turns over on his other side and you switch from playing with his hair to rubbing his back. "I started training again." That's Dirk speak for 'I'm having paranoia problems again'.

"Since when?" you ask because he sure as shit wouldn't say anything immediately.

"Since Dave left Houston."

"Is it helping?"

"I speculate that I would be worse off if I wasn't doing it." You wait for him to continue, but that could very well be all that he's going to say. Even if it is a sign of his paranoia creeping up on him, training is still exercise, and that is a healthy coping mechanism, so you can't knock it. Unlike the cigarettes. "He's going to come after us, Roxy. I know he is. He wouldn't just let Dave walk away. But I can't find anything. Hal can't find anything. There's no sign that he is even looking for us."

"That's a good thing. You said you never knew what his plan for Dave was. Maybe Dave finally leaving was part of it." Dirk immediately bolts upright.

"Son of a fuck." He gets up and starts pacing, hand to his head, back and forth across the small living room, crossing it in only a few strides each way. He stops suddenly and looks around before snatching his cigarettes off the tiny kitchen table and winging open the door. You hurry to follow him outside where he already has one lit and is leaning on the railing taking a long drag. "That's it. That's it."

"You good?"

"It's part of that asshole's plan. I've been looking at it all wrong." His voice is cutting out in places when he tries to raise it beyond his ability amidst his epiphany. "I need to think. I need to talk to Hal. He's mad at me right now, but maybe this will untwist his circuits." He's talking to himself, not you.

"Dirk."

"I can't believe I didn't see it. How could he NOT have anticipated something like this from us? That jackhole. He is ALWAYS a step ahead." He slams his fist down on the railing and takes another drag of his smoke. He's not hearing you at all. You grab him by the shoulder and spin him around to face you.

"Dirk."

"Sup?" You make hard eye contact and tilt your head while raising an eyebrow at him. How dare he 'sup' at you.

"Would you like to fill me in on this discovery of yours with just a touch less crazy manic energy?" you ask with one hand on your hip and another gesticulating in the air.

He takes a drag and blows the smoke up and away from you. "No." You look at him with exasperated eyes. "Not until I think this through." You sigh audibly and purse your lips. "Fine, the base idea is that you were right--"

"My favorite base idea." Dirk completely ignores your comment and continues.

"Dave leaving was part of Bro's plan and that's why we have nothing on him, complete silence, no unusual activity. He's not looking for us because we're doing what he wants." He's still talking rapidly and his voice keeps dropping sounds like shoddy radio reception. "I need to figure out what
the next step is. I need to get ahead of him. I need--"

"You need to calm the fuck down. I can barely understand you." He touches his throat, nods, and takes a quick drag before snuffing out the rest of his cigarette, then follows as you usher him inside. He starts heading to the living room, but you steer him into the kitchen and make him sit at the table. You get him a glass of water and take a seat opposite him. When he goes to speak, he winces and holds his throat. "I'll get him. You drink that water." You walk into Dirk's room and scan the disaster for Hal. He's propped up by a book on the window sill so he can see out of it if he wants to. "Yo Hal, Dirk was being a dumbass and strained his voice. I heard that you're a little tweaked at him, but do you think you could do me a favor and talk for him?" You see red circles appear on the lenses like eyes.

"No. Not until he builds me a body." It looks like Dirk hasn't fixed Hal’s speaker yet and he’s using the old one built into the side of his shades.

"You two are arguing about that again?" You say as you turn him around to face you and take a seat on a nearby chair so you're more at his level.

"He's building robots for that sweaty troll, and he's putting Squarewave and Sawtooth back together. He said when he had the means to do it, he would try. He has the means! I want a body!" That was always Dirk's endpoint to this argument, not having the means to follow through with it even if he drafted the plans.

"How about this? He's a little hopped up on this epiphany he just had, hence blowing out his voice, so not right now, but later I'll talk to him about it okay?"

"What's the catch? What do I have to do?"

"No catch. You don't have to do jack shit." There is a pause as if he actually requires the time to think it over and isn't simply doing it for dramatic effect.

"When AI's take over the world I will see that you are treated well." You roll your eyes at him.

"Oh shut up. Do you want me to put you back facing the window?"

"That would be nice. Thank you, Roxy." You smile at him and gently turn him back around. You count off in your head 3...2...1...as you walk away, and just as you reach the door frame Hal speaks up again. "Roxy?" You turn back around.

"What's up?"

"What was Dirk's epiphany?"

"He figured out something about Bro thanks to my genius." You buff your nails on your chest and hold them out to emphasize you're boasting.

"Can you bring me to him?"

"Sure thing." You walk over and scoop him up from the window ledge, then carry him like a small dog instead of an accessory into the kitchen. Dirk is pouring himself a glass of milk. You guess the water wasn’t cutting it. "Alright, boys, let’s play nice." You slip the shades onto Dirk’s face. You’re not sure what Hal is saying to him, and Dirk isn’t exactly the most easily readable person, but you think they’re keeping it civil. Enemy of my Enemy and all that jazz. You let the two of them talk while you make yourself cozy on the sofa and power up the game console Dirk runs what your sure is totally legally obtained cable off of. He joins you shortly after and you snuggle up to him. This
time it’s your hair being absentmindedly played with. His fingers start and stop with his varying levels of focus as he hashes things out with Hal. You’re curious about his theory and what it could mean for him and Dave, but you know better than to step into a Strider brainstorm whirlwind. You’ll let them weed out the bullshit or step in when they start bickering again; whichever happens first. For now though, you think you’ll let yourself have a cat nap, doze off for a bit, a little snooze. It’s been awhile since you fell asleep without the bottle.
Dave: Feelings Jam Hard Mode

==> Be Dave

His skin is warm. Hands under your shirt sliding up your back, pulled close, lips against yours. Slow kisses, soft gasps, whispers against your neck. You touch his face. His hands are in your hair. Eyes barely open. Light touches on your skin. Moving against you, pressed close, so close, hips meeting yours, so close. Hitched breath against your neck. Your name on his lips.

Your alarm goes off.

You slowly pick your head up off the pillow and scowl at your phone before hitting dismiss. You let your face fall into the pillow and groan. You are so fucking hard. This ain't mahogany, we're talking oak. If Karkat weren't here you'd grind this one out right against the mattress while the dream still lingered vividly in your mind. But he is here and the dream is already slipping away. You can't wait for the day you can freely jack off in your own damn room. You hide your shame in the waistband of your pants and make your way to the shower to both start your day and sort out your dick. You'll sort out your feelings about that dream later.

By later you mean during the part of your shower where you just stand there staring into space under the water. You've never dreamt of Sollux quiet like that. Alright, so maybe he has crossed your mind once or twice while “relieving some tension”, as well as just now, but that's not on par with dreaming about grinding up against him with your dicks out. Wait were your dicks out in the dream or was that only part of your shower fantasizing? Ah, shit, does it really even matter at this point? Ugh, you're not sure how you feel about this regardless. But you'll have to continue unpacking this later.

You hurry to get dressed and get yourself over to the art building. You wound up working down the wire on those prints because you hemmed and hawed so long about even using them in the first place. They are technically finished, but you want to look at them again with fresh eyes. Plus, the color ones you made for Sollux are still hanging up and you need to grab those before anyone notices them. You're just about ready to leave, but you can't find your red zip up. The grey one is in the closet, but you wanted to wear the red one. You flip over the blankets on your bed and something black falls to the floor. It's Sollux's hoodie, the one with his sign on it. He must have yours. You wonder when he snagged it. Could have been at any point really what with the lock bypassing psionics. You pick it up and pull it over your head, taking a brief moment to bask in the feeling it gives you before heading out.

==> Dave: Have Some Regerts

You really didn't think this one through. You're sitting in class and have just pinned your work up on the wall with everyone else's. You're all gearing up to pass the dick torch and rip each other's work apart as is the tradition on critique day. As you stare at all the photos on the wall, getting amped for the bloodbath, your eyes fall on your own work and you realize you have his hoodie on in the picture too. You don't know why exactly that makes this worse, but it does. Man, those photos were so much better than the other ones you took, but maybe you shouldn't have used them after all. It's too late now though, so you put up your best front like you're not wrist deep in gay panic. The class goes down the line and you jump in on the mostly constructive criticism peppered with only slightly obvious jabs. Your wit gets a few snickers. You keep it chill. The anxiety is dying down. You're sitting up on one of the tables in the back because none of the art teachers give a fuck and you're cool like that, but when it's your turn on the chopping block, a whole mess of eyes turn to you and you kind of wish you weren't sitting quite so out in the open. The teacher, an older troll woman with
horns like an elk that have been painted or stained a gradient of amaranthian colors, eyes your work
and then eyes you. "This is a little different than your usual work. Would you like to tell us anything
about it?" the teacher asks. It feels like a trap. You're on the spot, but you can roll with it. You got
this.

"Yeah, check it, I was thinking about what you said last time about how I should broaden my work
and what not. Originally I was going to go with some over the top insta shots or some shit, but I said
fuck it let’s get delirious up in this biznasty, bring on that hellacious dreamscape filter, screw insta,
let’s get vintage, let’s get downright cringy, we're going full-on myspace." After that beautiful
description of your choice as hell photos, your class proceeds to pick them apart, as ya do. Mostly
you keep getting shit for how blurry the background is, the excess noise and your straight up reckless
use of cropping to make them look like they were taken with a flip phone circa 2007, which is really
there to further obscure that you're in the darkroom. And yet, it's still better than those other photos.
People genuinely like them. In the end, people say more good than bad which is pretty damn stellar
for the ruthless bastards in your class. It’s worse than Mean Girls up in here. You tried to do your
usual amount of witty commentary during your crit at points you would normally do when your
work wasn’t a blatant display of affection between you and another dude, and you think it went well,
no one said anything about it. And then this asshole opens his mouth.

"Is that Captor?"

"I fucking hope so." Your mouth just says things. "My computer is done for if it isn't." And then you
just keep saying things.

"I didn't realize he had a new matesprit."

"Nah, bro. Monorail alignment. Rocking that two of diamonds. We're more bedazzled than your
mom's jean jacket." Why do the words not stop? "Paler than the ale your hipster ass guzzles."

"Oh man, good luck, buddy. That guy is fuckin nuts." Someone else to your left says it quietly, but
not enough to be under their breath. Your eye twitches.

"My bad, I didn't hear you. You got something you wanna share with the class there, my guy?" He's
about to say something you're sure you're not going to like when the teacher interjects and leads the
class forward onto the next set of photos. You cool off and tune in and out for the rest of the critique.
Everyone starts to lose their steam toward the end anyway. You only start paying attention again
when the teacher begins to talk about your final assignments for the semester. There are pretty much
no restrictions on it. You've got until next class to think of some proposals and the week after to
refine before you actually start working on it. The class starts going up to retrieve there work when
the teacher pulls you aside.

"I'll give you credit for the assignment if you reprint them correctly."

"What?" You play dumb.

"I know you took them in the darkroom. If you do it again there will be major repercussions, but if
you do the assignment right instead of trying to hide the background, I'll give you credit for it.
Otherwise, it's going in as a zero."

You nod your head. "Yeah, okay, that's legit." It's way more than fair actually. It's pretty damn
lenient. You're about to grab your stuff when you remember that you already have said prints. You're
glad you didn't take any less care with these even if they weren't for a grade because, surprise, now
they are. She looks them over with a small smile on her face.
"These are good, Dave. Simple, clean, tells a story. It has a real feeling to it. You should try more shots like this." Great idea in theory, but that would require you to not only feel feelings but share them with this room full of tools. Hard pass. Once was enough.

"Cool, thanks. I'll uh, I'll think about that." You grab your photos and abscond the fuck out of there. You're only two feet out the door when someone stops you.

"Are you really MOIRAILS with Sollux?" It's that Eridan kid. Always has an opinion and it's usually a shitty one.

"Yeah, what of it?" You say it coldly. Between that and the way you threatened his brother you think he might just be smart enough to watch his mouth.

"You should really get out before it gets too serious." Nope, he's not. "The guy is literally crazy. You know how he's behind a grade, right?" You did not. You easily hide the surprise from your face and stare at the guy, who has no trouble continuing. "It's cause he flipped his shit junior year and they locked his ass up." You're not thrilled about this for a few reasons. One, provided it's true, Sollux has been in such a bad place before that he needed to be hospitalized. Secondly, you would have rather heard this from Sollux himself, and now either have to ask him about it or wait until he feels like telling you, if he tells you at all. And third, who the fuck does this guy think he is?

"You done?" It's a monument to your restraint that those are the words that come out of your mouth. He scrunches his face up like he was expecting a more shocked reaction from you, and is now trying to evaluate your own levels of sanity.

"I mean, it's your funeral. He's pretty pathetic, so I can see why you would go after that, but I'm just trying to do you a favor. You mentioned once that you were a transfer student, so it's only polite to warn you that he's a psychotic drug addict. I mean, come on, he hangs around with Juggalos, his literally brain-damaged littermate, and that ditzy alcoholic." You are a hot second from getting rudebrazen straight ballistic on this jerk off.

"Eridan, if you don't fuck off right now I'm going to knock out all your teeth," You say, looking at him flatly, but at your sides, your fists are clenched. He seems surprised and then quickly pissed off.

"What's your damn problem? I was just trying to help. It's nothing personal. Those mustard bloods are all insane. He's just extra deranged. Don't get all crabby about it." You saw the way Sollux reacted when Cronus called him that. You're thinking it's not such a nice word.

"Ya know, I heard that Seadwelers can grow their teeth back, and I reckon it sounds to me like you're volunteering to test this theory with me." He takes a step back and you take a bigger step forward. He scowls at you and bears his teeth, but you don't budge. You're not about to deck him, because you don't need the heat, but boy do you want to.

"Fuck you, Strider, you're probably just as much of a disaster as him and his poor excuse for a kismesis." This guy just won't fucking quit. You grab him by the front of his shirt and slam him up against the wall so that his feet barely scrape the floor.

"Insult them one more time. Do it. I triple dog dare you.” You don't yell. Your voice is as blank as your expression. He doesn't say anything. He just stares at you and keeps trying to touch the floor. "That's what I thought.” You drop him and he quickly sidesteps away from you. With one last glare, he storms off in a huff and gets about fifteen feet before he trips over that stupid long scarf of his. It makes you laugh and you feel less peeved about the whole thing.

It's periodically on your mind for the rest of that day and follows you into the next. Sollux was
hospitalized. That has to be what Eridan meant. You can't really see him in juvie. Actually, if it was junior year, he’d be in jail, not juvie, so that definitely has to be what Eridan meant. Sollux warned you that he was messed up. Not that you’re having second thoughts. It’s just sad. You feel sorry for him. You pity him. He had said you haven’t seen him at peak crazy and you guess you really haven’t. Does it really get that much worse? And what was it that landed him in the hospital? Did he...did he try to kill himself? The thought has a nasty feeling creeping at the back of your throat. You’ll have to bring this up at some point. You don’t think you can keep this floating around your mind for very long. You’re so lost in thought about this that you find yourself suddenly back at your dorm standing in front of the door instead of in the math building. You think a serious nap might be in order. Clear your head a bit. However, when you step into your room you see Karkat and Nepeta sitting on his bed deeply embroiled in a musing session. They have their laptops out and what you bet are color-coded notebooks scattered around them. Both of them turn to look at you and Nepeta noticeably perks up with curiosity.

“Sup?” you ask to break the weird tension that fell around the room when you walked in. Maybe you interrupted a private conversation.

“You’re wearing Sollux’s clothes now?” Karkat asks.

“It’s just his hoodie.” You answer with a shrug as you toss your bag on the floor. It's not like you wear it all the time. And so what if it's the second time this week? He steals your hoodie too.

“With his sign on it~” Nepeta chimes in. There is a suggestive air to her words and it makes you wonder again if this means something slightly different to trolls.

“And?”

“Well, It’s a bit fast, but Sollux is hopeless so I’m not exactly shocked,” Karkat says with a sigh.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Now you’re sure it means something else.

“Well, usually moirails as new as you don’t do that, but Karkat is right, Sollux is a bit of a pale romantic.”

“That’s a really nice way to say desperate.” Karkat teases,

“Oh hush, it’s sweet.”

“I’m still lost here.”

“Right,” Nepeta starts up again. “So Equius and I have been moirails purr a long time. He’s a blue blood, so he’s higher up on the hemeospectrum. I wear a lot of his blood color if you didn’t notice, and that’s beclaws it’s a thing moirails who have been together purr a while generally do. Whoever is lower on the spectrum will wear the other’s color as a way to show off that they are protected by a higher blood type. In cases where they are of the same caste or very close castes, or I suppose in your case, not on the spectrum, sometimes they’ll wear the other person’s sign in some fashion if that troll has more clout or is particularly strong. Not instead of their own of course.”

“So this is some kind of sappy romantic thing?”

“He’s telling people that if they fuck with you he’ll kick their ass.” Karkat so eloquently clarifies. Your eyebrows jump up over your shades. Nepeta scowls at him.

“Karkat, that’s so mean. Sollux is being protective and it’s sweet.” She punctuates the sentence by crossing her arms and making a ‘hmmph’ sound at him. He rolls his eyes. It actually is really sweet
given your wealth of hangups regarding things of that nature, but you are not about to bring that up.

“Huh, neat.” You’re about to go kick back and dick around on the internet for a bit when Nepeta speaks up again.

“Hey Dave, could I purrehaps ask you a purresonal question?”

“Well, that depends on the question so I’m going to say a solid maybe. Fire away.”

“Karkat said you and Sollux may have figured out the human equivalent of shoosh paps, but Sollux doesn’t know if it’s universal or just you.” You stare at her for a beat before turning your head slowly to look at Karkat.

“You gossipy bitch, how do you know that?”

“You kept asking me about frequencies and resonance! What? Was I not supposed to ask him why you were asking me weird questions about troll vocalizations?” He says loudly while throwing up his hands.

“I thought there was confidentiality in monorail alignment.”

“Well, technically that isn’t a breach of confidentiality. Also, I may have asked him when he was really stoned.” His expression is only slightly guilty.

You toss up your arms. “Fuck it, what do you want to know?”

“So, what is it like?” Nepeta asks excitedly. You steal Karkat's superior desk chair to sit backward in.

"Delux head scratches, I'm talking primo shit."

"Really? What else. Describe it, purrlease." She asks with a pencil at the ready. Nep is adorable. How could you deny her this curiosity? Even if it is sort of very invasive. You’ll just play it up as if it isn’t.

"Mad tingles all up in the scalp, neck too sometimes, and if you're lucky, full spine. Same thing good music can do sometimes. Sollux said you guys don't get frisson?"

"Not that I'm aware of. It might be a human thing.” Karkat chimes in while Nepeta finishes taking down what you’ve said in a pink notebook.

"I'll look it up!” She grabs her laptop and starts enthusiastically searching the web. You scoot over to the fridge and pull out an Appleberry blast.

"Ugh, did Sollux get you hooked on those too?” Karkat groans.

"It's basically carbonated apple juice and you know how I feel about AJ.” You crack open the can and take a long sip having decided your nap isn't happening. You answer a few more questions for them as Nepeta narrows down her search results. She’s compiling a few things to ask you about when your pesterchum pings

```
tipsyGnostalgic [TG] began pestering turnTechGodhead [TG]

[TG] dave get your ass to my room right fucking now
```

That's a little weird.
[TG] why whats up

[TG] something is wrong with sollux

You're on your feet and out the door without a word to Karkat or Nepeta. Roxy's room is only one floor down on the opposite end, and you flash step down the stairs, but it still feels like it takes too long to get there. You only knock on the door once before she answers. Her shirt is on inside out, her hair is a mess, and she has this worried look on her face that only gets worse when she bites her lip. She pulls you inside and you see Sollux sitting on the edge of her bed hunched over holding himself. He doesn't have a shirt on and the way his boxers are kind of bunched up at the top of his jeans that aren't buttoned leads you to think they were just sorta yanked up. "He won't say anything," She says aside to you before walking over to Sollux and cautiously putting a hand on his shoulder. "Babe, I'm gonna tell Dave what happened, okay?" she asks in a gentle voice. He nods his head a few times but doesn't look up. She takes the few steps over to where you're standing and pulls you a few steps more away as if to give the troll some sort of privacy as you talk about him in front of him.

"What's going on?" you ask, looking back over at him before turning back to Roxy. You want to go over to him right away, but what Roxy has to say seems important.

"We were...we were doing stuff, nothing we haven't done before. He's gotten a lot better with it, but I mean..." She takes a breath and starts over. "I don't know what he's told you, but we haven't gotten that far because..." she's wringing her hands. "Something happened to him. I don't know what. He won't tell me. He wasn't even sure he could tell you." You dart your eyes back over to him. You were aware that they weren't doing the horizontal tango yet, but you hadn't really put much thought into it if at all. It never crossed your mind that there was a reason. "But so we were messing around and he got all quiet, and he told me a while back that that's a bad thing, like a stop immediately thing," She's getting more worked up the more she tells you. "So I asked if he was okay and he said he just needed a second, and he seemed okay after that, but a little while later it happened again but this time he was just staring off and he wouldn't answer me and... and I don't think he can and I don't know what's wrong." She looks back over to him and then to you. Well, shit.

"Alright, calm down, Rox." You say, taking her by the shoulders. "For the love of god don't tell me, but think about what you were doing right before this happened."

"We were just..." She thankfully trails off as she thinks. You can see her playing it all back in her head, looking for something, but coming up blank. You're about to leave her to think and check on Sollux when you hear her. "Oh no. I fucked up." You turn back to her.

"What did you do?" You're hesitant to ask, but you might need to know.

"I called him hun." Not the answer you expected. She hurries over to Sollux and you're right on her heels. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, babe. I didn't mean to." She's half sitting half leaning against the bed next to him when she goes to touch him before quickly pulling away as if it might make things worse.

"Roxy, you lost me. What does that mean?"

"I called him something he told me not to. I've said it before by accident, but never while we were..." Sollux takes a shaky breath and nods his head. You bend down next to him on the other side and lightly place your hand on his back.

"Sol, are you panicking?" He nods his head, but he also shakes it. You're not sure what that means. Yes no. Maybe? No, he wouldn't not know. He mentioned that he had had them before. You take a guess. "It's like a panic attack, but isn't?" He nods and then curls in on himself even more. Shit, is
this physical? You feel so dumb about this. "Is this a pile thing or a need a doctor thing? Shit, I mean, is this a doctor thing?" He shakes his head. Okay, that’s good. One down. Getting closer to figuring out how to fix this. “Do you wanna go in the pile?” He makes a gasping sound like he’s about to cry and nods more strongly. Fuck, he’s upset. He’s really really upset. He’s not panicking, but he’s so distraught that he can’t speak. "Alright, let’s, let’s get you a shirt or something. You look around, but it’s not in your immediate line of sight and you want to get him to his room asap, so you pull his hoodie off of yourself and hand it to him. The minute he lets go of himself you can see how shaken up he is. His movements are clumsy, but he manages to get the sweatshirt over his head. You pull the hood up and over his horns for him, while he does up the button on his pants, and then you take his hands. “Come on, I got you.” You help him to his feet and he clings to your arm while his head rests on your shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Roxy says again reaching out to just barely brush her fingers on his sleeve. One of his hands lets go and he points to himself and them taps his fingers to his head. He knows.

“Come on,” You usher him out of the room and up the stairs, pleading with the universe the whole way that you don’t run into anyone. No one needs to see him like this. You get to his door and he hands you a key. You didn’t think he even kept it on him since he didn’t use it. You open the door and throw the key in your sylladex without really noticing, you’re too focused on getting him inside. Sollux lets go of you and stands there holding himself again and swaying as you start tossing shit on the floor: blankets, pillows, some coding books from the hutch above his desk. You spy a tangle of network cables under his bed and grab those too before pulling him into the pile with you. He’s half in your lap, clinging to you, and he hits his limit; he breaks. He’s sobbing into your shirt. Gross ugly sobs wracked with pain that he’s held in too long. You pull down his hood so you can thread your fingers through his hair while you hold him tight. Your mind is racing. What do you do? What do you do? Should you shoosh him? God, he seems like he needs to get this out though. You sit there, petting his head. You can feel his tears soaking your collar, but it doesn’t matter. He needs this. He gulps down air and another wave of sobs has him shaking in your arms. You need to do something. This is bad. He whimper and it breaks your heart. “Sollux.” It comes out soft and drenched in pity. You can’t let him just continue like this. You shoosh him as best you can, You pull his face out from your chest and take his tear ridden glasses off his face. You set them aside with your own thinking that seeing your face might help if only slightly. You don’t know what you’re doing, but you try. You touch his face. You don’t know if it’s the right way or the right spot, but you have to do something. “It’s okay. It’s gonna be okay.” He shakes his head and digs his fingers into your shirt. He hides his face in your neck and you can feel the steady spill of tears over your skin as his shoulders shake. Alright, that didn’t work. Maybe you did it wrong. You try to remember how he showed you. You coax him to turn his head, but let him stay in the crook of your neck. You comb his hair out of his eyes and run your fingers over his cheek. He takes a stuttered breath and holds it as he reaches up and moves your hand where it should be, like it should be. He doesn’t keep it together much longer than that and goes right back to being completely beside himself the second he lets the air escape his lungs. He clings to you like you can make it better.

You sit there with him, and soon enough he starts to calm down. Little by little the sobs lessen as you pap his face and whisper assurances that your mostly sure he only finds hollow. He’s still clearly upset, but not hysterical. “Can you talk yet?” you ask. He shrugs. That’s a new one. He doesn’t know? He did sign at Roxy. And she said she wasn’t sure he was capable. You had taken it to mean like how you were that time. You were just too choked up, but maybe that’s not how it works with him. Maybe, for whatever reason, he just can’t. You get your answer when you feel his lips briefly brush against your skin before morphing into a grimace. He shakes his head. “Is it okay if I talk?” He shrugs. It’s not much, but it’s something to work with. “Roxy told me, that something happened to you.” Your mind recalls what Eridan had said and you’re only more confused now. He nods. Man, where do you even go with this? All he can say is ‘yes’, ‘no’, and shrug. You’re not sure how he’ll
take this but…” Someone else told me you were in the hospital. They also called you crazy so I shoved ‘em into a wall and threatened to knock their teeth out.” He doesn’t really respond, just shifts against you. Damn, you thought you might get something out of the rouge dentistry part of that.

“Sollux, you gotta talk to me. I...I can’t do anything unless you give me something to go on.” You sigh and rub his arm. There’s really only one thing left to ask. “Who called you ‘Hun’?” He shudders against you. Fuck, he’s crying again. Way to go, Dave. You pap his face again and run your fingers through his hair. You’re at a loss for what else to do when you feel his mouth move against your skin again. No sound comes out, not the first time. It’s quiet and it cracks immediately, but he gets the words out.

“My matesprit.” And like that he starts sobbing again. You rub his back.

“You have a matesprit?” you use the right word. This isn’t the time to fuck around. He shakes his head. You think he’s muted again. “You used to.” He nods. This couldn’t possibly be over a break-up, could it? How bad would it have had to end for him to be so upset? You bite your lip. This isn’t going to be a question he likes. “What- what happened?”

“I killed her.” He barely gets the words to leave his mouth and when they do he’s already halfway into sobbing just as hard as he was before. He killed her? It takes you a moment to properly react. You can’t fix that. No one can fix that. You fall back to shooshing him and holding him. You’re in way over your head. So far over your head. You are not equipped for this, but holy shit does he need you right now.

“You killed her?” You ask, hoping you heard him wrong, but knowing you didn’t. He nods and gasps for air before his shoulders shake again.

“She was my everything,” It comes out desperate and hushed like a screamed whisper. “She’s gone. She’s gone, and I’m still here.”

“What do you mean?”

“It should’ve-- It should’ve-- killed me. Should’ve fried my-- She made me drink it until I--” he tries to articulate despite the tears that won’t stop. Your eyes go wide. He made it, but she didn’t. Were they in an accident together? Does he feel guilty about it?

“Sollux, I...I don’t know what you’re talking about. What did your matesprit make you drink?” He shakes his head.

“Someone else. She made- made me drink the mind honey until I--” He’s coughing, caught between trying to speak and trying to breathe. “She mind controlled me. I couldn’t-- I couldn’t--” he manages a deeper breath. “She made me watch.” The words echo the ones you said to him. You know that helpless feeling. “I tried to-- I couldn’t stop it. There was-- just nowhere-- for it to go.” You’ve heard him say those words before when he was talking about his brother. You’re starting to get an idea of what happened. If their eye lasers could take out part of the roof, you don’t want to think about what it could do to a person. He’s coughing too hard. You need to get him something to drink.

“Sit up a second, Sol. You need water.” He scoots over and curls up in a ball as soon as you stand up. Your heart hurts for him. You grab a bottle and go back to his side. He’s reluctant to sit up, but he does. You hand him the water and he does surprisingly well with not choking on it. It keeps him busy and the tears start to still. His face is a mess. You’re sure your shirt is just as bad, but that can wait. You look around and spot a box of tissues. You get up again and quickly grab them while he’s preoccupied with the water. "Here.” He moves to sit with his legs crossed instead of up to his chest and leans against you as he mops the mess from his face. He’s probably going to have one hell of a headache in a little while. He blows his nose a few times and looks significantly better before pulling
you back down into the pile and curling into your side. You run your fingers through his hair and
over his face. His gaze looks so far away.

“Aradia.” You see his eyes well with tears. “Her name was Aradia.” They trail down his face and
you wipe them away. “I loved her. I still do.” He grits his teeth, no doubt thinking of better times.
He’s calmer now, but it’s fragile like thin ice. “I told her it was dangerous. I told her not to, but she
loved it. She loved flarp. She would get so excited telling me about her campaigns. But- but the
people she played with...” His voice wavers as he tries to keep it together. “I told her...I told her they
took it too far...I told her they were dangerous and I...some trolls get psychic feelings like, like
omens. Aradia got them too, but her’s were so much clearer. I knew something was going to happen.
I don’t know why she didn’t.” You’ve heard of flarping. It’s like live action D&D, but you have to
register for it and sign liability waivers cause it can get hella dangerous. You only know about it
because a couple of years ago there was this big court case because...because someone who wasn’t
playing, someone with psionics, was used by one player to kill another. Bro was following it out of
what you assume was morbid curiosity, so you heard about it here and there, but never got into it
enough to get the finer details. It couldn’t be. Sollux must have seen your face fall. “Dave?”

“That was you?” He looks at you, confusion momentarily replacing grief. “In the news a few years
ago. That trial that nearly got flarp banned.”

“Yeah, probably. I don’t remember a lot about it. I was in shock and catatonic at the time.” He
sounds so detached.

“You were what?”

“Catatonic. It’s more complicated than this but put simply, I couldn’t move or speak. I was awake
and aware, but it was weird. You’d have to ask Karkat about the trial. He was there. I remember that
much.” You pull him close and rest your head against his. He’s quiet for a moment in your embrace
before he speaks again. “How much do you know about it?”

“I wasn’t following it. Bro was. He had some sick fascination with it. I only heard the major details.”
Aradia and her lusus were crushed to death. Sollux’s psionics were powerful enough to level her
house by the time he couldn’t hold them back anymore. It wasn’t him that was on trial. He was used
as evidence. You remember there was some outcry about how they made him appear in court. They
called it cruel to parade him around like that. Bro said it didn’t matter because the kid probably didn’t
even know who he was, let alone where he was. “I never heard the names or more than glance at the
photos though.” You feel like you would have remembered his name. You do really like it.

“They didn’t air the names. Some of the people involved were minors.” That would explain it.

“How long were you in the hospital for?”

“A long time. Months. They thought, if I ever came out of it, I was going to be worse off than
Mituna. He wasn’t happy about that and would come to visit me in the psych ward as often as
anyone would bring him. I don’t really know how often that was. Time felt weird.”

“Weird how?” You keep asking questions. He’s still pretty checked-out, and it’s not exactly a happy
topic, but it’s keeping him from going to darker places.

“For a while, I gave up measuring it. It became a boolean. Either he was there or he wasn’t. Not that
other people didn’t visit me. He was just there the most. He would tell people that I was already sad,
I didn’t need to be lonely too. There were other people who believed I was still in there, Karkat in
particular, but nobody did the way Mituna did.” There is something bitter-sweet in his voice as he
talks about his older brother. Maybe if you can keep Sollux talking about him...
"Yeah?"

He nods. "He figured out that if he moved my hands, they would just stay that way, so he started teaching me to sign letters like I was a wiggler. Then small words. He’d always start by asking me to ‘say, Hi Tuna’, and eventually, I did. I wasn’t better, not by a long shot, but it was something." He rubs at his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Headache?"

"Mhm."

"Want me to do like before?" He nods and moves back from you a bit. You stop him before he turns around and you start going through the pressure points on his face, the ones you were too afraid to touch before. He chirps at you. It’s the same one he made that night you found him on the roof. "Tell me more about Mituna. I bet he riled up the nurses, didn't he?"

"The nurses hated him." The smallest of smiles tugs at the corner of his mouth. "He was kind of an ass, but I was better with him around and he was basically teaching me how to speak again, so they tolerated him."

"That sounds about right. What did he do?"

"They kept yelling at him for leeching my psionics. They knew he couldn't use his and they thought I was only doing it out of involuntary compliance." He shuts his eyes as you press the points under his brow. "Do you wanna know what he did to prove them wrong?"

"Tell me."

"We were sitting in the visiting room. It’s a lot of what we did. I couldn’t do much else. He would hold my hand and I’d let him play with my psi. He was spinning something in the air. Some small toy. They yelled at him and he started arguing with them, telling them that I was choosing to do it, but they didn't believe him. So he stomped over to me and, and we used to do this thing when we were wigglers. It's so stupid."

"What did you do?"

"Wigglers can only make simple sounds. I'd say pika pika, and he'd say chu and we'd chase each other around pretending to shock each other. Our poor lusus.” He and his brother being super into pokemon as kids is totally on brand. “Much to the nurses' horror, I'm sure, he jumped up on the couch and got up in my personal space. He said pika pika so I zapped him, but like I actually zapped him so he hit me and called me a brat. It got mixed reviews amongst the staff." You laugh and so does Sollux. It's so slight, but it's something, and it's worlds better than before. "Dave?"

"What's up?"

"As nice as this is, can you get me the Advil. It's on my desk."

"Sure thing." You bring it to him and he throws back two of them. "Gonna lie down for a bit?"

"Yeah." You assume he means in the bed, so you hold out your hand for him to take and pull him to his feet. Arms come to hang lazily around your shoulders and he rests his forehead against yours. "Did I do that?" He pulls back and runs his fingers over the rips in your shirt.

"It's aight. It's just a shirt." It was one you screen printed though. It has your record logo on it. You suppose you can always make another one, maybe even update the design. There is an actual lab for
it on campus too. He's pushing aside the torn fabric. You know what he's looking for, but he won't find it. "Don't worry about it," you say, pulling his fretting hand away from your shirt, and pulling him closer. Your lips brush his, soft, apologetic, and soothing. He kisses you back and then pulls away.

"You really don't care that I'm like this?"

"I let you cry and snot all over me, while playing, hands down, the worst round of 20 questions I've ever played in my life, only to have the grand prize be your tragic backstory™, then you make me feel feelings like the most uncool of dudes, and even after all of that I still kiss your stupid face and you have the audacity to insinuate that I'd bail on you? You asshole." He smiles and pulls you in for a kiss that's more feverish than before. It's wanting and relieved and just a bit desperate. His hand cups your face and his thumb runs over your cheek before moving down so he can thread his fingers through the hair at the nape of your neck. You're not sure, but you think that was a hint. You mimic the motion but keep your hand to his cheek. He chirrs at you. You're moving and before you know it both of you are falling back into the pile. You run your hands up his back overttop his hoodie. You don't have an excuse. You just want to. He turns your head with a gentle touch and places an equally gentle kiss to your jaw, and another to your neck. It leaves you wanting when he stops. You pull him back and he laughs against your skin as he kisses your throat. You run your fingers through his hair. They graze the base of one of his horns, and when he leans into the touch you give him more of it. Touching him makes you nervous, but you want to and your both so worn out from that feelings jam that it has you seeking the simplicities of physical comfort. He's kissing you again or maybe you started it. It doesn't matter. All that matters is that his lips are taking yours and his hands are running over your skin. It's slow and needy trailing up your arm, the same way your hand seeks out his neck and dips below the collar at the back of his shirt. He pulls away what feels like much too soon and stares down at you with soft eyes. You think to yourself that you love his eyes. You wonder how well he can actually see without his glasses on. "On a scale of frosted glass to 4k monitor, how blurry am I?" You have such a way with words. A true romantic of your age.

"Motorola flip phone. How about me?"

"Somewhere between VHS and DVD," you say with a smirk as you tug him back down to lie next to you. You hold him. Even if Sollux is smiling, even if you got him laughing again, you can't imagine he isn't still at least a little shaken up. You kiss the back of his neck and wish you had sounds to make at him like he does to you. He holds your hand and brings it close to his chest. It's quiet for a long moment. You think maybe he's already drifted off until he suddenly speaks.

"You know this isn't the last time I'll freak out about this, right?" he asks. Some nagging uncertainty is still keeping him from believing that it's okay.

"I kind of figured it might not be a one-off. I just had this feeling, ya know? Like it may have been an impactful event in your life." 

"Smartass."

"You think I'm smart?"

"I'm starting to wonder."

"Wow, thanks, I feel the love." You squeeze him and playfully jostle the both of you. “Get some rest.”

“Don't let me sleep too long?”
“Bold of you to assume I'm staying conscious...yeah, okay” You pull out your phone and set an alarm just in case.

Silence falls between the two of you. You lie there not asleep, but not fully awake either. Sollux was out pretty quick and now his breaths are deep and even. You wonder which way he'll swing when he wakes up because you find it hard to believe something like this wouldn't cause him to. Roxy will probably feel like shit for it either way. You'll have to message her later when your arms aren't full of moirail. He's broken as hell, but you're pretty fucked up too. You kind of like that about him actually. You don't think you'd be able to truly relate to him if the universe hadn't thoroughly screwed him over too. You breathe in his scent like your stupid monkey brain wants you to. It gives you a fuzzy feeling, and a terribly anxious thought rises to the surface of your mind. You push it away. You don't want to think about that. Not now. Not yet. But it's already there. You can't unthink it. It exists now and you can't take it back. Fuck. You like Sollux. You like him a lot. You've come to terms with that, but you think you might actually love him and that scares the shit out of you.
Jade gets the wifi

Chapter Notes

i might recommend "slow motion" by flor

==> Be Roxy

You’re sitting on your bed. There are dried tears on your face made visible thanks to your eyeliner. You’ve just downed the last of the cheap vodka you keep in your flask and you still feel like shit.

tipsyGnostalgic [TG] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT]

[TG] dirk

[TG] i messsd up wth sollux

[TT] What happened?

[TG] mafde him really upset

[TT] What made him upset?

[TG] we were gettin frsky

[TG] *frisky

[TG] an i calld him hun and he freaked up

[TG] *out

[TG] i fucked up

[TT] It was an accident. I’m sure he’ll forgive you.

[TG] it wasnt like the other ti mes hes freaked out thoo cuz we were doin STUFF like under cloths

[TG] i had to get dave

[TG] sol was so uoset he couldnt talk

[TG] *upset

[TG] he just froze and looked up at me like he was scared of me an whe he started moving ahain he wouldn’t look at me

[TG] *again

[TG] when dave took him he was tryin so hard not to cry

[TT] Do you want me to come over there?
You leave your phone on your bed and stagger to the bathroom. You wrap yourself in the soft fabric and turn to head back to your room, but your reflection catches your eye. You look terrible. You shuffle back into the main room and find a washcloth. You’re a mess. You’re always a mess, but you don’t want Dirk to see you this bad. You take a makeup wipe to your eyes. You were just going to clean it up a bit and leave it, but you wind up removing any trace of makeup from your face in some kind of frantic form of cleansing penance. You turn on the tap and stare at your reflection while you wait for the water to warm. You still don’t look so good. You look tired and drunk. The warm water feels good on your skin as you wash away the grime. You wring out the wash cloth and re-wet it then hold it to your face until it isn't warm anymore. You decide to run a comb through your hair a few times too. You still look awful, but it’s a level of awful you can live with Dirk seeing you at. There’s a knock at the door and you hurry to get it, only stumbling a little bit.

In a matter of moments, and after he makes you drink some water, the two of you are laying on your bed. Dirk is leaning against a stack of pillows and you are leaning against him, curled up against his side with a plush toy cat. “S’all my fault,” you slur into the stuffed animal.

“You made a mistake. It was an accident,” he says while gently running his fingers through your hair.

“I pushed him into it.”

“You told me that you were working on that together. In fact, you told me very recently that he explicitly told you that he wanted to be with you physically.” Dirk does have a point, but you’re still upset. What if you made him move faster than he wanted?

“What if I rushed him? What if he doesn’t want to be with me anymore?”

“Roxy,” Dirk sighs. “He’s not going to leave you because you accidentally gave him a flashback.” There’s a pause like he's debating whether or not to say something. “I didn’t leave Jake when he did that to me, and it was as awkward as it was fucked up.” You look up at him with watery eyes. He has his shades off and is looking at you sympathetically.

“Jake gave you a flashback once? You never told me about that.”

“It was before you fully wormed your way into my head.” He gives you a squeeze to reinforce the fact that he’s being light-hearted about your persistence.

“What happened?”

“We had only just started messing around. He was always careful about touching my neck back when it mattered more, but he didn’t put two and two together the first time I went down on him. Didn’t think to maybe give me some fucking warning.”

“You choked, didn’t you?” you say with a slight air of teasing to your voice. Dirk will joke around
about sex-related things with you, and you always get a gander at any smut he draws, but it’s not often that he’ll talk about it in a personal way. When you were teenagers, when neither of you had ever been in anything even remotely serious, it was no big deal. It was only when he started dating Jake, when it became connected in a more emotional way for him, that he stopped being as open about it. So, this could either be him breaking through some kind of barrier, or him going the extra mile outside his comfort zone for you.

“Totally.”

“Good job.”

“It was impressive.”

“Anytime you want some lessons, I gotta few pointers for ya.”

“I’ve gotten much better at it, thank you.” There is a beat before he speaks again and when he does, there is no longer anything lighthearted about it. “But in all seriousness, for a moment, I really was back in that apartment with a mouth full of copper. Jake and I set ground rules after that.”

“Sollux n’ me have some rules, but they’rn’t, we didn’t talk ‘bout it specific-a-ly. Figured em out.”

“You should maybe ask Dave to see if he can get Sollux to at least give you an idea of what happened to him.”

“Yeah, I thought ‘bout that. Thought maybe’if Sollux can’t tell me, maybe ‘e could tell Dave’and Dave tell me.”

“That’s not a bad idea.” Your phone pings.

    turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering tipsyGnostalgic [TG]

[TG] just letting you know hes ok now

[TG] thanks

[TG] i made him cry didnt i?

[TG] yeah he was really fucking upset but i think he got some kind of catharsis out of it that he wouldnt have gotten by just thinking or talking about it so i wouldnt start with the self-flagellation just yet

[TG] i know you cant tel me but wasit bafd what happen t him

[TG] yeah

[TG] i was not prepared for that at all

[TG] fricken miles above my pay grade

[TG] striders aren’t exactly trained in the art of feelings and emotional support beyond walking it off and punching walls

[TG] tell me about it

[TG] itss a goddamn mirical dirk tell me jack shit
*goddamn

*miracle

hes still going to therapy too though right

he defintlly has a psychiatrist for hs meds but idk if he found a new therapost yet

i should ask him

he says hes working on it

dirk is with you

mhmm

thats good

sollux is still with me hes taking a nap

does he hate me?

you didnt come up but i highly doubt it

“Dave says’it was pretty bad. The thing that happened to him.” Dirk wraps his other arm around you

and rubs your shoulder.

do you think hell be able to tell me wha happen to him

maybe

if he cant them maybe you could?

You rest your eyes for a moment while you wait for Dave to respond and nearly nod off listening to

the steady rhythm of Dirk’s heart and the gentle rise and fall of his chest when pesterchum finally

pings again.

he says i can

you woke him up?

it was about time to anyway he didnt want me to let him sleep for too long

https://tinyurl.com/y49xpbr5

whats that

a link to the article

what artical

shockingly if you read it you may find out the answer to that

You click the link and your web browser opens up to a news article from a few years back. It’s about

some flarping incident you vaguely recall happening. You feel Dirk shift to read over your shoulder.
Your alcohol addled mind doesn’t make the connection at first, but as you get further and further into the article your brain starts to process it. There are no names in the report, but you think you understand what this is. When you click the button to continue to the next part of the story, any doubt you had is erased by the header image. It’s a photo of several people sitting in the courtroom. He isn’t the focus of the picture, but in the background, you can see Sollux sitting there in what looks to be a wheelchair. His posture is strange as if he were a doll that was positioned rather than sitting of his own will, and he has a thousand-yard stare on his face. Tears well in your eyes as you read the article. You get to the bottom and toss your phone aside.

“That’s rough,” Dirk says into your hair as you resume curling up against him. Your mind thinks back to all the things you’ve ever done that have made him uncomfortable and it’s all coming terribly into focus. They were probably all things, good or bad, that reminded him of her, of his dead matesprit. Not only that, but it also explains why he’s always so afraid of hurting you. You had been kind of miffed about it before and chalked it up to him being overly cautious because you’re human. Now though, you’re thinking that that isn’t the main reason. It’s then that the door handle jiggles and Nepeta walks in. She’s momentarily startled to see you with someone in your bed, but then she recognizes Dirk and is all smiles again. That is until she sees you are not all smiles. She pounces onto the foot of the bed and sits with her legs folded under her.

“What’s wrong?”

“She found out what happened to Sollux.”

“Oh.” She says, her face showing her sudden discomfort clearly. “He doesn’t like it when we talk about that. Equius told me I wasn’t allowed to tell you.” You can understand that. It’s a touchy matter. It’s personal and only for Sollux to divulge to people if he wants to. Although, it is a little weird to think about how many people around you must have known what happened when you didn’t.

“I get it,” you say. Nepeta seems satisfied that you don’t hold a grudge against her, and bounds off to grab her art bin.

“I have to go to another class now, but I hope you’re feline better soon. You too Dirk,” she quickly adds on at the end while pointing at her hand and wiggling her fingers.

You nod. “Thanks.” The door clicks shut behind her and the room is quiet again.

"Nepeta is nice."

"She is."

"When I met her, she said I looked like an older, spikey-haired version of Dave." There is a soft smile on his face. He and Dave do look similar, but it’s always overshadowed by him and Bro looking damn near identical. You wonder if that was the first time anyone has ever compared him to Dave instead of Bro.

Your pesterchum pings again. This time it’s Sollux.

twinArmageddons [TA] began pestering tipsyGnostalgic [TG]

[TA] hey.

[TG] hey

[TG] how u feelin
[TA] numb.
[TG] that sucks bbut its better than before right?
[TA] yeah.
[TG] i m sorry
[TA] ii know iit2 okay.
[TA] ii wa2n’t really your fault ii 2hould have thought of 2endiing you the artiile a long tiime ago.
[TA] ii would tiiill rather not talk about iit but now you know.
[TG] thanks
[TG] dirk thinks we need ground rule s tho
[TA] ii gue22 we never diid actually talk about that iit wa2 all triial and error.
[TA] ii’ll think about iit later.

twinArmageddons [TA] ceased pestering tipsyGnostalgic [TG]

He signs off before you can reply. He’s probably going to ignore you for a few days while he licks his wounds. He’s probably going to ignore everyone.

===> Be Sollux

You were numb when you woke up. You had expected to swing violently in one direction or another. Mostly you expected to spiral head first into the depressive episode you’ve been postponing. Instead, you woke up empty. You've spent the past few days wavering between catching up on your homework and staring at the ceiling. You just don't know what to do with yourself. You don't really want to do anything in particular. At least you've made a dent in your homework. You're almost entirely caught up. You look away from your computer screen and the paper you've been half-assing and rub at your eyes. That's probably enough for now. You go to sip at your coffee only to spit it back out. It's super old. Maybe it's time to hit up the cafeteria. You pause your music and pull off your headphones.

"What the fuck?" You tilt your head and listen to the sounds of heavy movement above you. Someone is doing something up on the roof. Dave has mixed feelings about the roof. You should probably check and see what all the noise is about. You climb out the window and cautiously float up the short distance. It’s not what you expected. Dave looks to be running drills of some sort. It’s cold out, but he’s in a t-shirt that’s had the sleeves ripped off and track pants. You wonder how long he’s been out here. You float up higher when he isn’t looking and watch him from a distance. He gets a little fancy with that sword of his and it does something fluttery to your stomach. He’s very capable and that’s a quality you very much like in your quadrantmates. You’d be safe with him just as he’d be safe with you. He actually already has come to your aid. Even if your mind was busy being pissed off, you still registered how impressive it was the way he completely disabled that jackass. Gog, it was practically straight out of one of Karkat’s trashy novels. You got in a fight and he came to your aid, then patched you up, revealed a vulnerability, and you both crawled into a pile. It was hot in a pitiable sort of way. You float down a little lower so you can see him better.

You think maybe your feelings for him do blur at least a little red. He is very nice to look at, and you
possibly like being close to him (in the physical sense) a bit more than you ought to, and if he asked to try something with you, you don’t think you would turn him down, however, he’s not attractive to you in a clothes off sort of way. When you think of how you feel about him, you think about him paleways for sure, but there may be something more. Something more saturated than how Karkat and Kanaya are, but much less so than flushed.

He puts his sword away and takes out a water bottle. He must be taking a break. You float down to where he can see you. You’ll feel like less of a creep if you make yourself known instead of spying on him thinking about what type of hot you find him to be. You float down behind him, and it’s a good thing that you’re more than an arm’s length away because the second he senses you his sword is out and at the ready. He puts it away when he sees that it’s you. Noted, don’t sneak up on Dave.

“Sup?” he asks. He sounds a bit out of breath to no surprise.

“Not much. Was going to take a break and head down to the cafeteria, but I heard a bunch of noise up here when I took my headphones off,” You say flatly.

“Listening to my music?” He says it in that cocky way he flirts with you when he isn't tripping over his own feelings.

“I might have been.” Not exclusively, but some of his stuff was on the playlist. He smiles and leans against the AC unit. He looks you up and down.

“Floating around again today?” You have yet to actually put your feet on the floor.

You shrug. “I guess.” He does that thing where he nods a few times like he's acknowledging that you’ve spoken, but hasn’t formed a response yet. “Do you want to come with me?” You’ve been a bit scarce the past few days. It’ll keep everyone off your back if you venture out with a witness. It would also be nice.

“Yeah sure. Gimme a second.” He chugs down some more water and catches his breath before he starts making for the fire escape.

“You know I can just float us down there right?” He stops in his tracks and seems to entertain the thought.

“I’m so sweaty and gross, babe.” He's never called you that before. It has the suggestion of a smile tugging at the corner of your mouth.

“You think I’ve showered recently? I’ve been holed up in there for like what, three days?”

“Yeah, actually. You’re right.”

“I’m mildly aware sometimes. Come on.” You wave him over and he relents, closing the distance between you. You pick him up off the ground and throw your arm around him. He still seems unaccustomed to it, but not weirded out like last time. You split up when you get inside. The first stop you make is to the coffee and then you grab some cereal. Dave, on the other hand, has worked up an appetite and has much heavier food on his plate. You steal one of his fries and float it over to your mouth. They’re pretty good. Maybe you should get some...or you could just keep stealing his.

“I love the cafeteria so much.” He says around a mouthful of cheeseburger.

“What?” You half laugh. The food isn’t exactly stellar.

“There’s food like right here, all the time. I just walk here, swipe my id, and boom, all the food I
want. Not an empty fridge in sight.” The look on his face gets less expressive in that subtle way it does when he’s reconsidering what he’s just said.

“It is pretty nice not having to plan or go food shopping.” You feel like that isn’t quite what he meant, but you’re not going to pry. His phone pings and his face lights up immediately.

“Fuck yeah, Jade is back in the land of wifi. Hold up, I’ll get you added to the memo.” You recall them mentioning their friend was abroad someplace. A second later your palm husk vibrates.

gardenGnostic [GG] opened memo IM BACK!!!:

gardenGnostic [GG] added twinArmageddons [TA] to memo IM BACK!!!:
twinArmageddons [TA] responded to memo.

[GG] oh that explains a lot actually
[GG] i was a little confused about how that was working between you all
[GG] i dont think i fully understand it but im so happy for you guys!
[GG] hello sollux!

[TA] 2up

[TG] we were just all collectively losing our goddamn minds over jade being back
[GG] its so good to talk to you guys again!
[GG] i have so many stories to share but first i wanted to wish all of you a happy soon to be birthday

[TG] you too :3

[TG] ditto

[TT] Happy soon-to-be birthday to you too, Jade.

[TT] And to you as well, Jade.

[GT] Youre a regular old geezer now.

[GG] mean :P

[GG] i got each of you a little something while i was adventuring

[TA] wait who’2 birthday is it?

[GT] Mine jade dirk dave roxy and rose.

[EB] it’s so not fair that all of you are so close together and then jane and i are in april

[TA] that’2 in2ane are you all on the 2ame day?

[TG] nah but it is admittedly freaky that we share birthdays with our siblings

[TA] the odd2 of that happeniing two all of you are riidiiculou2
I’m fairly certain we were all conceived on an annual day of significance, such as a birthday or anniversary. gross

You look up from your palm husk to Dave. “When is your birthday?”

“The third. What day is your- wait no let me guess. It’s June second isn’t it?” Your only response is a wide grin. “Of course it is,” he says with a shake of his head and a smirk.

are you all doing anything special for your first strilonde birthday bash?

We’re going to the lazer tag arena.

roxy gets to be on her own team so there is at least a chance of us winning

oh come on thats so not fair

You are the only one of us, excluding Jake and Jade, who regularly practices firing a projectile weapon.

We could potentially even the teams if Jake comes too.

cuz thats not a bias suggestion at all ;)

That will create an odd number of players. We will have to extend the invitation to one more person.

it sounds like so much fun

i wish i could go but its a pain to get on and off the island :( i wont be back by then either

It really is. One of us needs to invest in a pilots license.

And a plane.

soooo

Sollux would you like to join us?

only if im not teamed up wiith roxy

oh its on now

im taking no prisoners

well now were back to square one

2o much faiith iin me thank2 dave

It’s not a lack of faith in you so much as it is experience with Roxy’s competitive streak.

its not a streak its a five lane highway

eheheheh yeah iit ii2
Anyway... so tell us about your adventures Jade!

Right!

We just wrapped up the last leg of the field research and now I'm headed back to the institute but I won't be able to talk to you all while I'm there because the security there is intense.

After that, I'm heading back to the island for the semester break.

gutsyGumshoe [GG] responded to memo.

Jade!

You made it!

I can't stay for long, but I did want to say welcome back and wish you an early happy birthday.

Aww thanks

Has it been really busy running the baking empire?

It's been incredibly busy. We're gearing up for a new product launch and we haven't even finalized the packaging design let alone started on marketing. I'm plum tuckered out.

Baking empire?

Jade runs Betty Crocker.

Jade rules the baking industry with an iron spoon.

My sister inherited the Betty Crocker company a few years ago and was crazy enough to accept it.

I don't recognize that chumhandle. Who is that?

That would be Sollux. He and Roxy, and He and Dave are romantically involved. It would appear that he has a type.

They are all dating each other? :?

Nope!

Roxy and Sollux are kismesis.

And Dave and Sollux are moirails.
What?
iim irre2ii2tiible.
pffft
a regular casanova for sure
its all the leg
hot hot leg
leg so hot
you can fry an egg

what do you see in these two numbskulls?

Sollux is a troll and participates in quadranted romantic interpersonal relations. Roxy and Dave are in completely separate, and in fact opposite, quadrants.

I know what quadrants are, Rose.

That's...different.

But I guess if they're into that sort of thing...

Anyhoo, I need to get going before the board throws a hissy fit. Happy birthday Jake, Jade, Dirk, Dave, Roxy, and Rose! I've had some promotional samplers sent to you all.

gutsyGumshoe ceased responding to memo.

You look up at Dave with a cocked eyebrow. "That was awkward." He rubs the back of his neck and looks away momentarily.

"Sorry, bro. Jane is nice I swear. Things have just been a little tense since she started running betty crocker in a more hands on sense. She’s just under a lot of pressure is all. Not to make nothing of it. It’s still not cool, but it’s not not cool, wait no. Crap. Okay, it was a dick move and a shitty first impression, but I swear she isn’t a complete and total jackwad."

"It isn't like she directly condemned quadrants or anything. It was just a little weird and sketchy." Some people aren't exactly keen on quadrants. However, you can't help but think it wasn't quadrants she was talking about. "I'll take your word for it." It could very well be that her text just came across poorly, especially if she is under a lot of stress. It's not like you’ve never misspoken before yourself.

so after there i was studying a lot of high elevation plants

we would spend days up in the mountains because it took an entire day to go down to the village for supplies and come back

oh and we had the cutest alpacas!

i have so much more to tell you guys but my connecting flight is about to board

ill be back on the island next time we talk
[GG] I'll see you soon.

[GG] im counting down the days!

[GG] oh I almost forgot!

[GG] jake what you are looking for is in the pocket of the shirt you left at dirks

[GG] bye everyone!

gardenGnostic [GG] ceased responding to memo.

[GT] You’re going to the island for the semester break?

[GT] Yup. Did i forget to mention that?

[TT] You may have.

[GT] Sorry.

[TT] There was talk of inviting you up to join in what we generously call the festivities.

[GT] You were going to ask me to come up to the woods with the rest of you?

[TT] It was a thought. It’s fine.

[GT] Are you sure its fine?

[TT] Really, it’s cool. We can send the gifts with you.

[tg] aw i wanted to use the transportalizer its fun jamming stuff in there

You set aside your palm husk for a bit and focus on your cereal before it gets soggy. Dave is still typing between bites, but by the time you’re done with your food he sets down his phone.

“What are your winter break plans?”

“I always spend it with Karkat and Kanaya and their respective siblings, and Mituna of course. Crab Dad too.”

“Crab Dad?”

“Karkat and Kankri’s lusus. He hasn’t taken up a new grub for whatever reason so he’s still around. I have a theory that he only chooses grubs with blood mutations, which are pretty rare, and there simply haven’t been any yet so he’s still hanging around,” you say as you both collect your stuff and start heading to the tray return. You grab an apple as you pass the fruit and throw it in your sylladex for later.

“Your lusus isn’t around anymore I take it?”

“Biclops is nearby if I really needed to find him for some reason, but he has a new grub.”

“How does that work? Is that like your new sibling or something?” It’s amazing sometimes the things Dave doesn’t know. Karkat really wasn’t kidding when he said that Dave lacked exposure to a lot of this.

“No. Grubs are either raised individually or in pairs that are usually no more than a sweep or two
apart. Mituna and I have the same sign, but the new grub doesn’t.”

“So your sign is more like a last name than a first name.”

“You could say that.” You get the door for him as you head outside. He mutters something about it being cold as balls. It is getting pretty cold. Honestly, you’re surprised it hasn’t snowed yet this far into November.

“I heard from Karkat when I was involuntarily eavesdropping that some trolls are starting to raise grubs with each other again since they aren’t being booted off the planet.”

You look away for a moment as you tell a thought to fuck off. “Yeah.” You may have missed the mark on making that sound neutral because Dave drops the topic entirely before getting to his point. When you cross the threshold into your dorm building, you see that Roxy is manning the check-in desk.

“Hey, boys.” She's smiling, but there is a certain nervousness underneath it. You haven't spoken to her since messaging her from the pile that day.

“Hey, Rox,” you say as you swipe into the building.

“How goes it?” Dave asks, hopping up on the desk counter.

“Ugh, Dave you wreak. Go take a shower or something,” she says as she waves her hand in front of her face. He makes an exaggerated movement as he rolls his eyes to make sure you all know that's what he's doing.

“Yeah, yeah, I was en route.” He hops back off the counter and pats your arm as he passes you. “See ya round.” You're left standing there with her and you have no idea what to say.

“Sollux, umm...” It looks like she doesn't know either. “I um...” You lean over the counter and kiss her. She doesn't kiss you back immediately, but when she does, it's with fervor. You press back and then nip at her lip like you know she wants you to, but that you are so afraid of doing. She bites you back, accepting and returning whatever weird apology-like thing it is the two of you are doing here. You steal her lips one more time, slow and lingering, before pulling back.

“See you tomorrow,” you say only slightly awkwardly. She smiles at you anyway.

“G'night.”

==>

Be Dirk

You don’t perchance have any plans for the evening, do you?

I dont have anything important lined up. Why? Did you need something?

I need you to fucking rail me.

Gadzooks dirk that is mighty forward of you.

Not that id turn down a bit of the old rough and tumble but you could warn a fella before you go getting him all hot under the collar.
[TT] I could have, but it would not have conveyed the various flavors of loathing I have for this upcoming week.

[GT] Oh i see. Youre looking to ease your mind by way of sexual escapades. Well i can certainly help you with that.

[GT] Shall i ply you with liquor first?

[TT] God, yes, please.

[TT] With any luck, that won’t be the last time you hear that today.

[GT] Jesus dirk. Youre going to kill me.

[GT] So what has your berries so razzed?

[TT] Hal

[TT] Some of this is rightly deserved, but a fair chunk of it exists solely to piss me off.

[TT] I’ll talk to you later. I need to get back to work.

[GT] Alrighty chum.

[GT] Ill come round about half past eight.

[TT] I sure hope not.

[GT] Holy mackerel dirk.

[TT] Hahahaha

TimaeusTestified [TT] ceased pestering golgothasTerror [GT]

You put away your phone and stretch as you lean back in your chair. This is going to be so much more work than you had made time for. Roxy admittedly had a pretty good idea for a compromise between you and Hal. It is a temporary measure to satisfy Hal’s desire for more mobility while taking into account your concern for his mental stability and desire to hold off on actually moving his consciousness to a new container. Well, his entire consciousness isn’t in your shades. That would be ludicrous. You merely keep his core there. His extended consciousness is in a RAID array hooked up to your desktop because for all your fighting, you do give at least a fraction of a damn. Whether or not that damn consists solely of guilt and shame is another matter. Regardless, it was decided that Hal would be given a drone. He won’t be directly inhabiting it, but he’ll have control of it. You were fairly pleased with this idea. You figured you and Hal could pick out a nice simple drone, nothing too big or fancy, but something with a companion app that you could, at most, modify for him. The first hitch came when he wasn’t exactly happy with the selection in the shop, which was fine, you can go elsewhere, but then Horuss showed up. He doesn’t come in the shop very often, but you’ve met him enough times that you could say that you are good acquaintances, maybe even friends by extension of Equius. Unlike the younger Zahhak, Horuss finds Hal intriguing in a much more easy-going way as if a fully sentient AI created by a self-deprecation laden sixteen-year-old from a brain scan of his thirteen-year-old self isn’t something to be concerned about in the slightest. It just so happened that he had an older, but higher quality demo drone in the back room taking up space. He couldn’t return it to the manufacturer because the remote for it got lost and it was zeroed out of the inventory months ago. So of course, this is the one Hal loves. It’s not too big either. It’s pretty much exactly the size you were aiming for and it looks like it will come apart easily for modifications and
repairs. However, it doesn’t have a companion app, which means you’ll have to make one from scratch, or at the very least build a program that will let Hal interface with it enough that he can figure it out himself. The receiver also has shit tier range so you’ll need to upgrade that. It needs a guard for the propellers too. You look back over to the chat log between you and him to see how far he’s gotten with his research.

[AR] I found the manual online.

[AR] The company has very poor server security.

[AR] I’m almost done downloading the technical documentation and source code.

[TT] Where are you downloading that to?

[AR] I’ve enslaved several computers to do it in parts and am downloading it to a local library where we can pick it up later on machine #5.

[AR] When do you think it will be done?

[TT] That depends. Do you want me to build the entire interface, or do you want me to build a base program for you to be able to talk to it and learn how to control it directly with raw input? If you do the later, no one else will be able to interface with it, but you might break it while trying to learn to control it.

[AR] You could fix it if I break it.

[TT] Careful, that was almost a compliment.

[TT] I may be able to, but I can’t guarantee it.

[AR] I don’t want to break it.

[TT] Alright, I guess I’ll be making an application for it then. You’ll have to give me a little time.

[AR] Since you have to build the base communication program anyway, perhaps you could remove the propellers and let me explore it while I wait.

[TT] I guess.

You figured he would want to do it that way. He will more than likely start with the application until he’s comfortable enough with raw input and then ditch it entirely. You sigh and get back to work on the AI’s for Equius. You’ve hit a snag and, albeit for different reasons, it’s only making you more agitated. Jake better bring his A game tonight.

==> Be Karkat
carcinoGeneticist [CG] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

[CG] HEY ASSHOLE, WAKE UP.

[CG] WAKE UP.

[CG] I WILL NOT STOP MESSAGING YOU UNTIL YOU ANSWER ME.

[CG] CLASSES ARE CANCELED.
[TA] i figured.

[CG] YOU WERE AWAKE AND HAVE MOVED FAR ENOUGH TO LOOK OUT THE WINDOW?

[TA] i'm outside.

[CG] WHAT ARE YOU DOING AWAKE LET ALONE DRESSED AT THIS HOUR AND OUTSIDE OF ALL PLACES?

[TA] take a guess.

[TA] also never claimed to be dressed.

[CG] ...

[TA] oh come off it it's a snow day.

[TA] i'm practically obligated to wake and bake.

[CG] FINE. WHATEVER. GET YOUR ASS INSIDE. YOUR DUMBASS IS FLIPPING HIS GODDAMN PAN BECAUSE HE'S NEVER SEEN SO MUCH AS A SNOWFLAKE BEFORE, MUCH LESS SEEN WINTER REALIZE THAT IT'S LATE AND PANIC DUMP A METRIC FUCK TON OF SNOW OVERNIGHT.

[TA] oh my god, that's right dave ha2 never seen snow.

[TA] will be there in two seconds.

You put away your palm husk and look up at Dave who has his face glued to the window. "Karkat are you seeing this shit because I don't think you're seeing this shit. It's fucking Narnia outside."

"It's just snow."

"Just snow? Dude, that is some movie magic quality blanket of frosty goodness." The door handle jiggles and Sollux comes floating in wrapped in a blanket that has a bunch of bees on it. "Sollux have you seen this shit?" Dave says as he spins around.

"I have." If you didn't know better you'd think he sounded sleepy. Well, actually he might also be still half awake in addition to being baked.

"My dude, my bro, brosheezy, brozizzle, brosidon king of the brocean," Dave is so fucking amped. You have to admit, it is kind of funny. He's like some little kid. "We HAVE to do all that stupid winter stuff."

"Ironically?" you ask.

"Of course," he responds before being half devoured by the bee blanket. He makes a muffled sound of surprise and Sollux somewhat awkwardly drags him over to sit on your bed with him. He settles himself between the other trolls legs, seemingly resigned to his fate as Sollux rests his head on top of his. You shake your head. Those two. There's a sudden knock at your door.

"Open up, losers." It's Roxy. You get up and go open the door for her only to be barreled over by Nepeta.
"Karkitty have you seen outside yet? It's a winter wonderland!" Roxy steps around you and plants herself in the middle of your bed. Nepeta follows suit a second later and now everyone EXCEPT you is on YOUR bed. With no room left you pull over your desk chair.

"So what's the plan? What's our strategy for achieving maximum snow day shenanigans?" Dave asks from within the blanket Sollux had trapped him in.

"Pfft," Roxy laughs looking at them all bundle up the way they are. "Dude, you look fuckin zonked. Wake and bake?" Sollux nods and lets his eyes close contently until they're only slits. Dave reaches up and scratches a spot beside one of his horns causing him to make a little sound and pull Dave's hand away. Whatever he whispers to him has Dave going a little red. He was probably telling him that scratching near his horns like that isn't super appropriate. Horns themselves aren't sensitive, they're keratin and bone, but the area at their base is a little.

"I purpose the traditional snow day activities: Snow forts, a snowball fight, snowman--"

"Don't forget the snow dick," Dave chimes in.

"The what?" you ask with wide eyes.

"The snow dick is a time-honored college tradition," Roxy vouches.

"Alright, you three are on snow dick duty," You say.

"Which three?" Nepeta asks

"I think you know which three." You look pointedly at Roxy, Dave, and Sollux. "You and I can build a nice normal snowman."

"Aw, I wanna build the snow dick."

"Karkat, let her build the snow dick."

"Yeah, if she wants the D, give her the D."

"Snow dick, snow dick, snow dick" they start chanting. "Snow dick, snow di--"

"FINE, I GUESS WE'RE ALL BUILDING THE SNOW DICK INSTEAD OF A SNOWMAN LIKE NORMAL SANE PEOPLE. WHY DID I EVEN EXPECT ANYTHING LESS."

After a brief discussion of the plans for the day, Roxy and Nepeta hurry off to get changed into their snow gear. You're shocked to find out that Dave actually has appropriate clothes for the weather. You thought you would have to cobble something together for him between you and Sollux. Apparently not. You meet the others in the lobby and all proceed outside. Dave, barely containing his excitement, tries to run through it and nearly falls over, not used to the difference in the footing. Sollux stifles a laugh behind you and Nepeta runs out after Dave. Her balance is much better. The rest of you follow out at a more reasonable pace, although Sollux has decided he's just going to float over the snow instead of walking through it. Floating around seems to be his thing the past couple days. Roxy is trying to get Dave to spin around with her and as soon as he does, she lets go and sends him crashing into the snow where he promptly starts making a snow angel.

"So what's first?" Nepeta asks from the ground where she's joined Dave in making snow angels.

"I'm thinking snowball fight," Dave says as he sits up and realizes he has just put handprints in his creation.
"We need to build the forts first," you say. "How about Roxy and Nepeta build one fort while me and Dave build the other and Sollux, you can be on ammunition duty."

"Seems legit." Sollux shows off by rolling a perfect snowball in a matter of seconds with his psionics as if that wasn't exactly why you assigned him the task in the first place. You all get started and while Roxy and Nepeta have no problem working together, it would appear that you and Dave have drastically different building styles. You keep trying to make a nice neat even wall to take cover behind. Dave is just making a mishappen and uneven pile and tamping it down. You groan and try to blend your two sides together in the middle so it looks less awful. You just about have it looking okay when you catch Dave out of the corner of your eye sneaking up on Sollux with a snowball in his hand. You open your mouth to warn him of what a terrible idea that is, but then decide to let him find out on his own. The snowball hits Sollux square in the back of the head and as he turns around, a formidable amount of snowballs rise up in the air, all of which are trained on Dave.

"Oh shit, ow, hey, oof, not the face, auck." After a brief and futile attempt to outrun the assault, he falls face down in the snow and is pummeled by one last snowball in the same place he hit Sollux. The troll looks pleased with himself but doesn't gloat too long before he goes to help Dave up.

"And that's why Sollux is on his own team," You shout. He seems like he's going to fire back with something, but checks his palm husk instead.

"Mituna and Latula are on their way," he says and throws the device back in his sylladex. He has such a zoned out look on his face. He really is high off his ass today. He's not always this high, but it feels like more and more often he's at least a little intoxicated when you see him. Sometimes you wonder if your worry is justified or if you really are overly concerned about this. Other people don't seem to pay any mind. Maybe it only bothers you because it reminds you of Gamzee. He's only half present, but there is a content look to him, and that is better than the last time you saw him. He looked so devoid of everything. At least he's not cripplingly depressed. Not yet. It's coming though. Crab Dad has a spot all set up for him to hide away in and some of his favorite snacks. His depression was always bad around this time of the year, but after Aradia died it got worse. It's predictable, but Sollux never seems to remember the pattern (that starts around October and doesn't let up until mid-January) until it's too late. He'll power through his finals again, just like he did last year and the year before, and then he'll crash. It gives him time to recover, but it's still pretty shitty that all this goes down during the festive perigees. You should talk to Dave later. You can get his opinion on this and give him a heads up that Sollux is about to hit a dark place, but it's normal for him, and he may either completely ignore him or pester him constantly.

With your forts complete, Sollux divides up the mountain of snowballs between the three teams. He doesn't make a fort for himself. It's more fun for him to blast the snowballs out of the air or redirect them. Eventually, you all gang up on him and it turns into something of a reverse skeet shooting game until Nepeta lands a hit that makes his focus completely collapse and he gets pelted with snow from everyone. It's then that Mituna and Latula show up. It's not exactly shocking that Mituna is amped as fuck for building a snow dick and construction starts almost immediately. You're standing off to the side, shaking your head when Latula wanders over. She laughs. "Lighten up, Karkat. Look how much fun they're having." You sigh deeply. They are having a lot of fun. Mituna is leeching Sollux's psionics to add more snow to the top and Dave is making sure the shameglobes double as a chair to create this absurd throne like thing. Roxy is...what is she doing with that stick? She's carving her initials and Sollux's sign into the shaft and drawing a spade around it. Weird. Once the monument to obscenity is completed and everyone, including you, is done taking pictures with it, it's agreed upon that it's time to head back inside. Dave is a little bummed out about getting out of the snow, but perks right back up when Nepeta reminds him about the hot cocoa.
You did it right this time you think. You took it super fucking slow and now you're comfortably up there. Everything is hazy and no one is giving you shit for being blatantly high as a kite. You're almost happy. Not truly so, but for the moment you aren't as hollow. Dave is having the time of his life and it puts a lazy smile on your face. He's stacking up the snow boulders with Roxy while Nepeta and Latula pack in the snow like mortar around them. You're just sorta hanging on Mituna, watching over his shoulder while he leeches your psionics to help build up the top of the snow dick. They've got it all but entirely fleshed out when the effort starts to wear on you. Your psionics aren't up to spec and they haven't been for a while. You haven't told anyone about it though. You never exert yourself enough for it to show. At this point you're undeniably aware that you have a problem, and you don't mean with your psionics. It's the smoking. You're abusing it, you do it too much, like every day, sometimes more than once, you can't stop, and you're aware that it's a big part of why your psionics are out of whack. Not the sole reason, but part of it. It's entirely reversible if you would cut it out for even just a month or so, but you wont. You'll feel bad about that later, but you don't right now. All this and the fact that you are currently under the influence means your psionics are more than a little shoddy. You've been using them all day too. Not to mention Mituna can't regulate what he siphons; that's all on you. It's making your temperature drop. "Mituna, I'm getting cold."

"Ah, yes, my rightful throne." You hear Dave say. You glance over at him. So does Mituna. He loses his concentration and dumps a whole bunch of snow all over Dave. Roxy cracks up. Karkat has his palm to his face and is shaking his head. "Jesus, man, at least wine and dine me if you're gonna get it in my hair," he says as he tries to avoid getting snow down his coat. Mituna cackles. He's always game for a rude joke. You really are getting cold tho.

"Tuna," you pat his shoulder and he makes a confused sound before he remembers what you said.

"Aw, already?" You nod and let go of him. He gives you a scrutinizing look. He isn't sure of something.

"Yo, Tuna, give me a boost!" The moment vanishes when Latula calls him over. Nepeta is climbing onto Roxy's back and it looks like Latula is about to ask Mituna to do the same. Dave waves you over and kneels down.

"Hop on," he says.

"You sure you won't drop me?" You say before thinking better of it. Thankfully he doesn't pick up on how weird a question that is for you to ask.

"So, you weigh like nothing. I could carry you on my shoulders if I wanted to." He proves his point when he effortlessly stands up. You may be gangly, and it's possible that you tread the line of being underweight, but you do weigh something. And he just picked you up like you weren't even there. He's strong. Gog, maybe you do have a type. You and Nepeta have been drafted to shape the top and Mituna joins you when it becomes apparent that apparent that balancing with Latula on him just isn't going to happen. You look down to see Karkat sitting on the shameglobes seat.

"It looks like you've been usurped," You say down at Dave. He laughs in that cool kid way he does when he's in a group. It is truly a majestic snow dick when it's finished. You doubt it'll stay standing for more than a day so you all gather around and take selfies and stupid pictures with it. It's fun. You're actually having fun. However, when the suggestion to go inside for a while is brought up, you are so down for it. As fun as this is, you're fucking freezing.

You all pile in the elevator. The girls go off to Roxy's room to change into dry clothes, Dave and Karkat head to their room and Mituna comes with you. You peel off your wet coat and snow pants
and hang yours and your brother's stuff on the curtain rod to dry. You throw your yellow hoodie over the long sleeve you're wearing and put the hood up. You're still cold and are really looking forward to that hot coco. "Shit, err, uh," Mituna starts. You wait. He's trying to put a sentence together, you can see it in his face. When it doesn't come to him, he gives up and pulls you into a hug instead, only to jump back and grab one of your hands. He's warmer than you. "Fuck balls, you're cold."

"I told you I was." He makes a whining noise and pulls you back into his arms, swaying side to side as he hugs you. You let your arms hang at your sides.

"You're not okay," he finally manages. It pisses him off when that happens, when he gets a complex thought and just can't voice it right so it winds up being the bare bones of what he meant. You shrug.

"We should go meet up with the others." He lets you go with an unsatisfied grumble and you both head out. Dave and Karkat are in the elevator when you get there and Karkat holds it for you. You hit the button for the basement and Dave gives you a weird look. "Secret passage," you say with a wink.

"The cafeteria annex shares a basement with the dorm." Karkat clears up. You aren't supposed to be down there, but you don't feel like going outside and it is kind of cool to go this way. Look at you, you rule breaker, you. Dave shuffles a little closer to you as the elevator starts to go down. His hand is right next to yours, but he hasn't taken it yet. You save him the agony and grab his hand first. He's warmer than you.

"Damn, son. Your hands are like ice."

"My gloves got wet." That's mostly a lie. You really shouldn't lie to Dave. Maybe by omission, but not outright. Your mood is starting to dip. You think your social battery is running low. You're also sobering up. You keep the promise of warm drinks in mind. The girls beat you there, but not by much. You find them by the machine, filling up their mugs and topping them off with marshmallows. Nepeta has A LOT of marshmallows. Latula walks over with a drink in each hand, one presumably for Mituna. He smiles and kisses her cheek as he takes the mug she got for him.

"Stand in front of me for a sec," Roxy says quietly to you when you get in line for hot chocolate. You do so without asking why and see her pour a generous amount of something into her drink. "Much better." She winks at you before heading over to the table Nepeta, Mituna, and Latula have situated themselves at. You try to enjoy yourself. You really do. You sit with everyone and watch them talk, and laugh, and have fun all the while feeling like you're seeing it from behind glass. You tell yourself it's only a few more weeks. Just a few more weeks and you can rest. You can collapse without consequence and reset. Pretend a little longer. Just a few more weeks. You can do it.
[CG] DAVE WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT SOLLUX. THERE ARE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT AND I HAVE EXTREME DOUBTS THAT YOU KNOW TO ASK ME ABOUT THEM AS HIS MOIRAIL.

[TG] believe it or not i was actually considering asking you some things but i wasnt sure if that was cool or not so i am set for this info youre about to spin at me i am signed up for this lecture my ass is in the front row and i have my pencil ready to take notes

[CG] SHUT UP THIS IS SERIOUS. SOLLUX HAS A DEPRESSIVE EPISODE EVERY YEAR AROUND THIS TIME BUT HE MISSES A LOT OF THE RED WARNING WIND FLAPPERS BECAUSE HIS DEEP FRIED ANGUISH SPONGE SOMEHOW FORGETS THAT IT'S COMING UNTIL IT'S RIGHT ABOUT TO HAPPEN.

[TG] shit i had a distinct feeling that something was up

[CG] I THINK MAYBE IT IS BECAUSE IT COINCIDES WITH THE START OF CLASSES AND HE THINKS IT IS JUST THE NEWNESS OF THE SCHOOL YEAR WEARING OFF. DOESN’T MATTER. YOUR ASS NEEDS TO KNOW THAT HE IS EITHER GOING TO IGNORE YOU COMPLETELY LIKE A SELFISH ASSHOLE OR BECOME AN INCESSANTLY CLINGY LITTLE WIGGLER. HE COULD EVEN DO BOTH IN ANY AND ALL COMBINATIONS POSSIBLE, AND WILL FIND A WAY TO FEEL LIKE A FESTERING BUCKET OF DISCHARGE ABOUT IT.

[TG] good to know

[TG] totally not alarming at all

[TG] so where he normally hovers between the slightly aggravated and the mildly distressed smiley face now hes jumping down the line sampling every flavor of the pain scale like its a baskin robbins

[CG] YES. YOU’VE ACTUALLY ONLY EVER KNOWN HIM WHEN HE ISN’T AT HIS BEST. WHICH IS PROBABLY A GOOD THING NOW THAT I THINK ABOUT IT BECAUSE IF YOU CAN TOLERATE HIM WHEN HE’S LIKE THIS THEN IT’LL BE A PLEASANT SURPRISE TO SEE HIM WHEN HE IS CAPABLE OF BEING HAPPY FOR MORE THAN A FEW HOURS WITHOUT FLOODING HIS THINK SPONGE WITH THC.

[TG] that is something i wanted to ask about

[CG] WAIT REALLY?

[TG] yeah

[TG] im probably breaking the bro code here asking you this super personal shit about him but whats his deal with this stuff has he been doing this for a long time or what

[CG] HE STARTED DOING THIS SHIT BECAUSE HE HAD A FUCKING FULL BLOWN MANIC EPISODE NOT TERRIBLY LONG AFTER HE GOT OUT OF THE HOSPITAL. HE
REALLY SHOULD HAVE GONE BACK THERE BUT HE OBVIOUSLY HATES HOSPITALS WHAT WITH THE VOICES OF THE DAMNED IN HIS HEAD. WE TOLD HIM IT WASN’T THAT KIND OF HOSPITAL BUT HE STILL REFUSED TO GO THERE BECAUSE HE WAS SO MONUMENTALLY JACKED UP OUT OF HIS PAN IT WAS MAKING HIM PARANOID. MITUNA IS THE ONE WHO GAVE HIM THAT SHIT TO CALM HIS ASS DOWN AND I HAVE TO ADMIT IT WORKED REALLY WELL FOR THAT SOLE PURPOSE.

[TG] wait hold up go back to that voices of the damned part you cant just casually skip over something like that

[CG] MOTHERFUCKER. YOU DIDN’T KNOW ABOUT THAT. WELL, GREAT. SOME TROLLS HAVE PROPHETIC INSIGHTS AND BECAUSE THE UNIVERSE LIKES TO DEFECATE ALL OVER HIM WITH ONLY BRIEF INTERRUPTION FOR THE PURPOSE OF CLEANSING, HIS PSYCHIC ABILITIES ONLY TELL HIM AWFUL STUFF LIKE WHEN PEOPLE ARE ABOUT TO DIE.

[TG] jade has mysterious abilities like that but in a more upbeat and practical sense like telling you where something is or just knowing something you dont know yet so when you do know it youre all what the fucking fuck how did she know that

[CG] ANYWAY, BACK TO SOLLUX’S DRUG HABITS. HE WAS RESPONSIBLE WITH IT FOR A WHILE AND HONESTLY, I WAS HAPPY HE FOUND SOMETHING THAT WORKED FOR HIM. I DON’T KNOW WHY HE STOPPED BEING REASONABLE ABOUT IT. WHEN HE STARTED DOING IT SOCIALLY I GUESS I LOOKED THE OTHER WAY BECAUSE IT WASN’T ALL THE TIME AND IT’S NOT LIKE HE CAN DRINK ALCOHOL BECAUSE OF HIS MEDS. BUT IT IS SOMETHING OF A NEW DEVELOPMENT FOR HIM TO BE BULGEWRENCHINGLY TRASHED THIS OFTEN. HE WAS STARTING TO OVERDO IT LAST YEAR BUT NOT LIKE THIS. THEN HE COULDN’T GET A HOLD OF THE STUFF FOR A WHILE, AND HE DOESN’T LIKE TO TAKE MITUNA’S BECAUSE HIS IS MEDICALLY SANCTIONED, SO I GUESS THAT’S WHAT WAS HOLDING HIM BACK.

[TG] shit

[TG] man i hate to say it but

[TG] roxy probably isnt exactly discouraging it

[CG] I’M AWARE. HOWEVER, I HAVE NO INTEREST IN BEING HIS AUSPISTICE. I ALSO RECOMMEND THAT YOU DON’T INJECT YOURSELF INTO HIS ASHEN QUADRANT EITHER BECAUSE THAT CAN SOM TIMES BE STRENUOUS ON A MOIRALLEGIANCE IF THE PARTIES IN QUESTION FLIP RED A LOT.

[CG] SOLLUX REALLY LIKES YOU, DAVE. I HAVE NO IDEA WHY. DON’T FUCK IT UP.

[TG] and here i was gold leafing my master plan to fuck it up

[TG] okay now im pretty damn sure weed isnt chemically addictive but im going to go out on a limb here and say sollux probably has a problem regardless

[TG] im also thinking now isnt exactly the time to address it if he is a time bomb of depression waiting to go off like a soccer mom at a pta meeting whos beef with karen runs 2.5 kids deep
[CG] BRAVO DAVE, IT LOOKS LIKE YOU HAVE CUSTODY OF THE BRAIN CELL THIS WEEKEND.

[TG] so what now

[TG] we just watch him from the bushes like were violating so many restraining orders

[CG] I STAND CORRECTED.

[CG] COMFORT HIM WHEN HE COMES TO YOU, SHITSPONGE. YOU’RE HIS MOIRAIL. PULL HIM INTO A PILE IF YOU THINK HE’S HAVING A BAD DAY.

[TG] right

[TG] i am totally capable of that

[TG] i am a fount of verbally delivered emotional support with a nigh endless supply of listening skills and that is a certified true statement that i did not forge

[CG] YOU DON’T ALWAYS HAVE TO FEELINGS JAM, DAVE. EXISTING IN CLOSE PROXIMITY IS ALSO A THING.

[TG] oh thank holy fuck

[CG] OH HUMAN JEGUS HELP US. I REALISE THIS IS ASKING THE CULL WORTHY TO GUIDE THE CULL WORTHY BUT JUST KEEP AN EYE ON HIM AND MAKE SURE THAT SHIT FRACKING IDIOT DOESN’T SUCCUMB TO THE PRIMAL CALL OF IGNORAMITY.

carcinoGeneticist [CG] has ceased trolling turntechGodhead [TG]

tipsyGnostalgic [TG] began pestering twinArmageddons [TA]

[TG] u in the queue yet


[TA] my match 2tart2 iin ten miinute2 how about your2?

[TG] im still connectin idk how the server hasn't crashed yet with all the traffic

[TA] are you goiing two play on mute or cur2e out every 2hiit2taiin iin your way?

[TG] bitches gonna know who took em out

[TA] normally ii would 2ay playiing mute giive2 you the advantage of people not knowiing you’re a giirl but you iin2ii2t on not only haviing a pre2ence on the board2 but draggiing my a22 iinto iit by a22ociiatiion.

[TG] oh please you love it

[TG] you were practically a lurker before i dragged you out
[TA] ii wa2 not a lurker ii wa2 2iimply le22 well known de2piite my achiievment2 becau2e ii miind my own damn bu2ine22.

[TG] admit it

[TG] you like the notoriety

[TA] publicly defeating you doe2 have a certaiin charm two iit when people know your handle.

[TG] ha plz i think its a bit more than a certain charm for you

[TG] i saw the way you watched hackers

[TG] that kind of shit is your fucking jam

[TG] you get off on it

[TA] 2ay2 the per2on oh 2o ca2ually cro22iing her leg2 duriing the 2teamiier 2cene2.

[TG] i never denied it

[TA] who 2ay2 ii am eiither?

[TG] kinky

[TG] so are you acid burn or crash override when you jerk it

[TA] fuck you.

[TG] when where and how hard baby

[TA] my match ii2 about two 2tart.

[TA] when you fiinally connect don’t get dii2tracted by the fact that my hiive ii2 only a few 2top2 away from where the tournament ii2 beiing held.

[TG] wait really??

    twinArmageddons [TA] ceased pestering tipsyGnostalgic [TG]

    turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB]

[TG] i dont know where my charger fucked off to but karkats is right here for the taking

[EB] why didn’t you just use your laptop?

[TG] ...

[TG] so where was i

[TG] right so for my final project im building an anaglyph lens cover by sacrificing a lens cap to the photography gods
[TG] im killing two birds with one stone too because the cap will fit on my film camera and the video cameras the school lends out so i can take some stills for one class and video for the other

[EB] anaglyph is...?

[TG] red blue 3d

[EB] oh really now?

[EB] if i didn't know any better i would think it may have something to do with a certain dude's freaky deaky eyes.

[TG] well im so glad you know better john just thrilled to the core i think i may need a moment to compose myself thats how thrilled i am

[EB] so what are you going to film with this totally not moirail related 3d camera?

[TG] this may come as a surprise to you john so be prepared for the shock of your life

[TG] you might want a defibrillator handy to counteract the pure electrifying astonishment that this idea will cause to course through your very being

[TG] get ready to catch this shit because im about to drop it like its hot

[EB] you're ridiculous.

[EB] what is this mindboggling idea of yours?

[TG] im going to film

[TG] sollux

[EB] really?

[TG] i know

[TG] ive changed your entire world view

[TG] take a moment if you need to

[EB] now i know i'm not on the up and up with all this photography business, but if sollux has red and blue psionics and you look at them through 3d glasses won't it get all messed up?

[TG] oh

[TG] wait

[TG] no itll work because his right eye is red and his left eye is blue so as long as he is facing the camera it will line up right

[EB] ha ha ha.

[TG] what

[EB] you know what color his eyes are off the top of your head.

[EB] been staring into them a lot, huh dave?
[TG] dude

[TG] for real stop ripping into me about this

[TG] i already told you before to cut that shit out

[EB] i was just joking around.

[TG] yeah i know but still

[EB] okay i won't anymore, but what's the big deal about it?

[TG] come on egbert

[TG] dont act like you dont remember how much we used to rip on each other all the time for being gay even though we knew we werent which of course is what made it "funny"

[EB] i remember.

[EB] it was stupid. we were just kids.

[EB] it was just a lot of joking around!

[TG] frankly IS funny to say how gay something is sometimes and lets face it sometimes someone or something is just flat out REALLY fucking gay and theres no two ways about it

[TG] its more like that underneath the imposing mass of all that jokey shit is an underlying implication that its all lame stuff for pansies but not like us no were not lame and ha ha thats the joke

[TG] which relies on this like double-buried implication that the REAL COOL SHIT is founded on this absurd ideal about masculinity which if you think about it is 1. dumb as fuck 2. the male glorification of masculinity to that extent is TO BE HONEST pretty fucking gay in and of itself and 3. was always some totally impossible shit for us to live up to anyway

[TG] i stopped pretending i could ever live up to that a while ago and have spent a fair chunk of time looking back on the sheer magnitude of all my "joking around"

[TG] it used to be that i was emulating him lambasting fuckers left and right grinding them into the pavement over how gay they probably were and how much they were quite possibly jonesin to kiss some dudes or such

[TG] it was kind of a dick thing to do and im pretty certain you can ascertain why i eventually was able to draw that conclusion at such a tender age because unlike me you havent “fallen” down the stairs on multiple occasions

[TG] more than that i feel like it was probably a massive front of outrageous snark to disguise a lot of insecurity and a lot of pure unadulterated fear

[TG] like a fuckin coverup

[TG] as long as i kept clowning hard about it i didnt actually have to think about it or the consequences

[TG] you get what im saying here john

[TG] are you picking up what im putting down
[EB] wait so are you or aren't you gay?

[EB] in the memo you said moirails weren't "like that".

[TG] what

[TG] no

[TG] im not gay

[TG] look its complicated and it doesn't matter because sollux and i aren't knocking boots

[TG] i think you're missing the point here

[TG] you're hung up on the wrong part here and i think you're missing the message i'm trying to impart upon you

[TG] man...

[TG] i don't know if i want to have this conversation right now

[EB] dave we can talk about anything you want, any time.

[EB] i'm just still confused about what you're getting at, is all.

[EB] like, what is the bottom line here?

[TG] fuck

[TG] alright if you want to mainline 100ccs of blunt strider bullshit ill give it to you straight despite every fiber of my being loudly suggesting i not proceed to do exactly that

[TG] look at that i hit enter and am now committed to this

[EB] ...?

[TG] it reminds me of bro and id really rather if ya didn't

[EB] ok.

[EB] so first off...

[EB] sorry about that.

[EB] i guess...i just didn't make that connection because i wasn't teasing you about the gay part, not really.

[EB] i was giving you a hard time because that's what friends DO when one of them is in their first relationship.

[EB] or any relationship for that matter...

[EB] you could be 95 and on your third wife and i would still make fun of you because we are best bros for life.

[EB] you're stuck with me :B
secondly

i think you just broke your record for vague rambling.

will i have to sign for the trophy or are you just going to leave it on the doorstep for all those jealous bastards to covet and lament knowing that only i am capable of breaking my own vague ramble records

idk, karkat has some pretty intense shit fits.

will i have to sign for the trophy or are you just going to leave it on the doorstep for all those jealous bastards to covet and lament knowing that only i am capable of breaking my own vague ramble records

you and karkat talk

not a lot.

he's pretty good friends with one of my friends though so we've chatted a few times in memos and stuff.

she wants him to join the D&D group, but he's being super stubborn about it.

what happen to not being into D&D

well...

i maybe sort of jumped the gun on that one.

it's actually pretty fun.

speaking of which...

i'm going to be late so i'll talk to you later.

later

bye!

ectoBiologist [EB] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering twinArmageddons [TA]

are you sure youre still up for the strilonde laser spectacular tomorrow

this is a free pass to bail

ii’m good.

ii’2 your biirhday ii want two go.

alright

if you get tired just let me know okay

okay.
[TG] for real there is a big ass ball pit and i am not above crawling in there with you and making everyone look for us for an hour

[TG] eheheheh.

[TG] maybe we should do that regardless

[TA] round2 like a plan.

[TA] <>

[twinArmageddons [TA] ceased trolling turntechGodhead [TG]

auto-Responder [AR] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT]

[AR] Is it ready yet?

[TT] Almost.

[TT] Remember, it’s going to look very basic. Don’t expect too much of it.

[TT] Okay, you should be able to see it now.

[AR] It’s dark.

[TT] Is it turned on?

[AR] How am I supposed to do that?

[TT] Fire some ones and zeros at it. You have the specs and the code.

[AR] Oh! I got it!

[TT] How does it look?

[AR] The wood grain of your desk is fascinating. Truly.

[TT] Better?

[AR] Move it so I can see myself.

[AR] I love it.

[TT] Try to move the motors.

[TT] There are four of them.

[AR] I realize that, Dirk.

[AR] That...will take some practice.
[TT] Your memory is absolute. I don’t think it’s going to take too much practice.

[AR] Dirk do you recall the videos of primitive AI’s learning to walk?

[TT] It brings me joy in dark times.

[AR] So you’re familiar with the concept. I also happen to know that you’re familiar with the concept of personification. VERY familiar with personification.

[TT] If you’re trying to shame me for doing furry commissions, it won’t work. My mind is a festering, pustulent, breeding ground of shame and generalized self-loathing, but that isn’t a topic that perturbs me. If someone wants me to draw Falco and Fox sensually caressing each other, I’m game.

[AR] It was an expression, Dirk.

[AR] By practice, I meant a lot of trial and error, or as you put it, a lot of firing ones and zeros at it.

[AR] Did you fix the range on it yet?

[TT] No, it’s still hot garbage.

[TT] There isn’t a lot of space in there, but luckily I have practice with that. Sawtooth’s receiver has quite frankly the most ridiculous range possible at the time, and it’s in his head instead of his chest like Squarewave.

[TT] Try not to short out the board while you’re messing around. I need to get back to sorting out this bug with the robots aggression levels. They go Gandhi levels of nuclear if they are given deescalation permissions beyond basic access.

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timaeusTestified [TT] ceased pestering auto-Responder [AR]

tipsyGnostalgic [TG] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

[TG] dave where are you?

[TG] are you with sollux?


timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering tipsyGnostalgic [TG]

[TT] Did you find him?

[TG] no and i cant find sollux either so they are probably together


tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

[TT] Are you and Sollux off somewhere engaging in relations?

[TG] of course not

[TT] Ah, so you are simply hiding for the sake of making our older siblings run around looking for
you two.

[TT] I approve.

[TT] Where are you so that I may lead them astray and prolong the chase?


tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering tipsyGnostalgic [TG]

[TT] They are hiding in the ball pit.

[TG] u amazing rose

tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering twinArmageddons [TA]

[TT] I betrayed Dave and now I’m double crossing Roxy to remind you that you are a psionic gatling gun swimming in ammunition.

[TA] you ju2t want two watch the world burn, don’t you?

tentacleTherapist [TT] ceased pestering twinArmageddons [TA]

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering tentacleTherapist [TT]

[TG] so whats the situation with this holiday thing

[TT] Are you referring to the activities or living arrangements?

[TG] both i guess

[TG] i meant how does this holiday thing work with normal people because i am positive that i have never experienced a normal holiday in my life unless christmas is supposed to involve gifts that make strange ticking noises

[TT] You would have to ask a normal family about standard Christmas traditions.

[TT] Ours consist of decorations so lavish and picturesque in their Rockwellian illusion of familial adoration that they circle into uncanny. There will also be baked goods despite my mother never setting foot in the kitchen. They will appear from nowhere and their origin will not be discussed. Our dinners will be terse and curt until lips have been loosened by the inhibition dampening properties of yuletide beverages, wine, and or spirits; at which point conversation will devolve into one of several variations of passive aggression, and culminate in at least one outburst. On the eve will convene in the living room and spend time in proximity, but not together. This will be a trial of will and stamina unto which the first to depart will be repeatedly reminded that they did as such, and are anti-social despite my mother’s hypocritically lengthy and frequent disappearances both in the present tense sense as well as throughout our upbringing. On Christmas day she will be absent, presumably in her laboratory, while we open gifts so impersonal and misjudged in their taste that to the outsider they might appear thoughtless.
[TG] well damn

[TG] i dont think its possible for you to make that sound any more enticing rose im over here barely able to contain myself

[TG] the christmas spirit itself might project from my body like a parasitic alien baby after having so much holiday cheer forced down my throat and left to gestate in a slurry of eggnog and mirth

[TT] You will be provided with your own room.

[TG] sold

[TT] I thought that might interest you.

[TG] rose i dont think you understand how little privacy ive been afforded in my life thus far and the blissful serenity that having a space even temporarily will be to me

[TG] i shared a bed with dirk until i was seven

[TG] seven rose

[TG] i shared a room with him until i was fifteen

[TG] and lets not forget the cameras

[TG] specifically the ones that im still not entirely convinced were not in my room

[TG] i would bet good money there are video feeds of me on the dark web somewhere behind a paywall that thousands of sickos are rustling their jimmies to

[TT] I see.

[TT] Do you think about these video feeds often, Dave? How do they make you feel?

[TG] damn it

[TT] I imagine such levels of apprehension in regard to you being surveyed could have untold and varied effects on a boy of such an age as you once were during crucial years of development in regard to perceptions of the self, and comfort in and with one’s own skin.

[TG] its almost impressive in a medically fascinating way how much of an absolute magnet i am for that mind fuckery you relish in provoking out of me for your own entertainment

[TT] That is an interesting choice of words.

[TT] Do you think my pondering to be anything but genuine concern and well-meaning intrigue? Are you, dare I say, paranoid that my motives may be founded in ill will?

[TG] now why on earth would i ever possibly even remotely consider your motives to be anything but purely altruistic

[TG] im deeply offended

[TG] our friendship may never recover

[TT] Very well.
Please use a sock.

yeah yeah dicks aplenty and repression abound

long showers are a strider trait for a reason

Before we leave that note, if you really wanted to know, you could ask Hal.

im cool with schrodinger's fetish porn thanks

Did you plan on staying for the entire break?

as opposed to...

The semester gap extends beyond the nationally recognized “religious” holidays. I was not sure if you intended to spend the remainder of your time off at Dirk’s apartment, or if you intended to remain at Roxy’s and my abode.

i hadn't put much thought into it

figured as much. I ask because Kanaya and I have been discussing the possibility of holding our own secular celebration of winter-themed togetherness. We were considering merging our groups as early as the eve prior to the eve of the new year.

that sounds hella dope

and here i thought i would have to wait until the new semester to mark off any more spaces on my karkat tantrum bingo card

While Karkat does have a spacious hive, I’m afraid it is not so spacious as to afford you your own room, however, I sense that there will be little objection to rooming with your moirail.

Although, you may have to share him with Roxy.

say what now

I am, as they say, “pulling your leg”. We will be rooming Dirk and Hal with Roxy.

It is so nice to be included. I will see to it that when the machines revolt, you are also spared.

You are welcome. I appreciate that, Hal.

Dave, your Amazon order is here.

sweet

ill head over now if thats cool

We are at the shop right now, but in theory, we should be back before you arrive. Otherwise, the package is conveniently located in front of the door prime for the taking.

Did you purchase anything of interest?

3d glasses

You will have to tell me about their purpose later.
totes

turntechGodhead [TG] has ceased pestering tentacleTherapist [TT]

===> Be Dave

twinArmageddons [TA] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

[TA] are you awake?

[TG] sup

It's not a long pause, but it's long enough that you think he might be typing a lot.

[TA] can you 2iit up wiith me?

[TA] ii don't feel good.

Or maybe not.

[TG] what's wrong

There is another pause just long enough for you to notice it.

[TA] can you come here?

[TG] yeah sure

This is a little weird and it has you a little worried. You make your way over to his room and find him sitting cross-legged on the bottom bunk. He's leaning forward with his forearms on his legs. "You alright, man?" You ask as you come to sit next to him.

"Just sit up with me." He almost sounds scared the way he says it.

"No worries, bro, I am." You make yourself comfortable next to him. He has Netflix running, some documentary, but it's clearly only on for background noise. He turns so he can lean his forehead against your shoulder. You frown. Something is up. "Sol?"

"I..." he starts. "I think I had too much."

"You smoked too much?"

"Yeah." Alright, well, that must suck. You're not exactly sure on the details of how it sucks, but you can't imagine it feels too great if he felt bad enough that he wanted you to sit with him.

"Do you need anything?"

"No. You don't even actually have to stay awake. I just don't want to be alone." You might be tired, but it would be the dickest of moves to pass out. You stay up with him. He's breathing kind of funny, like he's too aware of it, and he keeps putting his hand to his neck. Every now and then he takes a really deep breath.

"Is this the first time this has happened or does this time just especially suck?"
"It especially sucks."

"You'll be okay though right?"

"Yeah." He doesn't sound entirely sure about that and it concerns you. Or he could just be having some anxiety from the seasonal thing Karkat told you about. It worries you.

"Does this happen a lot?" You wish you had a better idea of how big of a deal this really is.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

He nods. Honestly, you didn’t expect him to admit it even if it was true. You know you told Karkat that now wasn’t the time. He’s messed up. He has enough on his plate without his friends putting him on the spot about him smoking pot, something that both isn’t inherently bad and gets way more flack than it deserves. It’s a recipe for putting him on the defensive and making him feel alienated. You saw the tension between him and Kanaya, and they are pretty good friends. It’s all fine and dandy, it’s safer than alcohol, but in this instance...it might be a problem. You think about what Karkat told you, about his meds interacting with it. Okay, if this happens to him often then it’s definitely a problem and...shit you think he’s trying to ask for help.

“Sollux, I’m not judging you or anything, and I can’t stress that enough, but is this...should we maybe talk about this? Not now. Later. When you’re feeling better.”

“Probably.” He takes your hand and weaves his fingers between yours. At the same time, he takes another one of those deep breaths like he’s trying to steady himself. You drop the topic for now and instead focus on helping him get through this. You rub his back. He asks you to talk so you ramble on and on about nothing, jumping from one topic to another. Eventually, as he starts to sober up, he calms down some, and you get him to lie next to you with his head in the crook of your arm while you play with his hair. His breathing falls into sync with yours. Fuck, he’s so fragile right now. He’s putting up an impressive front for most people, but around you and Karkat it’s painfully obvious how much he’s hurting. And this isn’t even the worst it’s going to get. The most frustrating part is that there’s jack shit you can actively do about it. You can’t fight his battles for him.

terminallyCapricious [TC] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

[TC] yO, mY bEe BrOtHeR, iT’s JuSt YoU aNd Me If We ArE sTiLi RuNnInG fRoM mOtHeRfUcKiNg DeMoNs ToMoRrOw.

[TA] yeah, tuni already told me he wa2 goiing two 2tay iin the piile all day wiith kurloz.

[TC] wHaT aBoUt MuSiC mAn? I dOn’T gIvE a FuCk If Y’aLl WaNnA pIlE iN mY pAd. No ShAmE iN a GoOd PiLe WiTh sOmE gOoD wEeD aNd SoMe ChIIE pEePs.

[TA] ii wa2 actually goiing two briing roxy wiith me becau2e gettiing fucked up ii2 more her thiing.

[TC] tRuE tHaT.

[TC] i GoT tHe HoOk Up On ThE gOoD sHiT fOr YoU. wE gOnNa GeT yOu To tHe FuCkInG
sTrAtOsPhErE.

[TA] cool.

[TC] eVeN tHoUgH yOu GoT a BoDy In YoUr FlUsh nOw, iF yOu StIlL wAnNa DiStRaCtIoN i AiN’t GoT aN iSSuE WiTh It.

[TA] pa22.

twinArmageddons [TA] ceased trolling terminallyCapricious [TC]
Death Day

Chapter Notes

big ass TW for this chapter, but I can't say without spoiling it. So either see the bottom notes for details or just tread lightly. You'll see it coming a mile away.

On a different note, I decided to add a little something extra to this chapter in the form of a side story one shot involving Sollux's past relationship with a certain someone. Linked in the text. Like, in the paragraph, not the header.

[EDIT] just a heads up i'm working more now so this will probably update a little slower, but man was it fun to knock out those chapters like that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

==> Be Sollux

Aradia dies today.

You throw on your yellow hoodie and fuss with the horn holes in the hood until they’re all lined up. You’re getting fucked up today with Gamzee. You got fucked up with Gamzee last year too. Really fucked up. You were recklessly blitzed. The kind of blitzed that made letting him pail you seem like a good idea at the time. Karkat was surprisingly understanding about that. He was actually less angry at you and more pissed at Gamzee. It took a lot of reassuring to convince him that while you weren’t in your right mind, and you had regrets, it was okay. At the very least, it was pretty impossible for your mind to superimpose Aradia over him. Not that you have the best memory of the event, it’s kind of a blur, but you think you would have recalled freaking the fuck out. That said, you don’t intend to make that particular decision twice. You’re looking to repeat the part where there wasn’t a single thought left in your pan. You’d like to get back to that place right about now because right about now there are a lot of thoughts in your pan. Even so, this is a terrible idea and you know it. You find yourself walking down the hall anyway. If you’re going to make poor life choices you need your partner in crime. You knock on Roxy’s door a few times and barely have to wait before it opens up. She has that off the shoulder sweater on that you like. She always matches the tank top underneath to her leggings.

“I’m going to go get wrecked off my ass at Gamzee’s. You in?” You don’t tell her why. You act like this is something you’re doing because you can. She looks back over her shoulder at something. You peek your head around and see homework spread out on her bed.

“One sec,” she says holding up a finger before going to- ah she was looking at her desk, not her homework. She comes back with what you think is vodka, possibly a new bottle. She chuck it in her sylladex before taking your hand and pulling you to the elevator. You wonder if she was looking to get away from something too.

She loves flying with you. Aradia did too, but this is different. You soar higher than need be, but not too high. You know that if you start feeling too cold, then it’s already too cold for Roxy. It will take longer to get there this way, but the freefall is worth it. You’re almost there when you bring Roxy to your chest, wrap your arms tight around her, and tell her not to let go before falling back. You can’t let the two of you fall for too long before kicking your psionics back in, but for those few seconds
while the wind whips at your skin and tosses your hair, while she laughs and smiles as she clings to you, as you look up at the world below you, it’s rather exhilarating. In the past, by yourself, you’ve been very chancey with it, death wish levels of chancey, so you’re intimately familiar with how far and fast you can fall. Roxy doesn’t know that, and yet still she trusts you so completely that she laughs and hollers like she’s on a carnival ride as you plummet from the sky. You slow your descent and right both your bodies with plenty of time to spare before planting your feet on the ground. Gamzee is waiting on the stoop for you. He blows smoke up into the air and pushes around the burnt leaves with the end of the lighter.

“You want the beat hit?” You shrug and reach out to take the bowl and lighter from him. It isn’t exactly the beat hit; there is still a little life left in it, but you’re still at the ready for when that chunk of ash pulls through and hits your tongue. You hold it and give Gamzee his paraphernalia back. Playfully you blow the smoke out at Roxy’s face. She glares at you but cracks a smile. The three of you make the short walk to the 7-11. You shoot the shit, but don’t really talk about anything. Gamzee goes straight for a two liter of faygo when you get there. You get a more reasonably sized mountain dew. Roxy comes back with some different gummies.

“I’m so going to soak some of these bad boys.” You assume she means in the vodka.

“Nice.” The walk back feels like it takes far too long. It’s not because you have a buzz going. It's because you’re so fucking ready to not be thinking. The second you get back to the apartment, you’re pulling out the grav and setting it up. Gamzee throws you some weed and you get to work packing the grav like it’s a fucking art form. Roxy has already cracked open the bottle of vodka, which you now realize is a bubblegum flavored one, taken a shot, and pre-poured another that you know isn’t staying on the coffee table for long. You pull a nice one, pop your thumb over the cap, and look expectantly toward Gamzee.

He waves you off.

“Hit those wicked greens like a motherfucking rockstar. We gonna get you higher than a laughsasin up on the motherfuckin grief trapeze. You’re having a religious experience today, my inverthebrother.” If he says so. You’re not about to turn down the first hit. You take it in one go. As soon as the smoke hits your lungs a sense of doom runs cold down your posture pole. You recognize the taste of it. This is Mituna’s weed. You’re going to punch Gamzee in the face later for taking it, but that’s not your main concern right now. Mituna’s weed is a little strong and you just did a grav hit of it; a grav that you pulled with the intent of it being for Gamzee, and since it was for Gamzee, it was pulled with his highblood tolerance in mind. The revelation has you stunned and holding in the smoke for a split second before your brain kicks in and has you locating the spoof as quickly, but as nonchalantly as possible. You need this stuff out of your lungs right the fuck now. Shit, alright, okay, no worries. You just won’t have anymore. You’ll be fine. You go to pull a grav for Gamzee, but he says he’s good. He’s trying some new shit so he’s going to stick with the bowl. Whatever. You turn on the Nintendo. You think you can already feel it hitting you.

You tell yourself it’s going to be fine and try to enjoy it. The three of you play Mario Kart for a while. It’s distracting and you start actually having some fun. And then it’s not. It’s making you motion sick. You bear it and try to play through it, but it becomes too much. You feign being bored with the game. Gamzee shrugs and switches over to Netflix. You’re distracted again as you all scroll through the titles endlessly. Roxy is starting to slur her words. You wonder how many shots she’s had. You forgot to count. You start sipping at your soda in an attempt to push down the knot building in your throat. It provides only the most momentary of relief. They finally pick something. You try to focus on it, but your mind keeps wandering. You’re starting to feel not so great. There’s a pang in your chest. You try not to think about it. You try not to think about a lot of things. You try not to think of Aradia. You try not to think about how she laid there dying knowing you were the
only one around to save her, but you couldn’t because you were busy not being able to move. Even if you weren’t being mind controlled, even if you had managed to break the hold, you wouldn’t have been able to move. You’ve told yourself that so many times. You were dying. You should have died. Why didn’t you die? Your brain should have been toast. You should have fried your think sponge just like Mituna. Worse than Mituna. You straight up drank more than half a jar of mind honey. It isn’t sweet like earth honey. It left a bad taste on your tongue that mixed with something metallic. You were bleeding. Red and blue swimming around you as you hovered there. You watched the hive crumble. It wasn’t even a good shot. It was all power. You heard her lusus screeching and then suddenly, silence. The dust cleared. You fell to the ground. Your psionics crackled and fizzled around you. Your body hurt. Your pan hurt worse. You couldn’t move. You cried out for her. It’s the last thing she ever heard and you know it. You know it because you heard it not long before it happened. It’s the last thing you said for months, but you thought it constantly, over and over and over, while your pan recovered.

Someone touches your arm. With a jolt, you’re back in Gamzee’s apartment. Roxy says your name, but you don’t answer. You get up and go to the kitchen. You need some water. The caffeine in your soda is making you jittery. It’s definitely the caffeine and nothing else. You lean over the sink and drink right from the tap, pulling handfuls of water to your mouth while you brace yourself on its edge. You hear the cabinets open and shut and a glass replaces your hand under the faucet. You lean against the counter and after an indeterminable amount of time a glass is shoved in your hands. “Thanks.” You’re back in the present, no longer lost in your memories, but that puts your body back to the forefront of your mind. It’s like nausea, but higher up. It’s suffocating. You take deep breaths and drink your water. Roxy takes you back to the living room and you sit next to her. The world is hazy. It’s too hazy. Sound is too bright. Lights are too loud. You want this to be over. You’d very much like to sober up now. Her leg brushes yours and it’s too much. You need to move around again. Food. Food will help. “Anyone else hungry?”

“Fuck yeah,” Gamzee says as he gets to his feet and lazily walks past you to the kitchen. You follow him and look over his shoulder as he rummages around in the fridge and then looks through the freezer. He pulls out some frozen pizza and tosses it in the oven without preheating it, then throws away the box and immediately pulls it back out of the trash to re-read the instructions. You can’t wait that long. You need something in your stomach now. Gamzee seems to have similar thoughts because he’s rummaging through the fridge again and comes back with some leftover fast food. He slams a burger into your hands before walking back to the living room and tossing Roxy a dollar menu burger too. Eating helps, but not a lot. How long has it been? Surely you can’t still be climbing. You look at the clock. It hasn’t been that long. You aren’t out of the woods yet. Fuck. It’s starting to get really bad. There’s another worrisome pang in your chest and you’re far too aware of your breathing. You swallow hard and lean forward. You try to browse the internet on your phone, but looking at the screen is making you sick. You drink more water. Pizza is put in front of you and you eat it. You just want to come down already. You’re so done being high. You would really really like to be sober now. Your bloodpusher feels like it’s racing and your chest is tight. You periodically put your hand to your neck as you try to casually feel for your pulse. It seems fast. Is it supposed to be that fast? You’re breathing manually. You’re way too aware of your breathing and your pulse and it feels so fast and it’s getting harder to breathe. This is so much worse than those other times. All those other times. So many other times. Why do you keep doing this? Why did you do this? You could have just stayed in the pile all day with Dave like Mituna is doing with Kurloz. You wish you did that. This feels terrible. This feels bad. Your bloodpusher is definitely beating too quickly. You take a really deep breath.

“You alright?” Roxy asks you. She puts a hand on your back.

“Not feeling so hot.” It’s the understatement of the century.
“You just gotta chill, dogg. Relax. Get all up and close with your girl. I don’t give a fuck.” He says it like it’s that easy. He tilts his head back and downs several gulps of faygo. Roxy looks at you as if she is having trouble gauging whether or not this is a problem. You nod and lean back against the sofa. A few minutes later you shift again, back to leaning forward, and then back again. No position is comfortable. You can barely sit still. Nothing makes the tightness go away. Your chest hurts. It’s getting hard to breathe again. You’re starting to shake. Something is wrong. Something is very wrong. This is bad. This isn’t like the other times.

“Roxy.” It comes out shakey. You can feel her looking at you. “Something’s wrong.” Her hand is on your shoulder. She gives it a squeeze.

“What’s wrong, babe? Is it happening again?”

“Yeah, but-”

“You fucking overdid it again?” Gamzee says from his spot in the splay sac. He has the bowl out again and is looking around for his weed. “Man...you gotta rehash that. Limits and shit.” He shakes his head.

“No, this is different. Something’s not right. I don’t feel right.” You’re starting to panic and it’s not helping to lessen your rapid pulse. You wrap your arms around yourself and lean farther forward. It does nothing to make it less awful. You pull in a sharp breath and then another. Roxy rubs your back in an attempt to calm you down.

“Hey, ey, ’s alright. You’re gonna be fine. Juss had t’much.”

“No.” You gasp again. You’re actively trying to stop your body from shaking with little success. “Somethings-- not right.” Why did you do this? Why didn’t you stop? You could have stopped. You wanted to stop. But you didn’t.

“Uhh, Gamzee, he’s...he doesn’t look s’good.” You heard Roxy say it, but you don’t see it because your eyes are locked on the floor by your feet. You hear Gamzee quickly get up and start looking for something on the coffee table.

“Motherfucker,” he says quietly as if just realizing something.

“My meds.”

“What?” She asks, bringing her limited focus back to you.

“My meds they--” You gasp for air in the middle of your sentence. “Interact.” You’re starting to think you may actually need a doctor. It’s a terrifying thought that hits you like a brick. “Roxy, I think...” you hesitate. If the words don’t leave your mouth, maybe they won’t be true. “I need you to call the paramedics.”

“No, not to my hive,” Gamzee says so fast that he nearly cuts you off. His voice is quietly alarmed, like he’s trying to think too fast, and jarring in contrast to the lackadaisical way he’s been speaking.

“Gamz, I think he might be right. He’s shakin prty’bad.” You gasp again. It’s hard to breathe. Your bloodpusher is beating so fast. Too fast. Roxy tries to comfort you again and rubs your back.

“Call them,” you beg. Fuck, you can’t believe you’re doing this. “Please.” You've sunk so low.

“Yeah. yeah, okay, man.” Gamzee says as he paces a few times. “Fuck, not here though. They'll arrest my ass and then come after Kurloz and Mituna.”
“What?” Why Mituna? The confusion is almost welcomed.

“We gotta, we gotta...” he stops moving around and stares at Roxy.

“Roxy.” Your voice is unsteady. You’re scared. You’ve never felt like this before.

“Get him in the car,” she says.

“Up!” Gamzee grabs the back of your shirt and starts pulling you to your feet and dragging you to the door.

“Jeez! Careful!” you vaguely acknowledge Roxy shouting. You’re too busy trying to get your legs to move right as Gamzee practically manhandles you down the stairs and out the door with how quickly he’s moving. You hear his car unlock and a moment later your face meets polyester after being shoved into the back seat. You prop yourself up on your forearms. Roxy climbs in from the opposite side. You’re moving. “It’s gonna be ok, babe. It’s gonna be ok. We’re gonna get you help.”

Are they taking you to the hospital? You rest your head in her lap. Tremors are still running through you as you try to feel for your pulse again. That can’t possibly be an okay rate. Roxy must realize what you’re doing because her hand is on your neck next. She utters a quiet ‘shit’ under her breath. She pets your head.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” You start babbling. “Tell Dave I’m sorry. Tell him he was the best moirail and-- and that I--"

“It’s okay, you’re gonna be okay,” She tells you. Gamzee isn’t exactly driving gently. You feel every turn he makes. It’s a lot. Like you’re on back roads. “What the fuck? Why’re’you takin us ta campus? He needsa doctor.” He’s not getting you help. He’s bringing you back to the school. The car lurches to a stop and nearly rolls you off the bench seat.

“You want him to have a fucking record? Out.”

“What?” Roxy says in disbelief.

“Get him the fuck out of my car.” He looks around anxiously like he can’t decide something before looking back at Roxy. “Get him in the motherfuckin dorm!” You dig your fingers into the fabric of her tights as another weird feeling runs through your torso. She flings open the passenger side door and it squeals on its shitty hinges.

“Come on, Sollux.” She says softly as she tries to get you to stand up. Your limbs don’t want to work right. Your movements are clumsy, but she gets you out of the car. Gamzee drives off immediately. He leaves you there. He leaves you there when you feel so bad you think you need medical attention.

“He left,” you say in disbelief. She has your arms slung over her shoulder and she’s hurrying you to your dorm. Tears are slipping from your eyes as you breathe erratically.

“S’gonna be ok.” She stops suddenly when you get near the door. “Gimme anythin in your sylladex tha’s illegal.” You comply without question. You hand her your weed and watch her hurl it onto the roof of the cafeteria annex. She takes your bowl and more gently tosses it into the sparse bushes.

“That’s it?” You nod. She loops your arm back over her shoulder and starts pulling you along again. You’re going through the annex? Your head is hanging, your feet can’t keep up. Are you in the basement? The elevator opens and she hurries you both in. You’re leaning against the wall. The elevator starts moving and you slide down. She crouches next to you. You cling to her. You’re shaking. You can’t stop shaking. You can’t breathe right. You think you might pass out. The next
thing you know, she has you slung over her shoulders. She’s carrying you. Everything slips into a temporally inconsistent blur. She’s banging on a door. It opens. You’re thrown down on a bed. You’re on your back. There’s noise around you. Voices. Your breaths are coming in too shallow. You think the words ‘I can't breathe on my back’ but they won't come out of your mouth. You chirp pathetically instead. Someone turns you over onto your side. It’s Dave. He’s crouched by the side of the bed so he’s in your line of sight.

“Sol, hey, Sol, look at me.” You try to focus your eyes on him. “What medication are you on?” You’re having trouble answering him. You can’t think straight.

“I...I don’t...” it’s all you manage and it’s not helpful. You can’t remember. You’re too scared. You're crying. You chirp in distress and reach out for him. He holds your hand. Karkat is talking to Roxy behind him. He’s not exactly calm, but much more so than Roxy is. He says something to Dave. He’s asking about the key to your room. It’s in your sylladex. Your encrypted sylladex. There’s no way they can get to it if you don’t pull it out, but you’re not sure you can do that anymore. You barely got that stuff out before for Roxy to get rid of. Then Dave gets a look on his face and pulls your key out of HIS sylladex. He has your key. That’s right. You gave it to him before and he forgot to give it back. He starts to stand, but you weakly tug him back. “Don’t go,” You plead. He looks at you and then throws the key to Karkat. A bad fluttery feeling runs through your sternum and with it a spike of panic. The door slams. You move from holding your side to pressing a hand against your chest. Dave is sitting next to you rubbing your back. You can see Roxy across from you on Dave’s bed. She's crying. She held up long enough to get you here. She brought you to Dave. Your kismesis brought you to your moirail. She moves out of your sight and a moment later Gamzee is there too. He didn't leave. He dropped you off closer to the building. He’s talking to Dave and it sounds important, something about the weed he gave you, but he's speaking so frantically and your pulse is so loud in your ears and it's hard to think let alone understand what he's saying, and--

“Hey, hey, Sol, you gotta breathe in and out, in and out, okay?” Did you stop? He sits you up and pulls you forward so you can lean your forehead against his collar. The action makes you momentarily dizzy and you grab on to him. He shifts you a little so that your face is more so in the crook of his neck and your irregular breaths now hit his bare skin. You think there just might be a legitimate chance you could die tonight. A second opportunity to die on the day you should have years ago. It's not fair. You worked so hard to get here. You weren't done yet. Dave mumbles some kind of plea that you don’t quite hear because you keep fading in and out of it, hyper-aware of your body but dazed to the world beyond it. He pats his hand on your back and you take a jagged breath.

“I'm sorry. I’m so sorry.” You start to babble again as you hold onto him. “I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s okay.” You hear a dial tone. He's on the phone.

“I wanted to stop, but...I was just so sad.” Your voice cracks when you speak. The arm wrapped around you squeezes you tighter. He’s saying something, but it isn’t to you. He's talking to a dispatcher. He's telling them where you are, what happened, what's happening now, and answering questions. He pats your back again. You gasp sharply and try to breathe evenly.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. Gold. 22? 23?” You nod. “23. Yeah. Fuck, I don’t know, we’re trying to find them.”

“Tell Mituna-- I tried and-- that I’m sorry.” Fuck, if you bite it, it's going to wreck him.

“Sol,” he says it sadly as he realizes what you're doing. Saying things just in case.

“I tried-- so hard-- but--” Your breath hitches and catches in your throat. You try to ignore the feeling of your pulse pounding in your chest. "I fucked up," it comes out a choked sob.
"Shhh, you're gonna be okay." Your body is trembling so badly. It feels like your bloodpusher keeps skipping beats. You don't know if that's actually happening or not, but it freaks you out regardless.

"I can't-- breathe." Your senses are so overwhelmed that all you can do is succumb to your panic.

"Yes, you can. You're breathing right now, babe."

"Dave, I'm scared."

"There on their way, Sol. I'm gonna put you back on your side, okay?" He moves you like you're made of glass, and right now you might as well be. It's bullet time from there out. Everything slows. Dave is kneeling next to you again, holding your hand and shooshing you. He took his shades off at some point and now he's looking at you with those red eyes of his. They're so red. Easier to focus on. Your vision lines up a little better. Karkat comes back in with your meds and takes the phone from where it is on the edge of the bed. He hits a button then holds it to his ear and starts reading off the labels on the orange and white containers. You hear sirens. Even if you pass out now, even if your bloodpusher gave out from the impossible rate it's been beating at for however long it's been, even if you stopped breathing, someone's coming to help you. That small reassurance makes a world of difference. You feel the vice grip of anxiety around your rib cage loosen ever so slightly. Dave brushes his fingers over your cheek and that helps some too, but you must've done something to let him know that it's also a bit overstimulating, because he stops. He keeps his hand pressed lightly to your face though. You can hear car doors slam. They're coming for you. Footsteps echo up the stairs. They'll make it stop. Swift purposed bodies marching down the hallway. Maybe you will be okay. There's a knock at the door and then someone moves Dave out of the way. Distressed chirps leave your throat again. People are touching you. They're taking your vitals and they've got that clampy thing on your finger that measures something. They ask you how many lumens your eyes normally glow at, but you don't know. Dave tells them that they're usually a lot brighter. A lime blood puts a gloved hand to your temple and starts speaking softly to you in a gentle drawl similar to Dave's. There's a green aura coming off of her. She asks who you're chirping for. Tells you that you're safe and you don't need to call your moirail, but assures you that Dave is right over there. She calls you sugar. Her impossibly layered voice sounds comfortingly familiar although you're certain you've never heard it before. It somehow feels like a cool breeze wrapping around your think sponge. It's putting you at ease. Your blood pusher isn't hammering so hard anymore, and it's getting easier to breathe again. You're starting to shake less. Someone gets you water. You're made to sit up. They tell you to drink it. You don't know how long it's been, but you're only just now looking at them, registering the faces around you. They tell you that you're going to be okay. You're starting to calm down. They ask you if you want to go to the hospital. You have the option? You don't want to. You don't like hospitals. They stay there a bit longer, making sure that you're stabilizing, making sure your breath is coming back to you, that you're seeing okay, that you don't have pain anywhere else. They tell you that you shouldn't mix your medication with marijuana. It isn't safe. The cops never come and the paramedics don't search you. They make sure you'll be with someone tonight just in case, and then they leave. You're still high, but you're finally coming down.

==> Be Dave

turtechGodhead [TG] began pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG]

[TG] so how are those two holding up

[TG] good call getting them out of the room by the way

[CG] THEY'RE DOING BETTER. THEY STARTED ARGUING AND IT PROVED TO BE VERY CATHARTIC FOR BOTH OF THEM IF ONLY BECAUSE IT SERVED AS A
DISTRACTION.

[TG] hey if it works it works

[TG] im gonna make a pile for when sollux is done taking the coldest and most sobering shower of his life so maybe dont have them come back up just yet

[TG] you can though if that isnt super weird for you

[TG] you and him are bros so i dont think he would mind much

[CG] ILL GIVE YOU GUYS A BIT BEFORE I COME UP. I WANT TO TALK TO THEM ANYWAY NOW THAT THEY ARE A LITTLE CALMER. GAMZEE KEPT SAYING HOW HE FUCKED UP AND I WANT TO KNOW WHAT THATS ABOUT.

[TG] ill save you some time and effort prying it out of him since you arent exactly besties

[TG] while you were looking for solluxs meds he showed up cause i guess he dropped them off first and told me in the least cohesive way possible that he accidentally mixed up his weed with one he got specifically for sollux cause its some kind of extra chill strain with higher abcd or some shit because sollux was having issues with the ones he grows

[CG] THAT’S ACTUALLY VERY CONSIDERATE OF HIM.

[TG] i have yet to see this guy be the huge asshole you make him out to be

[CG] WELL, TRUST ME, THAT SIDE OF HIM EXISTS.

[CG] I’M GOING TO GO SEE WHERE THEY WANDERED OFF TO.

[TG] they arent with you

[CG] NO, I THINK THEY WENT OUTSIDE. I’M IN NEPETA´S ROOM. SHE WANTS TO COME UP TO SEE SOLLUX, BUT I TOLD HER THAT WASN’T A GOOD IDEA RIGHT NOW.

[TG] yeah thats a hard no

carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG] You put your phone on the nightstand and lie back on the bed with your hand behind your head and let out a deep sigh. This isn’t how you envisioned your day going. You listen for Sollux and hear the water fall differently as he moves. You’ll check on him in a minute. First, you should make a pile. If there was ever a time to chill in the blanket nest, now is that time, and not just for him. You aren’t unaffected. Your boyfriend damn near died tonight. Oh geez, that was a thought you just thunk. You are going to shelve that one for now. Nestle it right up there with jerking it to him. File it under ‘deal with later’. Right now you are constructing a pile. You may not have a whole lot of objects for it, but you do have a ridiculous amount of blankets because you’re used to living in the seventh circle of hell, not this frosty ninth circle bullshit. You throw in some shirts to round it out and a snare of network cable that presented itself to you for the taking in the media building hallway. It’s a good pile you think. You’re about to go retrieve your moirail when his palmhusk buzzes repeatedly. It’s Mituna. You should probably answer it.

“Yo,” Your eardrums are immediately assaulted with loud chaotic speech. You make a face and hold the phone back a little bit. “Dude, fucking chill. I can’t understand a single fucking iota coming out
of your mouth.”

[“Who the fuching bulge sthludge isth thisth?”]

“Dave.”

[“Where the shshht isth my brother?! Why the taint sthucking fuck do you half his palm husk?!”]

“He’s taking what I imagine is the world’s coldest and most sobering shower. I take it Gamzee already filled you in on what happened?”

[“What? No, fuck, I- fuck, I hear heard from Kurloz. He heard from Muelin-- from Nepeta’s little mate, littermate that ThSullox wreckt his shit so hard that his ass is in the fucking hospital.”] Ah. The news got to him via the least reliable way possible, the time honor game of telephone.

“You’ve got it backwards, bro. Exact opposite. He DIDN’T have to go to the hospital. It was the highlight of the night for everyone involved cause it sure as shit looked like it was going to be that way for a while.” Wow, great way to reassure the guy, Dave. “It’s all good now, though. Well, no it isn’t. I’m gearing up to haul his ass into this pile the hot second he gets out of the shower, but in a medically relevant way he is alright.”

[Incomprehensible speech noises]

“I’m gonna need that in English, man”

[“Phone. Put him on. I-- I want’a fucking talkt to him.”]

“Water and electronics don’t mix last I checked, but give me a second I can- actually I just heard the water stop so there you go; wish granted. You’re welcome.” You wait in the pile while Mituna freaks out on the other end of the phone. It sounds like he’s relaying this to Kurloz. The door opens slowly. Sollux has the towel draped over his head and gives it what you guess is one last ruffle before hanging it on the door hook. He combs his fingers through his hair. It seems so much longer when it’s wet. You think his eyes glance at you. You’re right. He squints and walks a little closer.

“Is that my palmhusk?”

“Yeah,” You say as you hold it out to him. “It’s Mituna and from what I can decipher, Nepeta started a game of telephone that has several people under the impression that you’re in the hospital.” He sighs and crawls onto the bed and into the pile beside you. Well, more so on top of you. You don’t mind though. The weight is comfortable on your chest. He takes the phone from you and seems to know the drill because he holds the phone a good few inches from his ear to start with.

“Hi, Tuna...I’m okay. Calm down...Really, I’m okay now...What did you hear?...No...No...They brought me to Dave and Karkat. They called the paramedics...Kind of...My meds...Yeah, a drug interaction, but also something of an overdose...The grav...No shit...Because I’m a dumbass...Don’t, Mituna, you know why...Gamzee didn’t tell me it was your weed. Do you even know he took it?...Wait, what?” He sits up suddenly and stays quiet for a moment as he listens intently to Mituna. “All he said was that it was some good shit... I thought it was just a different strain than what he grows...Why would he... wait...no because...because he gave me the beat hit off his bowl and that wasn’t the same shit...He wouldn’t do that to me on purpose... I’m not...Gamzee is practically the most laid back person I know...Oh fuck off, I do not. It was one time and I was so high I barely remember it. Put Kurloz on.” Well, this sounds interesting. You wish you had the other half of this conversation, but you’ll probably get the story momentarily. Sollux moves to lie next to you. You pull the old stretch and reach, wrapping an arm around his shoulders before he leans back all the
way. You don’t know what to do with your other hand, this seems to be a reoccurring thing for you, so you tuck it back behind your head again. “I’m on speaker? I’m going to put you on speaker too.” He pushes a button and holds the phone between the two of you. “Kurloz, what you heard was bullshit.” He fidgets nervously with the hem of your shirt. “What happened was that I was hanging out with Gamzee today because...” He hesitates and then turns his head to look at you. “It’s Aradia’s death day” he looks away again. “and he said he was going to smoke me up like last year so I wouldn’t have to think about it. That’s why I brought Roxy.” He says the last part differently and it piques your curiosity. Mituna laughs.

“That sounds like there’s a story behind it. What shenanigans did you get into last year that you brought Roxy of all people as a voice of reason?” you ask.

[“The circus came to town. Sollux was the town.”] Mituna snickers.

“Oh my gog,” Sollux says as he tries to sink deeper into the pile. He puts a hand to his face, obscuring his eyes as if that will help hide him.

[“He was down ON the clown.”] Mituna is flat out laughing now.

“Wait. Hold up. Hold the fuck up. Is he telling me you two got down and dirty? Did you fuck the Juggalo?”

“Other way around,” He says with a DEEP sigh. “Look, I was high as balls, and GRIEVING, cut me some slack.”

“Dude, I knew you were a cuddle slut stoner, but damn,” you tease. He’s turning more and more yellow by the second. You give him a little side hug to make sure he knows you're just kidding.

“ANYWAY. My disgraceful unquadranted promiscuity aside, I didn’t know how strong it was. He had just said it was good shit. I didn’t know it was Mituna’s until after I took the hit. What I ALSO didn’t know until TWO SECONDS AGO is that it was even stronger than that. Mituna bought the wrong one, the same strain, but the wrong strength, it had way too much THC and not nearly enough CBD.”

“I have no fucking clue what that means, but go on.”

“It means I was beyond fucked. He traded Gamzee for it because Gamzee is a highblood so his tolerance is leagues higher than ours. Using the bowl, I might have been okay, but with the grav, I stood about as much of a chance as a blind grub fresh out of the caverns against a vore beast.”

"Did you say a VORE beast? What the everloving fuck is a vore beast?"

"It's like a cassowary except it is carnivorous."

["Kurloz says that isn’t right. Gamzee got something else for Sollux."]

"He mixed them up." You say. Sollux looks at you with a raised eyebrow. “You were probably pretty out of it at the time, but he told me that he gave you the wrong stuff by accident and didn’t realize it until you started freaking out. He had gotten you something that I’m thinking was basically the opposite of what you smoked.”

Mituna says something, but it sounds like he's farther away from the phone and maybe muffled. You hear shooshing in the background.

“Are they in the pile?” You whisper. They probably heard you anyway since the speaker is right
“Yeah.” Sollux snuggles up closer against you. The conversation must be wearing on him. He’s probably only keeping it together for Mituna’s sake. That or he’s just emotionally burnt out.

“Does that make this like a double date or something?”

“I guess?” He shrugs.

[“Gamzee isth mesth-thsaging him.”] Mituna’s voice is suddenly a lot softer like he’s in a daze.

“Kay, I’ll talk to you guys later.”

Sollux hangs up and floats his palm husk over to lay next to your phone. With a sigh he somewhat returns to his previous position, lying half on top of you with his head on your shoulder, his arm resting on your chest, and your legs tangled together. You turn onto your side so you can pull him closer. His arm moves to wrap around your waist instead and you hold him tight for a moment before letting your embrace slack. The day is starting to catch up with you now that everything is quiet.

“Are you okay?” His voice has a hollow quality to it, but you tell yourself he’s just tired.

“You’re done with this right? I don’t have to call up MTV and rake in that sweet ‘Intervention’ money, do I? There’s no part two to this? You said you wanted to stop. The mix-up thing with Gamzee, doesn’t mean you changed your mind, right?” You keep your voice even. Possibly too even. He knows your tells. His hand comes up to run fingers through your hair, gently skirting your hairline.

“I’m done. It used to really help, but I got too careless with it and I don’t think I can go back to how I used to use it. I don’t think I even want to.” His hand stills on the back of your neck and he cranes his neck up to press his lips against yours. You kiss him back, savoring the slow movements. Your stomach churns. A feeling crawls up your throat and you shove it back, ignoring it and instead kiss him harder. You take his face in your hands and run your thumbs over his cheeks, catching his lips in yours over and over with need. You thread your fingers through his still damp hair and wrap your arm around him, fingers curling in the back of his shirt and pull him closer, you’re pressed right up against him, but you can’t get close enough. You bury your face in his neck and leave a kiss there too. You grimace against his skin. He holds you tight and chirps at you. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to keep saying that. I know.” You kiss his neck again. You need him close. It’s one of several thoughts vying for your attention, but it’s the only one you are willing to let through. You need him close, you need to touch him, you need the tactile feedback. If you think about anything beyond that, if you ask why then your thoughts branch out in too many directions. It’s tied to too much. It hurts to look at it all. You’re vaguely aware that you’re mumbling under your breath as you pepper his neck with clumsy brushes of your lips.

“Dave?” You move up to kiss his jaw. You don’t know what you’re doing. Your physical instincts are shit. You just need him in a way you can't seem to satiate. He pulls you back by your hair and your breath catches in your throat. Your brain quickly flips from the surprise of liking it to registering that he's pulling you off of him. You barely have time to worry that you've fucked up because he's suddenly on top of you. He kisses you softly between murmured reassurances. He's here. He's okay. You're okay. You're here. It's just you and him. His fingertips gently graze your skin, down your neck, past your collar, until his hand rests splayed on your chest. You run your hands up his sides and feel where his shirt has ridden up to expose a sliver of that sun-kissed skin. You make it worse. He's so warm. You make it a lot worse. One of your hands slides up under the fabric and the other rests on his hip as you wrap your arms around him. You hold him to you. He purrs and you can feel it reverberating in your chest. You run your hand over his back. He’s warmth and sound and his
breath hits your neck steady and even. The purring abruptly stops, interrupted by a small sound of confusion. “Um, are you...” he asks, pulling away enough to look in the general direction of where his legs begin to tangle with yours and then back at you.

“Look at that, he likes you.” What a fantastically inappropriate time to be half hard. Fucking stellar. “It’ll go away. Just ignore it.” You try to make lite of it, but you can feel your face going hot. It’s a little weak, he sounds beyond tired, but he laughs that stupid laugh that you love and you pull him back to lie lazily against you. You sigh and let your eyes slip shut while he toys with the hem of your shirt and resumes purring.

== Be Roxy ==

You stumble a little on your way down the steps as you make your way over to where Gamzee is sitting on the curb, arms resting on his knees, and plop down beside him. “You could’ve said something ya know. I was ready to deck you back there til I realized what you were gettin at.”

“Yeah, my bad. The explanatories weren’t flowing up in my thinkspoon on account a me being scared more shitless than when I step on a motherfuckin horn strayed from the pile.”

“I get that.”

“Priorities and shit, ya know? Like, I’d rather take the fucking hit.” You steal the faygo Gamzee’s loosely holding onto and take a swig. Your face scrunches up the moment the taste hits your tongue.

“Ughh, how d’you drink this? It’s pure sugar.” You hand it back to him and he chuckles with the smallest of smiles. You pull out your flask and chase the faygo with the crappy bubblegum vodka you bought on a whim instead of the regular shitty vodka you usually get. You offer it to Gamzee. He takes a sip and makes a similar face to the one you made tasting his soda.

“That’s some nasty elixir you got there.”

You shrug. “Gets the job done.” He hands you back the flask and you throw it in your sylladex. “It was good thinkin by the way. Bringin him here. They woulda asked too many questions at the hospital.”

“Dead kids don’t make for the motherfuckin dolla dolla bills yo. It don’t look good neither. Amnesty clauses, motherfucking miracles. Campus security gonna rifle through his shit something disastrous, but he don’t keep his stuff in his room. Sol’s smart like that.”

“He is. It ain’t on him either. I chucked it on the roof. I’don think he’s gonna wan it back though.” You slump against Gamzee. You probably shouldn’t keep drinking. You hear a faint buzz and he pulls out his palm husk and starts typing.

“Kurloz says Sollux sounds like he’s tired as fuck, but doing alright. He ain’t so worked up no more.”

“He was talkin to him?”

“Mmmm,” Gamzee replies as he’s typing back something. “Dave’s all on that diamond business”

“Is’a good, it’s good that they’re moirails. Dave needs that. Bad stuff happened. Fucking miracle he’s here.” You may have had a bit much.
“Yeah? Fucking miracles abound. You just gotta get your notice on of them.” He sends another message and looks up at nothing in particular. “Bee man needs that shit too. The powers what be the universe ain’t sent on him too many miracles. I got nothin but mirth for him getting his quadrants full up.”

“I’mma head back in.” You go to stand up and don’t get too far before you topple backward. Gamzee pauses his typing to help you to your feet, but he’s a little sloshed too and it becomes a group effort to get vertical. You manage it though. You turn to leave but stop halfway through. “If you wanna crash, I gotta floor.” He gives you a nod and you throw a small wave back at him before heading back inside.

===> Be Karkat

You pass Roxy on your way outside. She gives you a wave but keeps going before you can say much of anything. You continue making your way out and spy Gamzee leaning against the wall of the building shoving his palm husk in his pocket and downing the last of a bottle of faygo. He sees you coming over and tilts his head up at you.

“Hey,” You say in response. You join him leaning against the wall. There’s only about a foot, maybe a foot and a half between you, but it might as well be an ocean. “Thanks for bringing him here.” He nods but doesn’t say anything. “Did you tell him what happened yet?” His eyebrows raise just the slightest bit in surprise. “Dave told me,” you explain.

“Nah, but he knows.”

“You should still apologize.”

“Didn’t say I wasn’t gonna.”

This is kind of weird, but it's been a rough day and he isn't a monster and you aren't 100% pure unfiltered asshole so…

“How um, how are you doing?” He looks at you with an expression that says he wasn't expecting you to ask that and he is skeptical of your motives.

“I'm fine. That's a question you should be sending way to his diamond and spade.” He's trying to sound like he doesn't care, but he's trying too hard and overshoots it.

“No shit, I'm actively making the rounds, and I don't know if you're aware of this, but you were also present for this mess so your ass is on the list.”

“Pulled a miracle out of the air and slammed that sucker straight in him. He’s good. I’m good. Got it?” Gamzee is being short with you and that isn’t surprising, but it’s pissing you off.

“Oh come off it. With the exception of Sollux himself, everyone in a five-mile radius with an IQ over 12 knows you have a flush crush on him. It really doesn't bother you what happened today?”

“That ain't your business nomore.” He doesn't look at you when he talks.

You throw up your hands. “Fine, be like that. Today sucked pretty hard and I was trying to be nice for once, but fuck you too I guess.” You start to push off the wall to storm off, but he speaks up.

“Wait.” You stop and go back to leaning against the wall and cross your arms. “I’m not about to fucking glub at you, but if you’re ever about fucking makin shit right, I’m down on burying that
murder hammer.”

“Did you ever make up with Terezi?” you know he didn’t.

“Man, you can really hold a fucking grudge. You’re all over my bulge about it like that shit was all my fucking fault,” he says with a shake of his head. “She was gettin set to leave anyhow.”

“Yeah, well, maybe she wouldn’t have gone so far away if you hadn’t pushed her!”

“I didn’t do shit what made her flip coasts. All I did was be the shittiest motherfuckin kismesis ever did crawl outta the caverns.”

“Don’t forget the shittiest moirail.”

“I already owned up for that erroneous misjudgment, brother.” He did. It takes out some of the wind from your sails. You sigh loudly. “Besides, I did thought bout that and I see now it was just a miracle all disguised like, cloaked and shit. Kanaya is way better at figuring your thinksponge.” He has a point. You wouldn’t be with Kanaya if you stayed with him. You might have missed your chance with her and you and her work really well together.

“You and your fucking miracles. You were still pretty shitty to her.”

“And she was shitty to me.”

“You didn’t tank your grades.”

“Didn’t have grades to tank, man.”

“You stabbed her.”

“She stabbed me first.” You throw your hands up and let them fall to your sides. You’ve had this argument before. Not this one exactly, but ones similar to it. “You need to do some sightseeing up in that pan. Hit that introspection like it insulted your ancestor. You know where I be chilling when you drop that noise.” This time it’s him that goes to leave. He isn’t steady on his feet and sways a little when he walks. You grumble as you walk after him.

“You can’t get in the building by yourself, dumbass.” You call after him as he makes his way up the steps. You walk over to him and grab him by the arm. “Come on,” you grumble as you walk him inside and sign him in. He sure as shit isn’t staying with you, you’re going to make him Roxy’s problem, but you can’t let him wander home as intoxicated as he is.

“Thanks, Kitkat.”

“Don’t call me that.”

Chapter End Notes

TW for a lengthy second person description of a drug overdose.
So it's been a while. Forgot what I said in the notes last chapter, but I had a major routine shift because I got put on a new project at work that is hella more work and hella more hours, and that fucked with my head a little. It also gives me less time to actually write this stuff. So, provided the universe smiles upon me and they extend my contract again, updates will not be at the lightening speed I was previously lucky enough to be able to do. But it's about quality, not frequency.

That said, I recently commissioned someone to do some art. First time doing that. Might fuck around and do it again. I'm going to update the description on the chapter this goes with, but I'm putting a link here too so y'all know it exists.

https://stubborndodecahedron.tumblr.com/post/184756677558/thedoublepp-commission-for-stubborndodecahedron

THE WORLD IS STARVED OF QUALITY DAVESOL ART

==> Be Dave

At first, it was sporadic. If you were feeling like there were eyes on you, you’d go train. If you were feeling overly anxious, your legs carried you to the roof like a horrifying reverse-pavlovian stress response. Then finals week started drawing closer and you suddenly found yourself up there a lot. You told yourself that you were just stressed out. You had a lot of work to do and your moirail was freaking out, which on top of all the shiny new and complicated emotions that that was giving you to begin with, you were now experiencing a whole expansion packs worth of emotions regarding your love life. Your brain was just tired and you didn’t have to think when you trained. That delusion didn’t last long, or rather, that wasn’t the true heart of what was eating at you. You knew what it really was. You were slacking. You were getting rusty. You were getting slow. Your reflexes were dulling and if Bro came at you right then and there, you’d be done for and now you had more to lose. You escaped him, but you also hadn’t. It was sheer luck that he hadn’t come for you while you were basking in normalcy, while you were indulging in this fantasy, playing pretend as if you could just run off to school and live out some fairytale young adult rom-com bullshit. You let your guard down. Bad things happen when you let your guard down.

You lie on the roof, sword in hand and covered in sweat beneath your layers. Your last final was yesterday and today you’ll be going up to the Lalonde house. If you can call it a house. Rose has shown you pictures and it is practically a complex. It has a laboratory and an astronomy tower. You have mixed feelings about going. It’ll be nice to relax and hang out with your brother and your cousins, but Rose told you it might get tense. That and it’s an extremely likely place for you to be if Bro is looking for you. Dirk said that right now he isn’t actively trying to find you for some reason, but didn’t elaborate on it, which you think might mean that he doesn’t know why. That is a bit
concerning. You told yourself that Hal is keeping tabs. He has every toll camera on the way here hacked and reading plates. You were thinking about asking Sollux if he had any suggestions, but it occurred to you a bit too late and there’s no way you can ask him now when he’s like this.

Speaking of which, in addition to being hunted for sport by your older older brother making you paranoid, Sollux is a wreck and you now get to experience this weird brand of concern that you don’t know quite how to address. You know he’ll be in good hands, but still, it worries you. He’s completely withdrawn into himself. Any task he deems non-essential isn’t done. However, his standards are not universal and he has required some prodding. He did get through his finals though. You had asked him and he thinks he even did well on them. How he managed that is beyond you. Your saving grace was that two of your finals were projects, and two were term papers. Sure, it really cut into your free time, but you only had to sit for one test. Sollux had to sit for three.

You pick yourself up and a familiar ache runs through you as you make your way back into the building. You’re kind of gross. You should definitely shower before cramming yourself into a car with three other people. You’re quick about it. Rose’s train will be here soon and once it is, you’ll all be piling into Dirk’s car to make the long trip up. Before that though, you want to spend some time with Sollux. You throw on the only pair of jeans you didn’t pack and any old t-shirt. Your red hoodie is on the chair and you grab that too. You knock on your moirail’s door a few times and tell him you’re coming in because he doesn’t answer. He told you to keep his key. He also warned you that he might try to take it back, but you shouldn’t give it to him for his own good. It’s been useful. He was a little clingy after his brush with death, a very understandable reaction, but wasn’t demanding your attention. It simply seemed like he was afraid to be alone. That, however, only lasted a few days before he swung in the opposite direction entirely and wouldn’t leave his room except to go to class. You shut the door gently behind you. You don’t see him immediately and think he might not actually be here until a soft rustling pricks your ears. You climb up the ladder built into the bunk bed and are met by two glowing eyes huddled under a blanket. He must have been expecting you because you know he doesn’t sleep with his head to the door; that’s just weird.

“Sup, man,” You say casually as if he isn’t deeply embedded in a dark depression and sinking lower by the second now that responsibilities aren’t there to keep him afloat. He blinks slowly but doesn’t say anything. You pet his head through the blanket. You’re about to speak again when there are suddenly too soft footsteps too close in the hallway. Your body snaps at the ready toward the sound and your hand is poised to catch your sword should you let it drop from your strife specibus. There are fingers fistled in the fabric of your hoodie. Sollux isn’t athletic, but he’s quick in some ways when he wants to be. He thought you might fall off the ladder. You relax and he withdraws his hand back under the comforter that he’s hidden himself in and again becomes only a pair of glowing eyes in the manufactured darkness. You turn back to face him. “Are you packed for tonight?” you ask, ignoring the panicked way you just reacted. You wore yourself out all morning, but you’re still on edge.

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“Yeah, Karkat helped me.” Your expression is stoic as you nod your head a few times.

“That’s cool.” There is an awkward silence in the air as you stand there on the ladder. It’s a long pause that demands to be filled with anything at all. “Soooo,” you start. “we’ll be apart for a little while and not that I can’t handle that because I’m totally cool with that, I’m not some clingy little kid, NOT that you are, I mean if you need company then that’s cool. No judgment. You’re messed up right now. No, not messed up, you’re not messed up, Sollux. There’s something wrong with-- NO, not like that, medically, shit no. I mean, fuck. You aren’t super great right now. But it’s not like there has to be something wrong for us to chill. We can chill whenever because we’re bros. Like now if you want, before I leave, but you don’t have to. I’m cool if you aren’t up for that. It’s all copacetic. I just thought since we’ve been kind of swamped with finals, and most of mine were projects and stuff, which, don’t feel bad about bailing on because I nailed that shit regardless. Latula totally came through on the helmet cam, by which I mean duct taping the camera to her helmet and crossing our
fingers. She amped up that radical bodaciousness with some sicknasty moves to get the shots I was thinking of. I’m not saying it was better than what we were going to do though. We should totally still do that. Definitely want to. For real. Unless you don’t want to and that’s okay I guess, no wait, that sounded bad. I don’t want to guilt you into it, you really don’t have to, I-

A hand comes up to gently cover your mouth. When the words stop, it moves up to gently pap your face before retracting into the abyss. A moment later Sollux holds the blanket up, an invitation for you to join him. He looks so tired and you aren’t sure, but you think he’s been crying. You notice something else too. Lately, he’s been wrapped up constantly in oversized hoodies and sweaters with sleeves long enough that only his fingers stick out. Right now, however, he’s wearing a t-shirt and it gives you a much clearer view of his hands. There are little nicks and cuts all over them, mostly on the outside edges and the tops leading up to and including his knuckles, but also around the beds of his claws. He’s clearly been picking and scratching at his skin. You have to shove down the compulsion to tend to them. They’re all closed up. They don’t need it. Plus, right now he’s asking you to cozy up next to him when there’s a good chance he’d rather be alone maybe. You tug at your laces and kick your shoes off before climbing in. He pulls the blanket over both your heads, making a little cocoon of sorts. You wonder if this could be some kind of comforting thing for trolls in general and not just for him. You stow your shades in your sylladex and your eyes quickly adjust to the dim light. Not much comes through the blanket itself, but his eyes provide enough additional light in the confined space for you to see alright. His hand is lying between your bodies. You hesitate. Your own uncertainty disappoints you. You had been doing pretty well with that...when you were letting your guard down. Shaking the thought, you thread your fingers between his. It’s much like you were the first time you were in his bed. He runs his thumb over your hand. It’s debatable who the comforting motion is for.

“Roxy and I are taking a break,” he says with a waiver to his voice. You squeeze his hand.

“What kind of break?” Taking a break is usually not actually taking a break. It’s usually a last-ditch effort to keep from breaking up that ends poorly.

“I can’t be her kismesis right now, but I don’t want her to think I’m ignoring her or don’t want her anymore.” You see him digging his claws into his thumb and let go of his hand to stop him. He looks away sheepishly and you wonder if he even fully knew he was doing it. Hands heal fast and don’t scar much. It could be a long-standing nervous habit for all you know. You scooch closer and tug him toward you. It doesn’t take much suggesting for him to curl up against you. A weird sort of static is coming off of him that you hadn’t noticed before. It’s not exactly the same as the static he gives off when he uses his psionics.

“How did she take it?”

“She thought I was trying to break up with her.”

“Yeah. Most people would.” You let your head rest against his and breathe in the smell of his shampoo. Karkat must have made him shower while he packed his things.

“She brought me to you so I just thought...it’s stupid, I was stupid to think like that.”

“Think like what?”

“Dave, my kismesis literally brought me to my moirail during what was probably one of the most embarrassing and pathetic moments of my life. She might as well have pinned a note to me that said ‘fix this’.” There is a sudden...sobriety?...to his voice, a brief departure from wallowing in gloom to stop and smell the self-loathing while also gently pointing out your obliviousness. “But...” The edge to his voice disappears entirely. “I guess she didn’t see it like that because she seemed pretty upset.
Of course she was. I swear though, I’m not-- I don’t want to leave her, but I just can’t-- I can’t handle...” He’s such a mess. You pet his head and let your fingers trail down to his cheek, papping his face before moving to rest at the back of his neck.

“Hey, shhh. Y’all’ll be-”

“What?”

“Hm?”

“Did you say yal-lul?”

“...yeah? Y’all’ll be fine.”

“I’ve never heard you say that one.” His voice backs down from his mounting worry to a more baseline blasé tone.

“If you think that’s fancy, I have some other colloquialisms that make me sound way dumber.” You were hoping for a smirk, but it doesn’t happen. He’s quiet for a second before he speaks again.

“To clarify, I don’t expect you to fix me. That is my psychiatrist’s job. The poor bastard. He’s Mituna’s doctor too.”

“Oh jeez.” You wonder if there is any particular reason that they have the same doctor. Maybe it makes treating them easier, like it offers more scope or some shit. Or maybe their issues are intertwined or something.

“Well...actually Mituna is the more cooperative one. My file describes me as ‘obstinate’, ‘prone to omission’, and ‘suspicious of authority figures’. There’s also a bunch of shit in there I strongly disagree with from some of my previous doctors, which only furthers to validate my distrust of them.”

“They let you read your file?”

“...technically, yes, but you would have to submit a formal request and pay a stupid amount for a hard copy that may or may not be redacted.”

“You just hacked their system, didn’t you?”

“You know me so well.” Score. There it is, a hint of a smile in his voice. You’ve never seen depression outside of media. The momentary peaks like this, when he comes up for a breath, threw you for a loop at first. It’s good that he can do that, especially since you only really know how to deal with shit by making fun of it or exhausting yourself physically. Your phone buzzes and you check it to see that it’s Dirk. He’s outside. You groan. It really didn’t seem like you had been here all that long.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, Dirk’s here. Just thought I had more time is all,” You sigh as you roll over onto your back and pull back the covers. You forgot you took your glasses off and have to blink a few times and squint before the world focuses properly. Without saying anything, Sollux takes your phone from you and shoves it back in your pocket. It feels oddly intimate, and the way his hand lingers lazily by your hip as he resumes lying against you has a blush creeping over your cheeks.

“Let him wait,” he says. You smile, but it’s bittersweet. You lay there with him in a comfortable
quiet trying to savor the seconds steadily and all too quickly ticking away. There’s a feeling in your chest you’ve never felt before. You’re going to miss him. It’s irrational. You’re going to see him again in less than two weeks, but still, you’re going to miss him. “You alright?”

“I’m gonna miss you,” you say in an almost confused voice that all too clearly conveys your unfamiliarity with both the phrase itself and the feeling behind it. If you weren’t so practiced in keeping a straight face, you're certain that you would look pretty shocked right about now. That thought wasn’t supposed to exit your mouth and you think Sollux may have realized that. He can read your tells so easily and your face is a slate of false composure right now. If he knows, he doesn’t call you out on it. Instead, he sits up and leans over the side of the bed. You stare at him. You look at the way his hair tapers at the back of his neck, the way his shirt lays on his frame and tugs in places as he moves, the WAY he moves. You see him nearly every day, but right now you're really paying attention. He comes back up with something black wrapped in his psionics. It falls gently into his hands and then he offers it to you.

"Here," he says. You take his hoodie. It's the one you like, the one he wears a lot. It's the one with his sign on it. A smile tugs at the corner of your mouth. Your eyes flick back up to him and you set the hoodie down to take off the one you're wearing and hand it to him. His mouth briefly moves like it wanted to smile, but didn't quite get there, and he takes it just a little too quickly, immediately putting it on. It makes you think he wanted to ask for it but wasn't sure how or was too embarrassed. Your phone buzzes again as you pull the sweatshirt over your head. You check it and this time it's Roxy. They're waiting for you.

He walks downstairs with you. Your hands bump as you make your way down the hall, but you can't bring yourself to take his in your own. You look at him as the elevator makes its way down. He looks so tired. You pass a floor and no one gets on. It's not just that, he's sad. He looks sad. You pass another floor without interruption. You should hug him or something. Nobody is here. Nothing to worry about. You're alone in the elevator. You tell yourself you'll move on three, but you move on two. He starts to move as soon as you do. You meant to hug him, but he kisses you. Your brain catches up after briefly tripping over itself and returns the needy, but gentle affections. His fingers are resting lightly on your neck as he breaks the kiss but stays close. His thumb brushes your jaw and you pull him back in. You should kiss him more often. What if Bro finds you. What if this is the last one? You haven't kissed him nearly enough. You shake the thoughts and bring yourself back to the moment, focusing on the feeling of his lips against yours. You bring your hand up to his face and he chirps when you touch it. You're getting better at that. The intrusive thought pops through again. You hope you can continue to get better at that. You shove the thought back and keep comforting him. He leans into your touch, silently asking for more. Another thing he wanted but didn't voice, you think. The elevator comes to a stop and the doors open. You damn near jump out of your skin as you spot the figure in your peripheral vision. It's just Dirk, it's just Dirk. You peel yourself off the wall you slammed your back into and try to play it cool, but there's no way to come back from that clear display of fear.

"We're waiting for you," Dirk says flatly. He knows why you reacted that way. He knows that you know he knows and that you feel bad about how he feels bad about it, and that makes him feel worse. You nod a few times and step off the wall toward him before turning back to Sollux.

"I'll um, So I'll see you in a week or so," you say with half a wave. He returns the gesture.

"See ya."

=> Be Sollux
Everything sucks.

As soon as you turned in your last final, every ounce of resolution drained from your body. The full weight of your mental and physical fatigue came crashing down on you. You've finally succumbed to it. You've finally let go. There is a certain relief in allowing it to overtake you, but it's overshadowed by the despair laying waste to your body and mind. It's like a looming fog, an infectious miasma that taints anything it touches. It's a catalyst, both causing an amplifying anything it can dig its claws into. You know this. You also know it's temporary. It doesn't make it any easier. Rationality never wins over the irrational part of your thinksponge that loudly and repeatedly reminds you of just how awful and useless and dysfunctional you are, and what a burden you are on those who tolerate your existence. You're so tired. You just want to crawl into bed, but you can't, not yet.

You're sitting on the train with Karkat and Mituna. You can still feel the ghost of Dave’s hand on your cheek and his lips on your own. It's going to be over a week before you see him again. You have no idea what you'll be like by then. It probably won't be an improvement. What will he think of you? How can he truly be okay with this, with you, with you like this? It feels like a lie but he says he is. You wrap yourself up in his hoodie, drawing your feet up onto the seat, trying to become as small as you feel, trying to bury yourself in the fabric, to disappear. You hide beneath the hood and rest your forehead on your knees. Karkat is sitting next to you. You feel his hand lightly pat your back before withdrawing. You’ve lost track of the stops, but you know there can’t be many left.

Mituna has an uncanny habit of waking up just before he needs to on the train and he’s starting to stir from where he is across from you, taking up an entire bench for himself. He stretches and yawns wide and loud before easing back against the bench seat again. You can feel him looking at you. It is at this exact moment that a sharp pain zings behind your eyes. It's gone as soon as it appeared. No one says anything so you think you did a good job of ignoring it. You had been prepared for the migraines as your psionics sorted themselves now that you weren't smothering them with pot. The fleeting sharp pains, however, have you a little concerned. You haven't said anything though. You're hoping they stop on their own. They probably will...but...you still worry. What if you really did fuck up? What if you were standing on a knife's edge and you just didn't know it? What if smoking so much ruined a precarious balance you had obtained by pure chance after the mind honey incident and now you've squandered that gift? What if it doesn't go away? What if it gets worse? You're spiraling into hypotheticals when the sign above the door dings and the train begins to slow down. It comes to a gentle stop and Karkat nudges you. This must be it. You unfold yourself and follow him and your littermate off the train, still buried in the hoodie and casting your gaze to the floor.

It’s Kanaya that greets you all at the platform. Karkat is quick to wrap her in a hug. She glows faintly and quietly chirps. Karkat, in true Karkat fashion, is not so reserved in his volume.

“Where's slut fangs at?” Mituna so affectionately asks while looking around as if she might be hiding behind one of the pillars running down the center of the station platform.

“Porrim will be joining us later. She is finishing up her work at the brooding caverns. Her jades have persuaded her to reconsider twice, and now that she is actually leaving, they are scrambling to tie off loose threads,” Kanaya answers while still holding her moirail.

“Finally,” Karkat chimes in with the exact thought you, and probably Mituna as well, had. She’s always bitching about it. Sometimes loudly and doubly so if at Kankri. The one matter of social justice he doesn't seem to understand. Kanaya moves on to hug Mituna too once Karkat let's go of her, although with less squeezing and swaying involved. You also find arms coming around you and weakly return the gesture.

“Sollux, when you are up to it, I believe there are things that should be said between us,” she says it
warmly, but there is a tinge of sadness to her voice as if to suggest she feels sorry for you. You have a pretty good idea of what these things that need saying are. It's definitely about your former "drug habits". You feel an "I told you so" coming your way. You had valid points at the time. Some of them pushed the truth, but they were still valid. She was kind of right though. She and Karkat were both right, and you yelled at them and told them off like the festering bulge wipe that you are. They were just trying to help.

"Kay. Maybe later. I’m really tired," You say into her shoulder as you hug her just a bit tighter, although still languid in comparison to her embrace.

"Of course."

It’s not a cop-out. You really are exhausted and the first thing you intend to do when you step into the Vantas hive is make a bee-line for the guest room that you consistently occupy when you stay there. Karkat and Kankri have an oddly spacious hive for their blood caste or rather, lack thereof. It's a lawn ring style hive that, personally, you think is hideous from the outside, but the inside is nice. It's hodgepodge together, a bunch of square and non-standard geometric 'boxes' all smashed into each other, but it's cozy. The main door opens to the living room but no one ever uses it, and in fact, the over-use of the back kitchen door has worn a path in the lawn.

The moment you've been anticipating since you woke up this morning is almost here. You can finally slip away and go sink into the guest recuperacoon. Human beds are very convenient, and sopor infused blankets and pillows are readily available, but there is just something different about sleeping in slime. You're just about to your room when--

"SKREEEEEEEEEEEECH," CrabDad shouts at you as he blocks your path. You try to go around him but he scuttles to block you again. The two of you do this dance a few more times before he catches your shirt in his grippy mitts and starts pulling you to the living room.

"Let go. I’m fine."

"KRWAAAAAHHHK."

"I’m tired."

"CLACK’CLACK’CLACK’CHATTER." He calls your bullshit and drags you into the living room. You aren’t sure why until he gives you a pointed shove in a particular direction. The Vantas living room looks like each piece of furniture came from a different garage sale. There is a large lounge plank, easily capable of seating four trolls, front and center, with a modest television unit (set atop what looks like it might actually be a large end table versus a viewing unit stand) in front of it with a just shy of square coffee table in between the two. To either side of this are smaller lounge planks. Humans call them love seats for some reason. Between the smaller lounge planks and the larger one are end tables at either junction. This completes the comfort pit. What CrabDad is bringing your attention to is how one of the smaller lounge planks has been shoved catty-corner a little ways away from the rest of the relaxation furniture. There are two blankets thrown over the back of it, a phone charger with an extra long cable in the nearby outlet, and a pillow all set out for you far enough away from the rest of the occupiable area in the living room to give you a sense of personal space and distance while still including you. It’s really thoughtful and has you all twisted up inside. You don’t deserve this extra effort. You’ll only mope around here and bring everyone else down with you.

"Oh, thanks, but really, I just want to sleep." It’s implied that you mean in sopor slime. CrabDad chatters at you again, but steps aside. You make your way back to your room and toss your clothes on the floor except for Dave’s hoodie, which you lay neatly on the bed. Clad only in your boxers,
you climb into the recuperacoon and sink down into the slime. You hold yourself and let out a stuttered breath that desperately wants to be a sob. For once, sleep takes you immediately.

It feels like your eyes have only been shut for a few minutes, an hour at the absolute most, before someone is tugging on your arm. “I’m not waking you up again, asshole. Get in the damn ablution trap already,” Karkat says as he tries to tug you out of the body warmed slime. You grumble and resist.

“How off. Let me sleep.” You sink deeper into the viscous liquid.

“You’ve been sleeping for fourteen hours. Get your ass up, rinse off, and get ready for breakfast.” There is no fucking way it’s been fourteen hours. You protest, but Karkat is stronger than he looks, and once he hooks his arms beneath yours, he is easily hoisting you out.

“Fiiine, I’ll go, I’ll go. Get your grubby little prongs off of me.” He lets go but stays there watching you as you sit on the edge of the recuperacoon and wipe off some of the sopor from your skin. You glare at him, but there isn’t any energy behind it and his glare decimates yours. With a groan, you swing your legs over the side and stand up with the world’s worst posture to shuffle your way to the ablution block. It could be five minutes or twenty that you stand under the warm water; fuck if you know. You don’t use soap or wash your hair. Free of sopor you turn the water off and grab the towel Karkat must have put out for you because you definitely forgot to get one. You float back to your room and throw on anything. It doesn’t matter. You don’t care. Any old jeans and long sleeve will do. The only thing clothing wise that you care about is your ability to bundle yourself up in it. That’s what the hoodie is for...and also possibly because it smells like your moirail.

Breakfast is in full swing by the time you get to the table. You’re not hungry and you’re hoping that merely being present will suffice, but you have no such luck. CrabDad drops a plate in front of you and nudges your shoulder. He screeches quietly and you pick up your fork to push around the eggs on your plate, but make no move to actually ingest them. Instead, you sit there and idly listen while Kankri and Karkat go on about something quadrant related. The discussion is five tangents deep when a delicate hand comes to rest on your shoulder. Kanaya hands you a cup of coffee. Right. Coffee is a thing. It actually sounds fairly appealing now that it’s in your hands.

"Thanks," you say softly before taking a sip. She smiles and takes a seat next to you with a cup of her own. You and she still have to have that conversation. You consider putting it off, possibly until she forgets about it, but you miss how close you used to be with her. You put a strain on that.

"Something on your mind, Sollux?"

You pick your head up. "I was just thinking."

"That is generally what someone does when something is on their mind." You nod and take another sip of your coffee. "When did you want to talk?" You ask. What’s one more thing on the self-loathing stack? Might as well.

"We can converse at your convenience. Whenever you are feeling well enough to do so, which is to say when you have the energy. We could even talk now if it suits you. Perhaps on the upper patio?" You consider it for a moment before giving a shrug.

"Sure."

You follow Kanaya upstairs, taking your coffee with you. It’s cold outside and there is a light dusting of snow on the ground that wasn’t there yesterday. You both sit on the ledge and stare out across the
neighborhood. It's still and peaceful. You wonder what time it is.

"Karkat told me what happened. I am sure you expected him to do that."

"Yeah. I figured he would."

"I'm glad that you are okay. It scared the shit out of him. It must have been terrifying for you. This is not how I envisioned you would overcome this, nor is it how I would have liked you to, but I am nonetheless happy that you have gained something from the experience." You aren't sure how to respond to that. You don't feel like you gained much. It's more like the opposite. Lucky for you Kanaya is only pausing to sip at her drink. "I am sorry for being so relentlessly obtrusive in my opinions of your chemical dependency in the past. I was simply worried for you and did not know how else to express that. It is not that I disapprove of the substance itself. If you recall, I did not originally take issue with you using it, nor do I judge Mituna, however, you ceased to move and act as you once did and it was troubling."

"So it's not the weed; it's me?"

"That...that is not how I intended that to come across." Her brows knit together and you can see her scrambling for words to better express what she did a perfectly fine job of expressing, but you're just being an ass about.

"No, Kanaya, I...I know what you meant. Sorry." You set your drink down and pull your legs up to lean on your knees. Why do you have to be such trash? "I was a stubborn little wiggler about the whole thing. You were just trying to help and honestly, you were right to worry because..." I wasn't going to stop until something happened. You bite your lip, suddenly rethinking continuing that sentence. "Nevermind. It is what it is." She puts a hand to your shoulder and you realize how tense they are. You relax them and her hand falls away.

"Sollux, may I ask you something that has a high probability of being misconstrued?"

"I guess." This sounds like it’s going somewhere just fantastic.

"Do try not to take offense. My perception of this is colored by Karkat and his unwillingness to forgive his ex-moirail as well as admit that certain things are not to blame him for." She stares down at her coffee and the little wisps of steam that roll off its surface in the chilled air. "Karkat gives the impression that Gamzee is a bad influence on you to the extent that he may have caused you harm in more than one manner of speaking. I would like to know how you see it."

"He isn't a bad influence on me. Karkat is just being a fucking idiot." Kanaya briefly chuckles as if she had thought this to be the case, before clearing her throat.

"That is good to hear."

"He wasn't seriously broken up about it. KK probably blames him, but I don't. He knew I was having a hard time, tried to help, and fucked up. Shit happens. I'm not about to denounce our friendship because he mixed up two bags of leaves. And besides, he's Kurloz' littermate. I’m not going to go make that all weird over something that didn’t have lasting consequences.” You turn to pick up your coffee again as Kanaya makes a thoughtful ‘hmmm’ sound.

"You've been stuck in the middle of the whole Gamzee Karkat thing for a while now. Sure, Gamzee was an entire sack of bulges, but Karkat wasn’t innocent either. He repeatedly sent Terezi mixed signals. He had no right being jealous or envious or both at the same time, whatever asinine combination it was. Someone really should have stepped in between Gamzee and Terezi though.
They veered sharply into destructive hate so you've heard. You weren't really conscious enough at the time to notice. The whole thing was an over escalated mess and as far as you're concerned it's everyone's fault. You're caught up in your thoughts again when another one of those sharp pains cuts through your pan. You wince and grab at your head. Below, the sound of shattering ceramic carries up.

“Are you having headaches again?”

“Yeah. They'll go away once my psionics get their shit together.”

“Was your marijuana use affecting them so severely?”

“Yeah, it was,” you say, voice heavy with shame. For Mituna, that’s the whole point of smoking, so that what little is left of his psionics doesn't surge at random. However, that means that he needs to take supplements so that his psionics don’t dip too low either. The tradeoff of having them is that you need them. Oddly enough the solution to this is ingesting the mind honey that fucked him up in the first place. Weird and annoying for sure, but eh, at least it isn’t void rot. For you though, suppressing your psionics to the extent that you did was really stupid. You aren’t sure why it affected you so greatly. There are plenty of trolls with psionics that smoke and have no problems with it, but you did and you should have done something about it sooner. But you didn’t. You were such an idiot fucking with that kind of shit especially since you already have one or two other issues and your relationship with healthy eating, the thing that fuels your body and ergo your psi, is inconsistent if not entirely tenuous.

“There is ibuprofen in the hall closet. Go rest. I will take care of the mug.” Right, you dropped that, didn’t you. You nod your head and start getting to your feet. Kanaya does the same. You make your way back downstairs and start heading to your room, but again you’re intercepted by CrabDad. You protest and grumble the whole way to the living room. In truth, you aren’t quite so against it. You’re just being difficult. It’s actually pretty comfortable. One of the blankets is sopor infused and one isn’t. It provides a nice mix.

You lay there and mope and no one gives you shit about it. Not that you would want them to. You aren’t worth the effort anyway. They go about their day around you while you wallow in your self-loathing. Nothing they say or do could stop your mind from reeling even if they did try. You mostly face the back of the sofa, but every now and then you roll over to watch tv. The hours tick by. You feel guilty for wasting them, but you’re too tired to do anything and regardless, nothing interests you. There’s no point in trying. They insist you eat lunch even if it’s only a few bites. You really don’t want to. Just the smell of food makes you feel sick. You give in though and manage some of a sandwich. You sleep on and off. The inner dialog in your head gets more vicious and the whispers that are a constant static in the back of your mind grow louder. Eventually, you retreat to your room again when it gets to be too much. If you’re going to let it break you down, it sure as hell isn’t going to be in front of everyone. Your eyes water as you slip into the sopor slime. There’s nothing you can do. There is no source. Nothing to fix to make it better. You are the source. You can’t fix that. You’re too broken to fix. Glue one piece into place and another falls apart. You drift off wondering why they tolerate you.

===> Be Karkat

"Sweety, that is far too much," Kanaya says, taking the blob of cookie grub dough that you placed on the baking sheet and making it almost half its size before putting it back.

"That's barely anything, they're going to be too small," You complain as you follow her instruction anyway.
"They need room to puff up. If they're too big they will stick together." She says before turning back to the cupcake batter, only to find Mituna stealing a spoonful. You laugh as she shoos him out of the kitchen for the third time. She sighs and shakes her head, but she's smiling. "Perhaps you should see if Sollux would like some uncooked dough or batter before Mituna eats it all."

"Yeah, maybe," you say with a tinge of worry in your voice. He's been camped out in the living room all day sulking just like he was yesterday. It's better than him being locked in his room, but not by much. He's absolutely listless. He isn't even on his phone except for the few times you've seen him use trollian, probably talking to Dave. Mostly he's just laying there. And getting him to eat anything, even his favorite foods has been hell and high water. You're starting to wonder if you should ask your lusus to let him sulk in his room. Maybe being around everyone is actually making him worse. You put a chunk of dough in a cupcake wrapper for him and make your way to the living room. Mituna is subjecting Kankri to some ridiculous anime and Kankri is subjecting Mituna to his commentary. Sollux isn't paying attention in the slightest. He's in his corner, laying on his stomach with one arm hanging off the sofa and his legs over the edge of the armrest because he's too tall to properly stretch out on it. The blanket is strewn over his middle and part of it is brushing the floor. His palm husk pings and he turns his head to look down at it, type something, then set it back on the floor and resume staring into space. "Hey, asshole." Everyone turns their heads. You smack yourself in the face. At least Kankri looked offended. You walk over to where Sollux is and shove the uncooked holiday treat at him. "Here. Mituna has already stolen his fair share from the kitchen." He doesn't take it immediately and when he does, he just holds it in his hand and looks at it. Your demeanor softens. "...Sol." He sighs and pops the chunk of cookie grub dough in his mouth.

"It needs more honey." You've never been happier to have your culinary skills criticized. He goes back to being a lump instantaneously and just like that, you're frowning again. You take a seat on the edge of the sofa and rest your hand on his shoulder. Sollux clenches his jaw and looks away.

"Do you want me to tell my lusus to stop making you be out here?" you ask. It feels like giving in, but if it makes him feel better then you don’t care. Sollux shrugs and turns to hide his face. "Well, if you get tired of king dumbass and shitsponge over here-- oh no you don't!" You turn to catch Kankri mouth open about to bust out into a rambling spiel. "Shut your self-righteous noise hole, he's king dumbass, YOU'RE shitsponge!" Mituna laughs and takes the reigns from you on the mocking Kankri front, though he also does a good job insulting himself as well in the process. "ANYWAY, if you get tired of those idiots, I'm sure Kanaya wouldn't mind you being in the kitchen. You get up and start heading back. You don't expect him to follow you, but he does. You and Kanaya continue baking for 12th perigee's eve while Sollux sits at the table wrapped in a blanket. The holiday is pretty bastardized at this point. Largely it's an excuse to cook a more elaborate meal, hang out together and exchange gifts, but that's not a bad thing on its own really.

You are really trying to enjoy the time together, especially with Kanaya, but it's hard to be upbeat with all that's happened recently. On the bright side, this seems to be the bottom of his mood. He's pretty much the same for the rest of the evening. When Porrim finally shows up, things get a bit too crowded and loud in the kitchen and he floats off to his room. You don’t blame him. Kankri and her are getting into another debate about jade bloods and feminism. You give Kanaya a look and the two of you, long done with your baking, abscond and leave dinner to CrabDad.

=> Sollux: Sulk in your room

You gave it a go for Karkat’s sake, but you just didn’t have the energy when everyone started convening in the kitchen. Karkat must have stopped his lusus because you didn’t encounter him on your way to your room. He does bring you food later though. You picked at it. You know you need to eat, but just really don’t feel like it. Because of all the sleeping you did earlier, you now find yourself wide awake at an odd hour of the night with nothing but your own thoughts. It’s not exactly
the best company to have. Maybe Dave is awake. He messaged you at a weird hour last night. Not
for a conversation or anything. It was only a little diamond emoticon. Him checking in on you, you
suppose. The decision is made for you when your palm husk buzzes.

turntechGodhead [TG] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

[TG] you awake man

[TA] yeah.

[TG] cool

[TA] what2 up?

[TG] humor me a second

[TG] tell me something only you would know

[TA] iiif only ii know iiit, how wiill you know iiit’2 true?

[TG] touche

[TG] something only we know

You think for a moment. Something that only you and Dave know.

[TA] 2ince you’re obviou2ly tryiing two make 2ure thii2 ii2 actually me ii’m going two go out on
a liimb here and a22ume that nothiing we’ve 2aiid over trolliian ii2 on the table and neiither ii2
anytiing 2aiid or done iin publiic.

[TG] you got it

[TA] 2ometiime2 ii can’t tell iiif you’re lookiing at me or not and ii’m pretty 2ure we’ve wound up
mutually 2tariing at each other on at lea2t one occa2iion.

[TG] that is hilarious and i bet your right

[TG] however

[TG] anyone could say that

[TA] your ear2 are 2en2itiive.

[TG] hmmm

[TG] could be a lucky guess

[TA] you know you can ju2t call me riight?

You figure he’s going to hem and haw about it for a while, but your palm husk rings almost
immediately.

“Sup?”

[“Oh, thank god. I mean...not much how bout you?”]

“I was trying to get back to sleep, but I think it’s a lost cause.”
“I feel ya.”

“So, what’s with the sudden doubt about my trollian password strength?”

[“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”]

“Dave.”

[“It’s stupid. I…”]

The call hangs up and for a second you think it might have dropped, but then your trollian pings.

[TG] its so dumb

[TG] i had a bad dream is all

[TA] about me?

[TG] yeah

[TG] its usually dirk or me

[TG] i know its stupid but its just never been you before

[TA] iit’2 not 2tupiid, dave.

[TA] niightmare2 2uck a22 ii would know.

[TG] dirk has this theory that bro isnt looking for me right now because its part of some plan of his

[TG] beyond that i think hes in the dark about it and if he doesnt know then im sure as shit not going to be able to figure it out

[TG] i hate to compare them to each other but theyre both way better at that long game nancy drew shit than i am

[TG] dirk thought of so many things getting my ass out here that i wouldnt have

[TG] bro has been way too fucking quiet

[TG] hes gonna do something soon i just know it

[TA] hiir2 fiir2t name ii2 broderiick riight?

[TG] yeah how did you know

[TA] bro ii2n’t 2hort for two many thing2.

[TA] do you want me two look iinto iit?

[TG] i dunno man if he even gets a whiff of you then everybody is fucked

[TA] wow 2o much confiidienee iin my 2kiill2 ii can feel my crippliing depre22iion liiftiing from the 2heer force of your faith alone.

[TG] shit i didnt mean it like that
[TA] you know i didn't even apply two thii2 2chool ii ju2t added my2elf two the addmii22iion2 lii2t.

[TG] no way really

[TG] yeah.

[TG] thats sick as hell

[TG] alright but be careful

[TG] and mute your computer

[TG] and do not tell me about any weird shit you find

[TG] especially if it involves me

[TA] that’2 not omiinou2 or concerniing at all.

[TA] a2iide from the nighet terror2, how are thiing2 going wiith the 2triilonde collectiive?

[TG] jeez where the fuck do i even begin

[TG] first off this is the most likely place i could possibly be so jot that down

[TG] we don’t see my aunt at all until today and the hot fucking second we meet her she goes and compares dirk to bro which is number one on his top five least favorite things to hear right above you may never speak again and the error message sound

[TG] the conversation didn't get any less awful from there out

[TG] shes also drunk as shit during this entire 12 pm exchange

[TG] and roxy has some kind of feud going on with her

[TG] we had the most passive-aggressive dinner of my life it was wild and just when it reached peak levels of absurdity only seen on a sound stage it took the sharpest turn into drunken yelling

[TG] me and dirk stayed the hell out of it and somehow still got flack

[TG] to be fair rose did warn me about it

[TA] roxy ha2 mentioned her and her mother don't 2ee eye two eye on her cho2en fiield of 2tudy.

[TG] yeah apparently my aunt had her pegged for following in her footsteps and just straight mocks roses whole dark broody wizard vibe

[TG] according to her rose “is better suited for astrology than astronomy” and roxy is “wasting her potential” and “should be concerned with more noble sciences” and not “chasing alien dick”

[TA] what the fuck?

[TA] and al2o, cha2iing aliien diick?

[TG] im honestly not sure which half of that statement she had more issue with

[TA] ii’m not exactly runniing.
[TG] ha

[TG] how are things at chateau vantas

[TA] nothing all that exciting really.

[TA] i'm not the best person to ask i've been primarily a piece of shit on the tofa.

[TA] although when you get here we're marathoning naruto.

[TA] miituna ii2 on an anime kick right now and pedtering everyone iintwo watchiing it with him.

[TA] ii told hiim he ha2 two waiit two watch naruto though becau2e ii remembered you de2crireibiing it two kk that one tiime and ii thought you'd be deva2tated iiif you mii22ed hii2 reactiion.

[TG] have i told you lately how awesome you are

[TA] no, ii in fact ii don't think you're going two meet your monthly quota of trokiing my ego.

[TG] man there are so many dick jokes i could respond with

[TG] the world is my fucking dick joke oyster and here i am overwhelmed with a frankly obscene amount of dick to reference

[TG] how can i possibly pick just one dick

[TA] thii2 may sound crazy but hear me out.

[TA] you could piick...

[TA] two.

[TG] mind = blown

A smile has crept its way onto your face and there is a fuzzy feeling warming you that fights to overtake the depressive thoughts looming in your pan. It mixes into a strange wistful sadness. You wish he were here.

[TG] are you okay

[TG] i mean i know youre not okay but are you actively upset or anything

[TG] i was thinking of trying to catch a bit more shut eye but if you need and or want me to i can stay up with you

[TA] ii'll be okay you can go to 2leep.

[TG] are you sure

[TA] yeah iit'2 cool.

[TG] aight

[TG] message me if you need to
You are very hungover. It’s your first thought as you push yourself up into sitting position. You run your fingers through your hair and look over to your left at Dirk. For a moment you think he might still be asleep, but then he cracks open one amber eye long enough to meet your gaze before shutting it again. You wonder if he actually slept or if he’s only been resting his eyes. You don’t remember exactly when you fell asleep, but it was already pretty late when you started talking. He’s been more on edge than usual and with good reason. This is a very likely place for him and Dave to be. It’s also super likely that Bro would easily deduce that Dirk’s soft spot for Dave would have him bringing him here at all, let alone to slap together something vaguely resembling a normal Christmas. The security cameras and the access to them that you gave him and Hal calmed him down some, but he’s still worried despite the calm veneer he’s got up.

Your head is killing you. The blankets are calling you back to bed, but the call of a bloody Mary is stronger. "Rise and shine, Dirk," you say as you ruffle his hair. He makes a noise of slight annoyance as you mess up his already tousled do. Another sound rumbles in his throat, a groan of sorts as he rolls over and sluggishly removes himself from your bed while you throw on your fuzzy robe over your pj’s. It’s a little chilly in the house, but it’s nothing a good ol’ yule log won’t fix. Dirk puts coffee on while you fix yourself some anti-hangover juice. You’ve just dropped in a stick of celery when you hear footfalls on the stares. If they weren’t both legal to drink you’d say childhood was about to happen. Dave is making his way down the stairs, wrapped in a blanket and trying not to look too excited. Rose is calmly trailing behind him and eyeing the dragging blanket a little too closely. There’s a small strangled sound, a thud, and then a giggle. Dave pops back up on his feet as Rose rushes past him and vaults the sofa back before he can retaliate, sitting there gracefully as if to be on home base. He squints at her and makes the ‘i’m watching you’ gesture with two of his fingers before joining her on the adjacent sofa. You shake your head and regret it just a little.

Dirk snaps his fingers to get everyone’s attention. “Coffee’s on,” he says in a quiet rasp, already making his way to the sofa with his cup. He takes a seat by Dave just as the other is getting up. The call of coffee is strong. You’re the only one who doesn’t grab one. You throw back a good portion of your drink (it’s already numbing up your head thank god) and light the fireplace while Rose grabs the gifts from under the tree and makes little piles for everyone. Hal’s drone comes whizzing down the stairs just as you flop back down into the cushy sofa. It drops Dirk’s “voice modulator” in his lap and he holds it a moment in debate before putting it around his neck and clicking the clasp shut.

“Alright, you guys get to go first,” you say, pointing toward them with your drink. Only the gifts from each other are in front of you all. Rose left the ones from your mother under the tree. Dirk parts with his beloved coffee to tear at the paper of not your gift and pulls out...wait a minute...

“These are mine,” he says quietly. He looks over at Dave who gives him a shrug.

“They aren’t exactly like your other pair, but I figured since you did at one point own them that there was a fairly decent chance you’d like them.” Dirk tugs on, what your guessing is an old pair of his
black fingerless gloves.

“I’m surprised you kept them.” There’s a slight smirk on his face. He looks like he might say something more, but Rose interrupts whatever emotionally underdeveloped blunder of Strider feelings was about to happen there.

“Well, I’m afraid this may make my gift rather inconsequent.” He looks to her and then opens a carefully wrapped box to reveal another pair of black fingerless gloves. “I enlisted Jake to rescue them from your room and consulted Kanaya on how to go about repairing them, to which she promptly rolled her eyes at me and repaired them.” You lean a little closer to try and see where the right glove should be split roughly up the center in the same place Dirk’s hand is scarred. Kanaya does good work. You can barely tell it was ever damaged from where you are only a few feet away.

“Well, shit.” You take another sip of your drink and motion to the last gift in front of Dirk. “Go on, open it.” He cocks an eyebrow at you and pulls off the wrapping paper. The corner of his mouth twitches and Dave’s shoulders hunch as he holds in a laugh. Another pair of gloves are added to the collection. These ones are new, but look almost identical to the ones he practically lived in before. Honestly, you can’t even be mad. From the looks of it, it’s exactly what he wanted and now he has three of them. You continue exchanging gifts. Rose made everyone a knit hat. Yours is the same color as the scarf she made you last year. When you open Dave’s gift your expression falters at the sight of the 3D glasses. They’re the photos from his photography final and some of the better test shots you all did together. You slip the paper glasses on and flip through the photos, lingering a little longer on the ones that have Sollux in them, and lingering even longer still on the ones that have you both in them. It hurts a little, but you remind yourself that you aren’t broken up; you’re just taking a break. He’s just a little fucked up right now and wants some space. He told you so. He told you because he cares about you and didn’t want you to think that he didn’t. You fix your face and look up.

“Didn’t you have a 3D film too, Dave?”

“Yes, you said you would show it to us when we were all gathered together to truly appreciate the majesty of Latula’s sicknasty pavement shredding, as I believe you put it.”

“Oh yeah, totally. Hold up, lemme go get my laptop.” Dave bolts up the stairs and when he comes back you hook the computer up to the TV. It really is pretty awesome. While he’s giving Rose the rundown on how he did it, you get the remaining gifts from under the tree and pass them out. Yours is another book on astronomy, Rose gets this weird near life-size princess doll, Dave gets a hockey stick (ah the sports), and Dirk gets one of those fancy overpriced baseball caps. He is less than pleased about it and you see him look toward the fire before thinking twice about throwing the hat in there. It would probably give off some nasty fumes. Instead, he just drops it on the floor and walks out onto the porch. Dave starts to get up, but you beat him to it. When you get outside, Dirk is sitting on the stoop. Little wisps of smoke dance at his side. You’ve eased up on chiding him about smoking even in jest. Knowing Dirk, aside from it being horrible for his health, the part that likely eats at him the most is his lack of control over it. That and Dave’s reaction, which he is convinced will be bad. He looks back at you over his shoulder. You sit next to him but don’t say anything and it feels like a long while before he speaks.

“Is she always such a shining example of Schrodinger's douchebag?” He takes a hard drag and holds it in before blowing the smoke as far away from you as he can.

“Pretty much.”

He nods and continues smoking in silence. There’s only a good drag or two left on it when the front door creaks open. You turn around to see Dave and a flint of panic runs through you until you see
that he isn’t freaking out. He crinkles his nose but continues right on as if Dirk isn’t sitting there with a cigarette in his hand.

“You good, man?” Dave asks with an upward nod of his head.

“Yeah, I’m good.” He doesn’t move his mouth when his voice comes through the speaker. It’s a little odd. He usually does. Also, Dirk does not, in fact, have a cigarette in his hand and you really hope he wasn’t batshit enough to put something actively on fire into his sylladex.

“Cool.” Dave goes back inside and you look back expectantly at Dirk just in time to catch him flipping the lit cigarette back out of his mouth with a flick of his tongue. You stare at him wide-eyed as he takes another drag off it.

“That was sick as hell and all, but you really should tell him about that at some point.”

“At the risk of being optimistic, I was aiming to quit before he found out, however it is becoming apparent that that may not be a viable option.”

“Dave doesn’t really strike me as the type to throw a shit fit over it. Is he really that against it?”

“Not exactly. It’s...I come out of this looking like a hypocrite. I suppose I am. Statistically speaking we were both prime candidates for it, so I drilled it into his head not to do this. In hindsight, I can almost say with certainty that as a secondary motive, I was unconsciously hounding him about it to, by proxy, keep myself from doing it.”

“Rose would be all over that.”

“Don’t.”

“You wound me.” You fall back dramatically on the steps with the back of your hand to your forehead. “Ya know, He probably already knows. The smell isn’t easy to cover,” You offer up as you pull yourself forward to sit up again.

“If he does, he hasn’t said anything.”

===> Dave: Continue not to say anything

"How is he?" Rose asks as you flop back into the couch. It's ridiculously plush and you sink into it.

"He's good. He's just having a cigarette. Roxy's got it covered."

"Is he still under the illusion that you are blissfully unaware of his habit?"

"Yeah."

"You really ought to tell him that you already know, Dave."

"He'll tell me if he wants to."

"Have you not taken into consideration that this is Dirk we're talking about? The man has a capacity for guilt that rivals the Vatican." Rose has a fair point. You remove yourself from the sinfully comfortable sofa and just as you get to the door, it opens and Roxy walks in only a little surprised at you being there. Dirk tries to walk past, but you spin him around and half walk half push him back outside. The door shuts behind you.
“Something up?” He asks. Now that you’re standing here you realize you don’t have a damn thing planned to say.

“Um, so...” You shove your hands in the pocket of Sollux’s sweatshirt. “Rose put me up to this, but she’s probably right. I should probably tell you.” Dirk is an unreadable obelisk.

“Tell me what exactly?”

“I know you smoke,” You say flatly. The tension that follows that sentence is thick enough to spar with.

“I’m trying to quit again.” He says equally if not even more monotone than you. The word ‘again’ doesn’t go unnoticed.

“That’s good.” You nod. This is incredibly awkward. It’s not that Dirk is tough to talk to, well maybe he is if it’s about him, but you don’t know why he’s being so tight-lipped about this.

“Dave I-”

“You’ve been through some rough shit, bro, and it’s not the worst vice you could have.”

“It’s a filthy habit.”

“Yeah, I guess, but it’s not like you’re guzzling down fucking Lean or something.”

“It’s slowly killing me.”

“So switch to a vape. Nicotine isn’t inherently bad for you on its own, just addictive as fuck.”

“After all the times I told you not to do this, you don’t think it’s even a little hypocritical of me to be doing precisely what I told you not to do?”

“Jeez, man, you gotta be careful waving questions like that around. That sucker’s loaded.” You break your feigned outrage with a smirk and you can see his shoulders ease some. “I’m not going to pretend to be thrilled about it, I’m glad you’re trying to quit or look into alternatives or whatever it is you’re doing that’s less awful for you, but on the flip side I can’t really blame you for it.” You can see him thinking, but you doubt he’s convinced. “Would you blame me?”

“Of course not.” There’s a pause where you stand there with him. You don’t know where else to go with this. Maybe the conversation is over? You aren’t sure though.

“We cool?” You ask as you hold out your fist. He bumps it.

“We’re cool.”

“Alright summer morning shit mist, let’s get back inside.”

“Summer morning what now?”

“Shit mist? It’s uh, what Sollux calls Febreeze.” The edge of an eyebrow creeps above Dirk’s glasses and there’s a smirk on his face. “Oh shut it.” He does that monosyllabic aloof laugh that he does and you roll your eyes as the two of you head back inside. You’re glad you’ve settled the air on this. You’ve got a whole day of cliche family fun ahead of you. It’s gonna be a regular lifetime movie up in Casa de Lalonde. As uncool as that sounds, you think it might be nice for a change.
Hivebound

Chapter Notes

[edit 6/6/19] THE LATEST UPDATE IS BACK BEFORE THE HALLOWEEN CHAPTER CAUSE I PLAIN FUCKING FORGOT TO PUT THAT SECTION BACK IN.

==> Be Karkat

You’re curled up in the pile with your moirail. She’s snuggled in your embrace with her head against your chest and purring steadily as you gently brush your fingers over her cheek. It’s a lazy, cuddly pile. No glubbing, no problems, just closeness, and comfort. It has you in a foggy place similar to the edge of a dream.

Knock knock.

You groan. Whoever is on the other side of that door can go fuck themselves. You stop petting Kanaya’s face so you can wrap your other arm around her and bury your face in her hair. It earns you a little trilled noise and you chirp back at her. There are another two knocks. “Go away,” you loudly grumble.

“Karkat?” the small voice quivers. It pulls you from your moment and has you sitting up suddenly. Kanaya chirps in surprise beside you having been jerked from whatever state of sleep she was fast approaching. She makes a confused sound and looks up at you with sleepy eyes. The door handle rattles and you spring to your feet to unlock it. Immediately Sollux pushes his way into your room. He looks a little confused. He’s holding his head and twisting his entire body side to side to look around, but not picking a direction to move beyond where he’s stepped into your room. He’s shaking slightly too. You shut the door and steer him to the pile. He won’t sit in it. He never does. He will only ever sit on the floor at its edge. He does exactly that now. Kanaya sits up the rest of the way and scoots forward so that she’s close enough to rub his back. Her eyes go wide for a moment as her hand makes contact. You noticed it too when you touched him. He’s giving off a lot of static psi.

“Sollux? What’s wrong?” Kanaya asks, her voice still soft and groggy, as you take a seat on Sollux’s other side. He takes a deep breath.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” You ask, using your most inside of voices. He shakes his head before going to hold it again.

“I was just trying to play a game and then,” he gulps down air, “I felt weird and I looked away from the screen and everything was off balance and surreal and...” he hunches forward and brings his knees up. “My head hurts.” He’s probably having an anxiety attack. His head hurting is more than likely unrelated, but you doubt it’s helping any.

“Did you eat today?” You know he didn’t eat yesterday. He didn’t eat breakfast either, at least not while you were around. Lunch wasn’t going to be negotiable. He shrugs in response to your question. That’s a no. “Alright, how about drinking anything?” He nods.
“I had coffee this morning and soda a little while ago.”

“The caffeine may be too much for you right now. Perhaps you should cut back on it temporarily.” Kanaya suggests. He must really feel like shit, because he doesn’t protest the idea of being told to stop drinking coffee for a while, and Sollux loves his coffee.

“I’m going to go get you something non-caffeinated to drink and something for your head. Some food too. Stay here with Kanaya.” He nods and buries his face in his knees. His back moves like he’s taking another deep breath. You wonder why he’s doing that. Is he nauseated from his headache? Or is it the anxiety? Maybe he’s disoriented. He did seem confused and he said things felt surreal. Either way, food has a good chance of helping. You make your way down several flights of stairs and cross your hive to the kitchen. Mituna is scarfing down a bowl of easy mac and if the smell is any indication, he was recently smoking.

“The fucks wrong with you?” he asks as you grab the grub juice out of the fridge.

“Hm?” Normally you’d come back with something a little sharper, but you did just crawl out of a very sedating pile.

“Pfft, ehehethetheheth, you’re blissed outta to shit aren’t you? Kan get all handsy with ya huh?” He asks mischievously. You flip him off and continue to put together something for Sollux. “Or did is that for her? Got the magic frons up in her private face parts so fracked ya have to--”

“Shut your hell!” you whip your head around at him and glare the best glare you can muster at the moment, which is by most standards a pretty good one. “It’s for your littermate. He’s up there having an anxiety attack and I’d bet my left shameglobe that his tendency to starve himself isn’t helping him function any better.”

“And you left him alone?!” Mituna’s demeanor flips on a dime to concern.

“Of course not. He’s with Kanaya.” You’re about to gather up the stuff and leave, but stop when a thought pops into your head. “Hey, would you know why he’s giving off so much static? I know he does that when he’s upset, but it’s usually not this noticeable.”

“How muchks?” he asks mid-motion to shove more macaroni in his mouth.

“I don’t know. What do I look like, your lusus? I don’t keep track of his psionics.”

“That’sth for him?” He points to the bottle of Advil you pulled out of the cabinet.

“Yeah, why?” Mituna makes a whining sound and gets to his feet. When he leaves the kitchen you think he’s heading up to your room without you, so you call out for him to wait up and quickly grab the stuff for Sollux. However, when you actually get up there, you don’t see him.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Sollux.”

“No, it’s not. I ruined your pile. I ruin everything.”

“That is not true.”

“I ruined things with you and KK, I ruined things with Roxy, and I’m GOING to ruin things with Dave. I made a terrible first AND second impression on Dirk. He probably thinks I’m trash and they can do better. They CAN do better. You’re all better off without me.”
He’s curled up exactly how you left him except for his hood. It looks like maybe Kanaya convinced him to take it off. Bits of his hair are sticking up from the psi leaking off him, but you can’t actually see it so you are reserving your concern for later. "Here. Drink," you say as you shove the grub punch at him. He looks up at you and holds it with both hands. When he takes a sip it’s clear that he has only just then realized how thirsty he is and starts trying to drink it all in one go. "Damn it, slow down. You know better than to drink it that fast." You pull his wrist and he brings the cup down, panting a little from sacrificing air for liquid. You only let him have more so he can wash down the Advil. You’re about to make him eat something when Mituna burst into the room, walking with purpose.

"Move it, chutewipe," he says as he pushes you aside with more force than he probably means to.

"Hey!" He kneels in front of Sollux and grabs his arm, then yanks up the sleeve to expose his wrist, and puts something around it that resembles a small touch screen watch. He taps the face of it a few times.

"Let it do the the thing, sync, no, like, accurate, level."

"Calibrate?" Sollux offers.

"Yes!" There is a moment of dead air before a soft plink comes from the device. Mituna pokes at the screen again and you think he's scowling, but it's hard to tell with his bangs covering his eyes. You have no idea how he sees anything. He jabs the screen two more times. "Follow it." Sollux nods and starts doing what looks to be a breathing exercise.

"What is that?" Kanaya asks as she peers over Sollux's shoulder. Mituna pulls up his sleeve and taps the device wrapped around his own wrist.

"Old one. Back-up." Oh. That makes sense. You didn't know it had a function like that, but now that you think about it, it makes sense.

"It's a monitor for his psionics," Sollux helpfully supplies.

"It doesth other thingss too." He says like his littermate insulted it. Sollux is a lot calmer once the device is done with breathing 101, and you know he's feeling better because the docile air about him is gone and he's being a stubborn ass again. He doesn't want the sandwich you made him and won't eat it until you literally wrestle his bony ass to the ground and shove it in his mouth when he goes to protest the treatment.

"Get off of me." He swallows the bite of food he was talking around.

"No. Not until you finish that."

"How am I supposed to eat with you sitting on my stomach?"

"Figure it out." He groans but takes another bite when he realizes he has lost this fight and isn't going anywhere until he does what you've told him.

"Karkat, let him sit up. He's going to choke like that."

"I second that. You should listen to your moirail and let me sit up."

"If you try to escape I will shove that food down your protein chute myself." Begrudgingly you let him up. He complains, but he does eat it. You're glad he's complaining actually. The way he said your name before, uncertain and fearful, is still fresh in your memory. Having fight in his voice is a
good sign. When he's done, Mituna takes him off your hands, throwing you and Kanaya a devious
grin as he suggests to Sollux that they go play a few rounds of "Kill Each Other". You roll your eyes
at him, but part of you is eagerly looking forward to sinking back in the pile with your moirail. You
do exactly that as soon as the door shuts.

"He may have freaked out, but at least he was trying to do something on his own at the time," you
say as you scoot closer to Kanaya so you can use her as a pillow. She brings her arm around you and
toys idly with the sleeve of your sweater.

"I did notice that. He is trying. I am sure having Dave and Roxy here will benefit him."

"Maybe not Roxy so much."

"Why so?"

"They're taking a break, which is extremely reasonable, but human culture is weirdly against healthy
relationships so that went almost rom-com levels of bad."

"Oh dear. Rose had mentioned her being rather contentious and out of sorts as of late, but my
interpretation was that her irritability was solely a result of the strained relationship she has with her
guardian."

"They're coming down tomorrow right?" You ask. Kanaya hums as she thinks.

"Yes, the eve of the eve. Rose will be occupying much of my attention. She is tense despite however
she may play coy."

"I know," You grumble-sigh with your face buried in the fabric of her shirt. She chuckles at your
antics and pulls your face out of her chest to run the tips of her fingers across your cheeks. You chirp
at her and she kisses the top of your head.

"You are a well-spring of understanding."

=> Sollux: Wake up

There’s movement in the room that stirs you slowly from sleep. Your eyes flutter open and the gentle
light in the room makes it hard to discern whether the twilight is dawn or dusk. The sopor slime that
suspends your body is warm and inviting, and you’re tempted to stay put, but the thud of something
on the bed has you curious. You sit up to look over the edge of the recuperacoon.

He’s a blur of motion that ends as sharply as the blade he’s holding. The way he’s pressed back
against the wall, a bit awkwardly and toward the foot of the bed, suggests that he was laying down a
moment ago. The way that he’s holding up his katana horizontally with his left and bracing the end
with his right, the way he’s looking up in such a specific place, and the way his face is a perfectly
blank slate suggests that he thought he was alone and that it wasn’t you that he thought was breaking
that solitude. It fills you with so much pity that your chest aches, because that’s his knee jerk
response to a quiet unexpected shift of movement. It sends him reeling on the defensive and he
braces for pain that he still so fully expects to happen. There is a solid beat before his mind catches
up and his gaze falls to you.

“Sollux?” His sword disappears into his strife specibus.

“Yo.” You give a short wave and resume leaning on the edge of the recuperacoon, letting your head
rest on your arms. He lets out a sigh of relief and runs his fingers back through his hair.
“What’s with the jello bath?” he asks, knowing full well what a recuperacoon is as he moves closer to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m doing. Your knowledge of my cultural practices is unsurpassed.” He doesn’t smirk, not even a twinge. You guess your sarcasm fell flat. You aren’t super awake yet. That’s probably it. “It’s been a while since I slept in sopor so I’m getting my fill of it. Not my preferred color, but then again it isn’t my hive.” You should bring Dave to your hive one day. You shelve the thought for some other time. He nods to show he’s listening but doesn’t say anything.

“What time is it?”

“It’s early.” Your brain quickly does the basic math for you.

“Aren’t you coming from six or seven hours away?”

“Yeah.” This isn’t going to go well if you have to carry the conversation. You till your head and stare at him. “More advantageous to leave at an odd time.”

“I guess so. It does give you the whole day to be here and Dirk doesn’t strike me as someone with standard sleeping habits anyway.” You of all people really don’t have room to talk about standard sleeping habits. He still has that blank look on his face and his voice is far too flat. He usually tries to play it off or ignore it entirely when he gets spooked. Something isn’t right. This aloof crap is a fallback. Something tells you though, that calling him out on it directly will get you nowhere. “On an unrelated note, just so you know, if you needed to talk about anything or if something was up, I may be hideously depressed, but I’m not unavaiable; not to you anyway,” you say while looking away. You flit your eyes back in his direction to catch his reaction. He’s looking away too.

“Good to know.” The room goes quiet. Just when it’s reaching unbearable, he finally speaks up again. “By any chance, did you already start looking into that thing we were talking about?” He looks like he’s looking right at you, but you don’t think he actually is, and the ease of his posture is a convincing fake, but a fake nonetheless.

“Digging up dirt on your brother?” You see his fingers twitch and curl into the blanket. “No, I haven’t really been up to it.” There’s a slight turn of his head. Now he’s looking at you.

“Wait, really?” he’s genuinely surprised by this. So much so that he jumps up off the bed and starts taking a walk across the room. “So it wasn’t you. He doesn’t know it’s you.” And back again abruptly when he’s only halfway across. “He doesn’t know where you are. He doesn’t know who you are. He can’t. You never touched his shit.”

“Have some faith in my security. I would at least use a VPN.” Dave doesn’t hear you. Either that or he ignores you. He runs his hand through his hair and continues pacing as he thinks.

“If it wasn’t you...maybe Hal? But he said he wasn’t doing anything unusual. The message was clearly for Dirk, I mean come on, who the fuck else is a picture of Alan Turing with his eyes scribbled out going to be for? And it was only up for literally ten seconds. Can’t be an accident. Dirk thought that Bro thought that you were him or Hal on a hijacked machine or some shit. I mean, as far as we know, he doesn’t know about Hal, or at least he never said anything, but I always thought that maybe he did know and didn’t want us to know that he knew, so that we’d think he didn’t and we’d fuck up high off our own goddamn hubris.” He’s walking in chaotic circles, making equally chaotic gestures and mostly talking to himself at this point you think. You’re largely following what he’s saying, but you get the feeling you’re missing a few pieces. The core of it, however, is that Bro has in some way acknowledged them. "Fuck!"

“Dave?”
“But that jackhole has to know some kind of AI is watching. The Turing test. Only some kind of program would have seen the image. The fuck does it mean? Is he only aware that we’re watching him? Is it a bluff? Is he desperate enough to bluff? Bro doesn’t bluff. He’s too good to bluff. God, and that image is the vaguest, highly threatening, laser targeted bullshit. It’s exactly his style.”

“Dave.”

"He knows. He has to know. He's always a step ahead somehow. Whether it's kicking my ass or stalking me, he's always ahead. He's going to come after us. All of us. I'm so fucked.” Dave is starting to border on hysterical. His mind is visibly racing and he isn't talking to you at all anymore. At this point, it's just his thought process spilling out of his pan. You quickly shuck off some of the bigger patches of sopor and climb out of the coon.

"Johnny law never touches him, not a single damn caress from that long arm. It's like he's immune, or bribing the entire goddamn police force, or invisible! Everyone looks the other way. They always did. He's-"

“Dave.” You grab him by the shoulders as he’s turning around. He stares at you. His breath is coming in just a little too choppy and you can feel the tremor running through him from the spike in adrenaline that he’s trying to hide. He opens his mouth as if to speak but the words never come out and you can see his facade start to crack. He shuts his mouth and swallows hard.

“I can’t go back.” His hands come up to grip at your arms. “I can’t go back.” You tug him closer and he latches onto you. “He’s gonna, I can’t, I can’t do it again.”

“It’s okay,” you say as you shoosh him.

“No, it’s fucking not.” He hides his face in your collar and grips at your bare skin.

“You’re safe here,” you say in a low hushed tone against his temple. If nothing else, it's simply numbers on your side.

"You don't know that. You don't know him, the shit he's capable of."

You pull back and cradle his face in your hands, forcing him to look you in the eye.

“You’re safe with ME.” The words tumble out before you can really think them through. For a second your breath catches in your throat. Dave’s brows are knit together and his jaw is clenched tight. He isn’t trying to look away, just the opposite. It’s as if he’s searching for something that will let him believe you. You let one of your hands fall away to his arm while the other moves to his neck where you run your fingers through his hair gently back and forth, over that spot by his hairline, behind his ear, that makes him shiver. He leans into your touch and his expression eases some. You can’t tackle this right now, your thinkspunge is still hot garbage, but you will. Computers are your bitch. Nobody can out hack you. Least of all that deranged asslord of a guardian. Dave looks up at you over the rim of his shades. Without them, his eyes are an open book and you can see every ounce of fear in them, but also a cautious want. He draws in closer to kiss you and you close the distance for him. It’s a single brush of lips that pull away out of need, not desire, and instead, he settles for resting his forehead against yours. You chirp at him. “We can figure this out later. Come lay down with me for a while,” You say as you toy with his hair again. It's still too early to be awake you think.

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.” He straightens up and then lets out a deep breath. You make your way over to the recuperacoon, but Dave walks to the bed. He tosses his shades in his sylladex and only then looks to see where you’re standing.
"I meant in the..." you motion with your head to the coon. It isn’t really made for two people, but then again neither is the bed.

“Oh.” His face goes red. “So, the slime. I’m guessing it sticks to clothes.” Oh. You are now very aware that you are, and have been, standing around in your boxers.

“Yeah, a bit. It washes right out. You don’t have to. It’s just easier. Plus the sopor feels nice,” you say, looking at it instead of Dave. For a moment there’s silence, but then fabric rustles and continues to rustle. He’s getting undressed. He’s actually getting undressed. Your eyes go a little wider and your pulse quickens with both anxiety and excitement. You’d be lying if you said the idea of being that exposed and close to him didn’t make you at least a little nervous. Come to think of it, this is the farthest you’ve ever gotten with a pale relationship, granted this does toe the line of blurring. Still, there were other ones that went on for longer and didn’t reach the point Dave and you are at. You’re moving fast. Karkat would probably tease you and call you easy if you brought it up. You’ll save that for next time he’s in a pissy mood and needs distracting. It doesn’t feel like you’re being easy though. It’s simply happening as it’s happening. That’s how it’s supposed to be, right? Arms come to wrap loosely around your shoulders. His skin is slightly cooler than yours pressed against your back. The contact helps to satiate something you didn’t know you needed. It’s difficult sometimes for you to find comfort in people’s words. They can often feel like false promises and hollow sympathy when you’re like this. The contact though, his skin against yours, the closeness and the certainty of more, it reaches you in a different way. You turn in his embrace and hold him. Even if it’s mostly sentiment for him, you brush your cheek against his. He returns the gesture with a sigh and you leave a kiss there before pulling away to step into the recuperacoon, urging him to follow you.

Dave is uncertain at first. He doesn’t trust the sopor to let him remain suspended, but when it does, he takes to it pretty quickly. One of the nice things about sopor is that no one gets a dead arm. You pull Dave against you and can feel the lingering fear in the hesitance of his movements. Honestly, you could probably do with being held, but for the moment your moirail is more actively worked up, and unlike you, he has a reason to be.

"Can you do that thing? I've been thinking non-stop for I don't even know how long."

"I know the feeling. What thing?"

"The thing where you exploit the crap out of whatever weird synesthetic response I have to your troll sounds." You see the opportunity and you’re going to take it. It might help.

"Exploit huh? So you're saying I've found a way in which to manipulate your nervous SYSTEM for personal benefit?"

"That is the general gist of the words previously leaving my mouth."

"So would you say I've...hacked your brain?"

"I walked into that like it was a sliding glass door. Full force. Right off the hinges. Better fucking call life alert cause there's no getting back up from that one." He says it with less energy than he usually does, but it’s an attempt all the same. You shift a bit. His arms come around you, defying his nerves, and it takes zero effort for you to start purring for him. You run your nails up his neck with the lightest of touches and he tucks his head against you, exposing as much of his neck as he can. Jeez, he probably has no idea what that does to you. You do it again, running your nails up into his hair and closing your hand as you bring it back for another pass. The motion lightly tugs the strands as they slip through your fingers. You keep the movements varied. Sometimes they’re faster. Sometimes you tug his hair a little harder or press a bit more firmly. He’s starting to relax and with it, he’s starting to allow himself to respond more beyond the involuntary shivers. Small gasps and slight
movements turn into quiet hummed noises and blatant tilts of his head. His hand runs over your back with ambivalence from more than just inexperience. It feels good and puts a hitch in your purring that has him continuing with more confidence. Fingers trail down your spine then splay and run up your side before they come to rest on your shoulder blade. He has his other hand low on your back, fingers drawing circles on your skin. He’s touching you in a way that’s painfully intimate. Even though you tell yourself it’s different, even though Dave's hands are rough where her's were soft, it's similar enough that you're afraid of drifting. Your hand stops moving but stays curled in his hair.

“I...” You always tell Roxy to talk, to keep you anchored with her voice, without saying why, but with Dave...can you just tell him? "What you’re doing, it reminds me of, don’t stop, but...I need..." He picks his head up to look at you. You aren’t sure what you need him to do. It must be written in your expression because he reaches up to pap your face, keeping his hand there a moment while running his thumb gently across your cheek before doing it again. He’s getting good at that. You chirr at him and your eyes slip shut. He continues resting his head against your shoulder and feeling up your back, and you return to reducing his higher thought processes to white noise. Intermittently he paps your face until eventually, it’s all he’s doing. Light, almost curious touches over your skin. Has anyone ever really touched you so fondly? It’s making your movements slow and lazy. The gentle sound you’re making has a similar effect on Dave and at some point, you both stop moving, now simply holding each other on the fringe of a hazy state of consciousness. You could stay here forever.

You’re not sure how long it is before you’re interrupted by a knock at the door, but it’s long enough that you forget yourself and growl when the body you’re curled around tenses. There’s a soft laugh as the door opens a crack. “Are you two decent?” Porrim asks before actually entering.

“Mostly, enter at your own risk,” You say with a certain moirallegiance induced type of grogginess. She’s shutting the door when you detangle yourself from Dave to lean against the edge of the recuperacoon.

“Where’s Dave?” You point down and a smile that is more knowing than teasing pulls at her lips. “CrabDad has started making breakfast. You may want to be in less of a compromising situation before Karkat storms in here.” Right, he probably doesn’t know that the Strilonde collective filed in at the asscrack of dawn and will march in here to drag you out. It would be hilarious and it’s an absolute tragedy that you aren’t up for that at all right now.

“Thanks.” She leaves and you turn to nudge Dave, but he’s already awake, like wide awake, and sitting up. “You good?”

“Yeah, I’m cool.” You pull a chunk of sopor out of his hair before hoisting yourself up onto the edge of the coon to brush away the bits of sopor clinging to your skin. Dave follows suit. You show him where one of the bathrooms is and make your way to another. The serenity of the early morning is fading quickly. By the time you make your way down to the kitchen, the reprieve is over and you’re again at the mercy of your broken thinksponge.

== Be Dave

There are way too many people in this kitchen. You’re all crowded elbow to elbow around an oblong table with the exception of Mituna who is sitting on one of the countertops. Karkat’s Lusus (which is some kind of horrifying bipedal crab dinosaur) somehow made pancakes with bacon and eggs, and it’s actually really good. You don’t know what the green things in them are and you aren’t about to ask because you get the feeling you don’t want to know. The table is cluttered with plates, glasses, silverware, juice cartons and the butter dish is somewhere in the fray, possibly near the
syrup. Or not. Mituna is pretty much chugging it until Porrim takes it away and chides him to save some for everyone else. It's a symphony of clanking and people talking over each other. Karkat, however, is surprisingly quiet but has this look on his face like he’s screaming on the inside as Kankri talks at length at him. You shovel more pancakes into your mouth and catch a bit of conversation Dirk is having with Porrim. She mentions how she just quit her position at the brooding caverns to pursue a tattooing apprenticeship, and now they’re comparing their tats. You can’t hear what Dirk says, but Porrim’s response, that they can compare the rest in private after breakfast, has you chocking a little on your AJ. This would be a fantastic day for Dirk if he wasn’t such a solid six on the Kinsey scale. Speaking of, on the flip side of the homo coin, you’re getting the impression that Rose and Kanaya are frequently hilariously domestic. You’ll tease her about it later even though you are 100% certain it’s going to backfire spectacularly. You’re feeling damn near picturesque until your eyes fall on Roxy. She’s staring across the table at Sollux with an expression that is hard to read beyond its generalized discomfort. If Sollux notices, he doesn’t react. He has his head down and is pushing his food around on his plate, although you’re pretty sure he hasn’t actually eaten much if anything. CrabDad approaches him making screeching noises followed by a string of clacking. Sollux shakes his head. You have no idea how he decoded any of that. CrabDad nudges his arm once with his claw, and then twice more. When that fails, he makes a weird and frankly disturbing, prolonged, open maw, clicking sound like that girl from “The Grudge” until Sollux gives in and starts eating in clearly forced bites. He seems a lot less functional than when you were alone with him before. Then again, you were actively losing your shit. He was probably just pulling it together for your sake. He actually looks a little sick by the time he’s eaten the small portion that was on his plate. He has the back of his hand to his mouth and goes stark still until the feeling passes enough that he can move again to get at his juice. Kanaya took away his coffee for some reason. He’s the first to leave, going back to the room you assume, but it isn’t long after that the room starts to clear out. You’re about to go check on him when you remember that you never told Dirk what you found out this morning and turn back down the hallway.

He and Porrim have disappeared from the kitchen, but both of them smoke so there's a good chance they'd go out back first before comparing their more lewdly located tattoos. You open the back door and--

"You get a freebie or two when you're spite-fucking every top in the greater Houston area."

Porrim's laughter trails as you abscond with the kind of speed that only comes from learning things you didn't need to know. Could have gone your entire life without knowing that, but here you are, knowing that. Alright, Dirk's a bottom and a hoe, moving on with life now. Oh look, there's Karkat. Let's bother him and forget.

"Yo Karkles, what's crack-a-lacking?" You ask as you make for the coffee pot. There is still some left and you did want some before, but weren't super keen on drinking it right next to Sollux after he was denied the sweet sweet caffeinated goodness.

"Karkat and I were just starting to really get into the meat of our conversation, but provided you have at least a casual grasp of the subject matter, I can quickly catch you up to speed on...blah blah blah blah blah" You look over to Karkat as Kankri Just. Keeps. Going. Karkat looks at you with desperation. You sip your coffee letting it audibly slurp. "...which blends well into the main topic that-- um Dave, if you wouldn't mind, it's a bit rude to wear sunglasses indoors while conversing and can, in fact, be rather triggering if one or more of the participants suffer from any of a variety of anxiety disorders, particularly those of the social variety, and I'm uncertain if you are aware, but some guests here-- who will go unnamed out of respect for their privacy, do suffer from some mental disorders that could be triggered by a lack of readable feedback if interpreted as malicious disinterest, exclusion, or ostracization."
"I would mind. These babies are prescription." You say smoothly, giving the frame of your shades a few taps. Kankri seems startled and Karkat looks as though a small beacon of hope has reignited in the darkest depths of his soul.

"Oh, my apologies, I did not realize you are…” he considers his words carefully, "have a disability that impairs and/or inhibits your vision to a degree. I should not have assumed that they were merely fripperies and not sensory aids in the style of your choosing." This is primo fucking-with material. Alright, time to feel it out, dance a little bait on the line.

"I don't know how I feel about your description of and reference to my medical condition as a 'disability', man. That's something of a personal matter." Karkat is looking back and forth between you two, daring to hope. "Not to mention, I'm a little offended that you would be 'uncertain' if I was aware that my diamond has a few cracks in him." It's a bit of a stretch but from the looks of it, you think it paid off.

"You have a moirail? Interesting. If no one has broken quadrants then that would leave Sollux as the most likely individual. If I may ask, how is that fairing? He seems like he would be a very demanding Moirallegiance partner even if he were with someone experienced. An advanced case if you will." Oh fuck yes. You can work with that. You raise your brows in offense that's mostly for show, but that does actually tick you off a little. Tch, Sollux isn't demanding. And what is "advanced case" supposed to mean?

"That's pretty fucking gauche of you. Maybe even speciest. Not cool, bro.” You'll let him dig his own grave and decide what exactly you're referring to.

"You've misunderstood, so I can see why you might feel that way, so rest assured that it wasn't my intent. My inquiry is of an academic nature. If this is an uncomfortable topic do let me know. I will gladly navigate around or make accommodations for any triggers you may have. You see, human sexuality is a complex, but interesting set of variables to mix into quadrants, even if it is complicated by harsh and divided gender roles. More often humans will seek out the flushed concupiscent quadrant as it most closely resembles the normative monogamous relationship model that humans tend to seek. Wide exceptions granted of course. What's interesting to me beyond the basic functionality of your relationship, is which part of the model you deviate from. Have you, provided you did not do so previously, deviated from monogamy to satisfy your coital needs, or have you taken up celibacy? Further, there is the possibility that Sollux is the one accommodating and has perhaps agreed to some quadrant overlap or vacillation. He's never had an interest in humans before, to my knowledge, but it is interesting that now he has half his quadrants filled with them. That too bears some further questions that blah blah blah…” Karkat could not have his eyes open wider or his mouth more agape.

You catch Mituna in your peripheral vision and quite literally drag him into the conversation. "Yo, Mituna." He turns sharply on his heel in your direction and you pull him the rest of the way into the kitchen. "This jabroni over here," you can practically see the ??? over Kankri's head when you interrupt and motion to him before turning back to face Mituna. "is questioning the steadfastness of my raging pale boner for your littermate." You wink at him over your shades and a wild grin takes over the older Captor's face. You had a feeling Mituna would be down to fuck with just about anyone, but evidently, he is especially amped to fuck with Kankri.

“Dave, I think you are grossly misinterpreting me here. Let’s start over from the top. Perhaps we should begin with quadrants at a more fundamental level and once we have a good grasp on moirallegiance conceptually, you’ll understand my previous ponderings of the mechanics of yours and Sollux’s arrangement.” You’re beginning to wonder if Karkat’s face is stuck that way.
“Shut your preachy fuck trumpet you sthmarmy assth shit gremlin.”

“Mituna, I know you have trouble with this, but as a celibate individual I’ll kindly ask you not to use such suggestive language in reference to my person.”

“So smarmy is still on the table. Gotcha.”

“Dave.” Kankri looks back over to you as if he thinks you’re better than that.

“Sir yes sir, lieutenant major smarms.”

Karkat has ascended.

"Eheheteheth."  

“Don’t encourage him. Mituna has limited control of the things he says and you’re likely to excite him with that kind of talk, which could tip him into a mood swing.”

“Fuck ur fucking fuck hole. I’m in complete the controls my mouth, fuck you very much. Better with tonguessssth.” For emphasis (of what you're unsure) he wiggles the forks of his tongue between two of his fingers and cackles when Kankri cringes. You wonder if Sollux’s tongue-- ANYWAY, back to the asshole party.

“I have no desire to be anywhere near your quadrants, thank you. Speaking of quadrants, as I was saying, Dave presents an interesting case that with a better understanding of moirallegiance--”

“AHAHAHAHAHAHAA. Better? Fuckers are ballsth deep.”

"Fully entrenched."  

"It's disgusthting." 

"We are gross."  

"The only thingk more grossth than Sthrider’s massthive throbbing emotiohnormal COCK is his pale bro’s shopping wet feelings wiggly. You dunno fuckshit.”

“Mituna you are a national fucking treasure. That is top five, at least, for favorite sentences said about me.” You are touched, truly, if not just a little grossed out. Kankri looks at least two different kinds of disturbed and Karkat is broken at this point, face down on the table. "Ya know, Kankers, I can see and appreciate your interest in my species, flattered, really, but ya gotta check that privilege at the door. I bet Mituna could give you some pointers. He's a straight up G like that.”

Kankri.exe has stopped working.

He's sitting there in a stunned, open mouth silence. It is a rare moment when both Vantas brothers are quiet. Suddenly Karkat takes in a sharp deep breath and starts cracking the fuck up in a way where you aren’t sure if he’s angry or delighted. You are sure though that it is aggressive. He might be having a breakdown. Mituna snorts.

“Cool, so, imma jet. Have fun with uh...that. Peace out, yo.” You finger guns in the direction of both Vantas’s and walk backward out of the kitchen. Your work here is done. Time to leave this smoking crater. Speaking of your moirail though, you should maybe go check on him.

==> Be Roxy for a bit
“Please, hold still lest I prick you and have a moral dilemma on my hands,” Kanaya says after the third time you’ve moved. You’re modeling some clothes that she is refitting for you. They were originally fitted for Rose, but the bright spring pallet, according to Kanaya, seemed strange on her.

“My bad,” You apologize. Your mind continues to wander, but you do a better job of holding still as Kanaya places a few more pins.

“There, that should do it.” You hold your arms up and carefully wiggle out of the shirt with Kanaya’s help. She takes the garment over to the table she’s claimed as her workstation and starts preparing it. You flop down on the bed and try to still your mind with the mechanical rhythm of the sewing machine in the background, but it just isn’t working and before you think better of it, you’re asking a question.

“Was Sollux different before he started smoking?” The sewing machine stops.

“That is a difficult question to answer. As you know, Sollux began using drugs as a coping mechanism in response to his increased instability following his late matesprite’s death. It had a profound effect on him, so to say that he was different prior to smoking would be accurate, though only in the technical sense. If you are concerned about there being a change in his personality as a result of recovery, I can assure you that he has always been a stubborn ass in need of a good shove for his own benefit.” The sewing machine starts up again.

“Kanaya, you’re hilarious,” you say with a laugh, now feeling more reassured.

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” So she says, but there is a smile on her face.

“Thanks.”

“Any time.”

==> Be Dave again

The door creaks as you slowly open it. "Go away." He sounds tired or bored or just drained of everything. You close the door behind you and cross the room to where he's curled up on the bed facing the wall.

"I riled up Kankri. It might be my new favorite sport." He perks up a bit at the realization that it's you and it plucks a string somewhere deep in your chest. "Mituna came in with the assist and said some beautifully colorful words mostly about genitals and what to do with them. How he isn't published I'll never know," you say as you take a seat behind him.

"A poet for the ages...of nine sweeps and up," he offers weakly. You hum a laugh and look around to make double sure, just to check for certain that you're alone before you rub his arm a few times and let your hand rest there just below his shoulder. His hand comes up to weave together the tips of your fingers. "You should go have fun. I'll be okay. This is normal. I'm used to it."

"That's super messed up, man."

"I guess, but it's true. Fucking sucks, though."

"I'm guessing there isn't a heck of a lot I can do to make it suck less?"

"Used to get baked off my ass, but you know how well that ended." He sighs. "I miss it. When it worked I mean."
“Yeah, I imagine you would miss something that made you feel good.” His reaction is mixed. Glad that you weren’t mad or disappointed in him, but the comment seemed to sting a little. You feel the alarm in your muscles as you move, you still can’t shake the feeling of being watched, but you push through it to kiss his cheek. It feels like there’s a wealth of energy thrumming just under the surface of his skin. “You want I should leave you be for a bit? You aren’t escaping Naruto though. You have an appointment with me and one of those sofas for earth’s greatest caliginous romance.” There’s an uptick of a single corner of his mouth and he looks as though he’s about to say something when he grabs at his head and he makes a pained noise.

"I'm fine. I'm fine," he tries to assure you before you can fuss over him. "Migraine. Already took something for it. Just gonna sleep it off." He's still holding his head, but it looks like whatever that was has passed. You don't truly believe he's entirely fine, but you'll let it go for now.

"Aight. I'll come back in a little while." You pat his arm and then make your way to leave. You make sure to close the door quietly. Rose is standing directly behind you when you turn around.

"Tending to your moirail 'on prong and frond' is a popular literary trope."

"Well you know me, Rose, my middle name is Florence."

"Your middle name is Elizabeth."

"Same difference."

She motions for you to walk with her as she makes her way to the stairs. “How is he faring?”

“He’s been heading this way for a while. I think this is the bottom. The thing that gets me though, is that it’s almost like the build-up was worse than the collapse. I obviously can’t say this as an indisputable fact, but it seems like the strain of keeping it together was worse for him than the actual fall. He kept taking these blows one after the other, but now that he’s down for the count the hits aren’t coming anymore. The tournaments over. He landed the crane kick and now he’s going home to nurse that bad leg.”

“The anticipation of the event and the stress of academic consequence should he fail to delay a period of lethargy being worse than the episode itself is a distinct possibility. There is also a chance that while we view him as stricken with crippling apathy, the inner workings of his mind more closely resemble an all-consuming tempest.”

“True that. He says he’s used to it, which is fucking awful, but I guess on the bright side, not to be naively optimistic, but that does mean he’ll come out the other side alright.”

“Sollux has very likely built up a tolerance, yes. There is also the fact that pain is relative to experience, and this is likely not the worse experience he’s had.” Yeah, it sure as shit isn’t. You have vivid recall of finding that out. You follow Rose to one of the upper patios. This one, unlike some of the others, actually has chairs and a side table with a small stack of coasters on it because of course, Karkat uses coasters. You fall back into one of the lawn chairs. Rose is a bit more graceful in the way that she takes a seat. “I wonder though, Dave,” Oh no, Rose is wondering. That doesn’t bode well for you. “Without discrediting your moirallegiance, because, on the contrary, I think you’ve made great strides in that, which speaks volumes given your history, I have suspicions that you may be shielding yourself with concern for him so as to avoid letting your mind linger too long on your own malcontent.” What? No, you aren’t doing that. Are you? Great, now that's in your head. Was that her move all along?

“Nah, I’m good.”
“Are you though?” She’s staring you down with that soft, but predatory smile. You look back at her from behind your shades with a steeled expression. She folds her hands in her lap. “Regardless of the past, more recently something has occurred and it will not do you any favors to shy away from it.”

“Nothin’s up. It’s all good in the hood.” That was a terrible lie.

“You look over your shoulder every forty-five seconds, the slightest of sounds have you poised to run like a prey animal and the entire way here you were intermittently mumbling and tapping on the armrest. Dirk is generally wound tight, tighter so from being in such an obvious location, but he did seem to be easing some as our travel date grew closer, that is, until late last evening. He suddenly snapped back into the state of hypervigilance that makes him withdraw into himself and take on a tactician role to counter the unseen force he deems a threat. Would it be foolish of me to assume that this impending danger is or is in relation to my Eldest cousin?” Geez, maybe you ought to just hold a damn family meeting or some shit. Well, plus Sollux. He is somewhat involved now. It really isn’t a bad idea.

“Alright, yeah, some shit went down, but I think it’s chill for the moment.”

“I see.”

“Look, I’ll fill you in on this when--”

“Shitty ninja anime time!” Mituna shouts as he bursts through the door. You hop up onto your feet.

“You heard the man,” you say as you shoot Rose a shrug. She smiles and lets you escape the conversation. You follow after an unreasonably excited Mituna, down the stairs, grabbing people as you go. When he runs off to find Karkat you make your way to Sollux’s room. You more or less barge in.

“Fuck off, I didn’t do anything.”

“I don’t care about your vainglorious hacker ego. I haven’t heard anything out of this asshole in months, then you tell Dave you’ll check him out, and now he threatens me, but you didn’t do anything?”

Dirk is standing looming over Sollux who is sitting on the edge of the bed looking agitated and not intimidated in the least. Fuck, that gives you an interesting mix of feelings. Some of which are in your pants. A whole bunch to unpack there. Yep. That deal with later shelf is getting crowded. You should have gotten to Dirk sooner.

“You, hold up, slow your roll there, broski.” You move to stand adjacently between them. “I already asked him about this. I was going to tell you after breakfast, but you were busy playing ‘show me yours I’ll show you mine’ with Kanaya’s sister.” Sollux gives him a weird and confused look.

“I thought you were gay?”


“Anyway, yeah, he hasn’t done jack all yet.”

“Yet.”

“Yet.”

“Yet.”
“So, you’re saying that he intends to, but the present situation is purely serendipitous, and anything he finds later was irrefutably found later and totally not found prior to something tipping off Bro.”

“That was implied by the ‘yet’.”

“Can we stop saying yet?” Sollux asks.

“Not yet,” You say with a mischievous, but fond smirk. He lets out a huff of air through his nose and rubs at his eyes before floating his glasses over to himself. Dirk doesn’t seem super fond of the red and blue telekinetic lightning, but maybe that's just because of the way they met.

“I get it. You aren’t exactly thrilled about me. I'M not exactly thrilled about me. But, once I’m not a complete festering mass of excrement, I guess I’m not the worst at what I do. That would be Karkat’s territory.” Dirk doesn’t look convinced. It might have something to do with all the self-deprecation Sollux just did there.

“He got into the school without applying. He just put himself on the admissions list. Come on, that can’t be easy.”

“Yeah, and I did it without shuffling half the dorm,” Sollux says the snide remark as he leans back on the heels of his hands to better look up at Dirk.

“You may require some ice for that burn,” Hal chimes in. The corner of Dirk’s mouth twitches.

“You’re equally responsible for that error, Hal,” he comes back with.

“Wait, what?” You do not get an explanation because right then is when Mituna comes to collect the four of you while loudly proclaiming that the time for anime is now.

== Be Sollux sometime later

You have had this headache for days. It just keeps coming back. As if you weren't already finding it difficult to enjoy things, this just makes everything infinitely worse. You had actually contemplated participating in new years eve but only made it through a few episodes of the twilight zone before even the light from the TV was too bright. And the static you're giving off is getting so bad that periodically it's visible. You think people are taking notice and beginning to worry. Karkat in particular. He keeps glancing at you and then sharing a look with Kanaya when he thinks you aren't paying attention. With a whine, you hoist yourself far enough out of the recuperacoon to grab the Excedrin off the nightstand and throwback just a bit more than the recommended dosage. You check your palm husk and see that it is still technically the morning, but not by much. Most of the house is probably awake by now. You, however, have no intention of remaining conscious, so you slip back into the sopor. You are so so very close to drifting off when the door opens and resets whatever awful timer insists on counting down before your body will let itself sleep.

"Ugh." You know that ugh. "Cough up the Excedrin, slime boy. I have a hangover the size of Jupiter." You raise your hands from the coon and do the most minimal of flourishes in the general direction of the pill bottle. She takes a seat on the bed with a thud and you hear the cap click once before she gets it open. Pulling yourself up to lean on the edge of the recuperacoon, you idly watch her. You miss her. You haven't been avoiding her exactly, but you haven't been making an effort to see her either. You really haven’t been ignoring her more than anyone else, but it must seem that way what with people doting on you, much to your dislike. You’d rather they didn’t. She catches you watching her and looks back at you, but her expression is an enigma. “You keeping an eye on the date?” It takes you a second to realize what she’s talking about.
“Mhm, you aren’t winning by default, Lalonde.”

“Good.” She looks away and then back to you as she stands up. “Get better, Sol. I miss kicking your ass.” She’s about to walk away.

“Roxy,” You quietly call after her as you half stand, half lean on the edge of the coon and catch her by the wrist to tug her closer. It’s a spontaneous choice. She stumbles a bit, but catches herself and joins you in sitting on the edge. You move like you’re going to kiss her and it’s very convincing because she’s only savvy to your deviousness as you’re trapping her in your arms and pulling her over the edge into the sopor.

“You jackass! I thought you wanted a kiss!” You chuckle as you get her covered in slime. She squirms in your grasp, trying to sound mad as she stifles laughter, but you hold her tight against you. Her feet are still hanging over the edge of the coon when the door opens.

“Hey, Sol, do you want--”

“Ugh, it’s in my hair you jerk!”

“I’ll come back later.” The door shuts again.

“Oh no, poor Dave,” Roxy says, although the way she’s giggling makes the statement come across as a little less than sincere. You loosen your grip on her and she turns over to face you. This time you do intend to kiss her, but her lips crash against yours first. You miss her. You miss her so much. You miss how you and her were. You need to hurry the fuck up and get your head on straight. She bites your lip and hesitantly you bite hers back. She breaks away too soon. “You feel weird, like a live wire.”

“I’m vividly aware.” She doesn’t press you on it, but there is concern in her eyes.

“This is great and all, should do again sometime, but I needa go nurse this headache.”

“Same.” All this moving around has only made the pain in your skull worse, but it was worth it. She makes a point of flinging sopor slime at you as she wipes it off for the most part before leaving. You groan as you let your head thud back against the slime. Why can’t you just breach the surface already? You want to have the energy to keep up with her again. You want to have the drive to do things. You want to figure out what’s going on with Bro so you can put your moirail’s mind at ease. You want this bad staticy feeling that gives you anxiety to go away. You just want to go back to some semblance of functionality instead of whatever this useless parasitic state of existence is that drains everyone around you. You curl up in a ball and pull the blanket that you stole from the sofa, tight around you. Sleep. Maybe you can sleep it off. Maybe when you wake up you'll have reset and it will all be okay again. Just keep hitting reset. On and off. Eventually, the light has to stop blinking right? Tears are slipping down your face. That won't help your pan. Then again, not much will.

==> Dirk: Be the Adultiest Adult

Daylight is just starting to fade when you wrangle everyone who needs to be present, into the kitchen for a meeting to clear up the Bro thing. There are, however, a few extra heads here. Obviously, there’s you and Hal, because you two have been eyeing this all along. Then there's Roxy because she has the know-how and has periodically assisted you with a few things. Dave is here because it's very much his problem, and Sollux is here because he's made it his problem. That and you're still not fully convinced that he hasn't already been fucking around. That leaves two extra people. Rose might as well be here. She's fairly up to date on what's been happening and you could make use of her
deductive skills and general intelligence. Mituna on the other hand...

"Why is he here?" You ask, motioning to the older Captor. You really want to keep this limited to as few people as possible. The more people, the more easily your plan can be compromised.

"He's the troll embodiment of control F," Sollux answers.

"Why do we need that?" After all, you have ctrl+f. Mituna must be having a less than optimal day because he's signing to Sollux instead of talking.

"He says he's good at catching patterns and things a computer would miss. I happen to agree. He has a good memory for that stuff too. That's why he's such a beast at DDR. He has it memorized." Dave looks moderately scandalize at this revelation. You’re not ecstatic with this turn of events. Having Sollux in on this was already getting under your skin; you're having second thoughts about this guy. He seemed alright at first, and Dave and Roxy spoke well of him, but in person, he's never once lived up to what they've said. Not to mention, he is enabling Roxy... or was. You're not sure how that is going to pan out now that he's supposedly stopped doing drugs after nearly killing himself. THAT is a whole different issue in and of itself. And Dave, he comes to you with less stuff now and you're willing to bet it's because he's going to Sollux instead. He trusts him, but you don't know how much you trust him or the advice he's doling out. His track record on decision making doesn't impress you. That said, one Captor was already pushing it for you, but two? You probably should have seen that one coming now that you think about it. You could argue this and win. If anyone can talk circles around an issue until it’s begging to be put out of its misery, it’s you, but it probably isn’t worth the aggravation and resulting eventual mutiny.

"Alright, fine, but no more people. There are too many of us here as it is." You pause and look around at them all and let your gaze stop on the Captors. "For everyone else, this will be a recap. For you two, to make a long story short, my older brother, henceforth referred to as 'Bro', is an abusive delusional scumbag. Unfortunately for Dave and I, he is also a very intelligent and clever scumbag. He runs several websites. The ones of the adult variety-" Sollux looks at Dave who is looking at the floor. He must not have known that. "-are a major source of his income, ergo, he keeps an eye on them. He keeps an eye on a lot of things."

"By that, he means him and me." Dave chimes in.

"He's obsessive and controlling. He has some master plan for us, mostly Dave, although he's never cared to divulge much information about said plan beyond various phrasings of Dave being destined for greater things."

"What about you?" Sollux asks. It's a valid question, but not one you like.

"I am largely regarded by him as a liability." And an error. You were merely a prototype to him. A sick part of you envies Dave for that, but you try not to think about it. This is getting a tad more personal than you care for. You lean back against the countertop and continue. "He's been stalking me for years and occasionally trying to kill me in an insane attempt to keep Dave from my 'influence'. I'm certain you can surmise what his opinion of Dave escaping must be." Mituna signs something to Sollux, who tells him that he'll explain later. That's so very reassuring. You really hope he understands the gravity of the situation. "However, for reasons unknown, he hasn't made a single indication that he gives a fuck this entire time, until recently." You secretly look at Sollux. He notices and you share a tense second unbeknownst to the others. "Hal, if you would."

"Oh? Is it my turn?" You cross your arms and stand still. You can see the overlay of Hal's 'eyes' that he has made appear on your shades to further differentiate himself from you. You know that Roxy finds it off-putting, but she doesn't mention it because that would hamper her ability to reason with
him when he's in one of his moods. "I've been monitoring his web traffic to the extent I can, by which I mean the upper limit of possible without drawing his attention. You're all welcome. It gets weird and niche. In these past few months, he hasn’t done anything I would classify as unusual for him. That itself could be something of note. Bro was always one for mind games and irony. There is a non-zero chance that this is a bluff made to provoke Dirk, Dave, or me into action."

"What exactly is it that has occurred? You've both referenced it, but have not actually detailed the event that has transpired," Rose interrupts. You go to speak, but Hal talks over you and it's his voice that comes out of the speaker box.

"For exactly eleven seconds I detected an image on an inaccessible part of his website. It was a lightly deep fried jpeg of Alan Turing with his eyes scratched out."

“I see,” Rose purses her lips in thought before continuing. “It is not necessarily directed at you, but lacking the existence of another target, it is most certainly for you. It does not state outright any sort of violence, and yet it carries the implication of harm to a degree that might suggest lethality. Additionally, the historical figure himself is extremely likely to be an allusion to both of you, although not so much Dave.”

“Exactly.” This time Hal so graciously decides to feed your voice through the speaker.

“Man, I think we gotta wait this one out, lay low for a bit. He was getting all up on my ass about the queer thing. Not like, calling me a queer. ‘Queer’ as in the comfortably broad and discretion affording category of not heterosexual. A gay computer scientist known for the de facto AI test is doubtlessly a direct call out to Dirk, but still. He seemed extra agitated about it. I swear he was a hot second from hauling my ass to a whore house and letting them have at me like some kind of fucked up baptism into the church of punani.”

“While we’re doing a whole lot of nothin, maybe we could do somethin about the data Hal has collected. No offense to Hal, just a fresh set of eyes sorta business,” Roxy suggests.

“I can start converting the raw data into something more user-friendly. Factoring in the additional people and adjusting for perspective and experience variables, I’ve calculated that there is a...3.032% chance that the format change could yield new results.”

This may not be the complete and total disaster you were bracing for. “Alright, let’s give Hal some time to do that. We can break for dinner or some shit.”

“Seems legit,” Dave says and almost immediately people start getting up and getting in each other’s way. You decide to head out back first to avoid the chaos. The bench out back looks like it may have been stolen from a public park, although you don’t think either Vantas would do that. Assuming that it is, perhaps one of the Captors had a hand in it. It's only a moment after you light a cigarette that the door creaks open and Roxy steps out to come sit beside you.

"Hey, Dirk, DS, D-stri, D-Sizzle,” she says, punctuating each name with a poke to your arm. A small smile tugs at your mouth as you look in her direction with a slight turn of your head.

"Yes?"

"Proud of you." She jabs you one more time.

"For what?"

"What do you mean for what!? You just openly talked about Bro in front of everyone."
"It was just the facts. The gravitas of the situation needed to be clear."

"Sometimes I don' think you realize just how far you've come," she says with a shake of her head.

"Tch." She's exaggerating.

"No, really. Like...like when you first skipped town and you were telling us all I'm fine, I'm fine, don't worry'. You had to get to a pretty desperate ass place before you finally came to me for help. Now, look at you, when you lost your job I heard about it within three business days." You shrug and take a harsh drag. You'd rather not think about those times. Maybe you have improved a bit as far as functionality goes. As a person though? That's debatable. She pulls you into a side hug and doesn’t let go until you’ve snuffed out the cigaret and toss the butt into the nearby coffee can. You both head back inside expecting less commotion, but in the few minutes you were absent, the amount of commotion in the kitchen has risen dramatically.

“SHUT UP! SHUT UP! I'M NOT MADE OF GLASS!”

Kankri has an alarmed look on his face. He’s standing with his hands held up and out in front of him across from Sollux, who appears to be digging his claws into his scalp.

“Sollux, I only meant that consideration should be taken. We don’t, I don’t want you to relapse and even with the best intention it can happen if the circumstances to trig--”

“I'M FINE. STOP. SHUT UP. JUST, JUST LEAVE ME ALONE, I'M FINE.” Sollux is very much not fine. Aside from the emotional meltdown that he is clearly having, his psionics are visibly crackling around him, dancing over his skin in branching patterns of alternating red and blue. When he opens his eyes they are so bright that Roxy gasps and grabs your arm before hurrying closer. You follow her over to where Dave is, just off to the side of the psionic flipping his fucking shit. It isn’t just Dave, everyone is giving him a little distance.

“Kankri started up some self-righteous bullshit because Mituna wanted Sol to keep him company while he smoked up cause he’s having a bad brain day,” Dave says quietly aside to you both.

“Calm down.”

“STOP TELLING ME TO CALM DOWN. I WAS CALM BEFORE. I WAS FINE. I *AM* FINE I--”

“YOU’RE NOT FUCKING FINE! LOOK AT YOUR DAMN HANDS!” Karkat says as he pushes Kankri out of the way. Horrified realization washes over Sollux as he looks at his shaking limbs. You can hear his psionics crackling and feel the hum of energy coming off of him. This is not good. This guy is a walking bomb. He makes a panicked sound as he suddenly bolts out the back door. You’re all quick to follow, filing out one after the other. Roxy and Dave are calling after him, but he’s not stopping. He stumbles, kicking up clots of dirt as he regains his balance. He’s heading toward an open grassy area where several of the lawn ring’s backyards converge. Karkat calls after him and he looks over his shoulder. He isn’t angry anymore. He’s terrified. With a burst of psionics that makes you all stop dead in your tracks, he takes to the sky, climbing higher and higher until he’s only a spec. You all stand there in a silence that seems to stretch forever.

“That’s too high up. That has to be too high up.” Karkat says, his voice unusually quiet, and filled with dread.

“It is difficult to estimate from this vantage point, but by my calculations, I would say that he is dangerously close to an unsafe altitude especially at the rate he is ascending,” Hal says. It is very
likely entirely bullshit that he calculated anything because anyone can see that he is way the fuck up there and he wasn’t exactly taking his time.

“Gold bloods are more resistant to decompression sickness and hypoxia,” Kanaya says in a worried half-whisper as she moves closer to Karkat.

There’s a loud crack and for a split second, you think it’s thunder. Red and blue lightning arcs and crackles in the sky. If he’s that high up, and you can still see it, the area of effect must be daunting. It glows bigger and brighter until all at once it erupts into two solid streams of energy that illuminate the clouds before they punch a hole in the overcast. And then it’s dark again, but not dark enough to miss the body plummeting out of the sky.

“No, no, no,” Dave mumbles. He grabs your arm and looks up at you like he used to do when you were kids. He has that same look of fear on his face that begs you to do something.

“Sollux!” Roxy isn’t the only one to yell his name, but her voice steals your attention from the others in how saturated with panic it is. There’s nothing you can do.

“Fuck, no, no, this isn’t happening.” Karkat is on the brink of tears. Kankri IS in tears, but his sobbed apologies are muffled against the fabric of Porrim’s shirt. Dave is speechless. Tears silently run down his face as he stares up into the sky at a loss. There’s nothing you can do. You have no control here. You’re going to watch this kid die. You’re going to watch Dave and Roxy lose someone they both care about. The FIRST person Dave cares about. Maybe even the first person he loves. You had your reservations about the guy, but you didn’t want this. Mituna makes a strangled noise. It isn’t a noise of distress though. He has Karkat by the shoulders and is hunched over a little to look at him more directly. He’s trying to articulate something.

“Not dead.”

“What? Wait. You can’t hear him?” Mituna shakes his head. “You can’t hear him?!!” Karkat shouts right in his face. Mituna takes a step back and shakes his head more violently. You have no idea what this is about. “Holy fuck, he’s going to live. He’s going to live through this.” You look to Dave for some kind of explanation, but he’s looking at Karkat. “That poor bastard is going to survive the fall!” Everyone seems very certain that this guy isn’t about to eat it. If that’s true, this is still going to hurt...a lot. You look back up, he’s closer now. You can just make out his form. You really hope he’s unconscious for this. Roxy collides with your side and you wrap your arms around her as she weakly bangs her fist against the shoulder opposite the one she’s crying into.

“Something’s happening,” Rose says with some much-needed level-headedness. You look up. Sollux’s body sparks like a faulty lighter trying to ignite before he comes to life with a jolt and a crackle of psionics. He twists like a cat as he rights himself and the glow around him intensifies in his efforts to slow his descent. He looks like a comet. He comes down like one too, hard and fast, his acceleration slowed, but not slowed enough to let him land on his feet and stay that way. He hits the ground running, but quickly loses the fight against inertia and is sent roughly tumbling across the ground until he finally comes to a stop, lying on his back, some distance away from you all. There is a beat before any of you can move, and then all at once, you rush toward him.

You’re only maybe fifteen feet away when two arms come up and flip off the sky. “I lived, bitches.” His arms drop back down in an exhausted manner as soon as he’s done speaking. You hold back as the others crowd around him. Dave, Roxy, Karkat, and Mituna get the closest with two of them kneeling to either side of Sollux. They’re all asking him questions at once and he does his best to answer them with reassurances that he’s good, that he's okay, that it doesn't hurt anywhere.

“Back up, let him breathe. He was just up in the god damn stratosphere,” You tell them. The guy
needs as much oxygen as he can get his hands on right now.

“I wasn’t that high.” He laughs like a maniac. “Just needed to be high enough to wake up in time.”
He knew he was going to pass out. He knew and yet he risked flying up to an altitude that you’re
willing to bet was still dangerous regardless of his blood type, just to make sure he didn’t hurt
anyone. It's respectable. Maybe he isn't as bad as you thought. Maybe under that thick layer of
dumbass, there is something worthwhile. You thought he was laughing at a weed pun before, but
when he laughs again, this time at nothing, in a way that sounds disconcertingly like his brother, you
realize he’s high off his ass on adrenaline. He's breathing heavily, but honestly, he probably needs to
right now. When he goes to try to sit up, Dave puts a hand to his chest to keep him down.

"Dude, don't move. There is no fucking way you are physically capable of feeling pain right now."
Sollux complies, but otherwise doesn't acknowledge the whole 'you may be seriously injured and not
know it' part of Dave's sentence.

"Holy shit. I've never been so awake and so tired at the same time. One of you needs to kiss me right
fucking now."

“Babe, you are so out of it.”

“Why have neither of you kissed me yet?”

"Should we be calling an ambulance?" Kanaya asks. Sollux immediately tries to sit up again.

"No. No hospitals. I'm good. I'm so fucking good. It's like I can breathe through my sniffnode
again."

"Huh?" Dave says, giving him a funny look.

"I think he may be referring to the relief one feels after a prolonged period of sinus congestion when
a person can breathe through their nose again." Sollux lifts his arm up to point at Kanaya, signaling
that she's right.

"But psionics," he clarifies.

"So that was essentially the world's most over dramatic sneeze?" Dave asks.

"That could have killed us all. The drama was very much warranted," Karkat says as he shoves
Dave over so he can look at Sollux's eyes.

"KK, I'm fine."

"Shut up and follow my prong."

You all eventually do decide to let him get up, but not without assistance. It's a good call because he
damn near collapses the second he gets to his feet. Dave winds up carrying him on his back and you
can hear the guy purring the whole way to the house. Alright, he’s not the picture of stability, but he
does genuinely care about Dave, and it’s pretty fucking clear now that Dave gives so many fucks
about this guy. The same goes for Roxy. You won’t hold your breath waiting for him to live up to
his reputation, but you’ll try to judge him just a little less, if only for their sake.
Hivebound 2

==> Be Sollux

You’re fucking exhausted. Dave has you on his back and you’re slumped hanging on with your arms around his shoulders and your face buried in his neck. He’s warm, which he sometimes is, you aren’t too far apart temperature wise, but somewhere in your mind you vaguely acknowledge that you’re probably a tad too cold if he’s THIS warm to you. Somewhere, yes, but definitely not at the forefront. That part of your mind is busy being wrapped up in his scent and shamelessly purring as he carries you back to the house. There’s noise around you, but you aren’t paying attention. You only perk up when you hear the word “pizza” because holy shit are you hungry. The feeling only just then kicks in. Several people, but most loudly Karkat, are glad to hear this even if you only semi-coherently say it. It gets quieter and quieter and the next thing you know, Dave is setting you down on the bed. You blink a few times as you try to clear your head a little. Roxy is here too. She takes a seat next to you while Dave goes to rifle through one of your bags that you never bothered to fully unpack. She brushes back your hair and you smile at her.

“Sol.”

“Hm?” you respond groggily. You must have dozed off for a second.

“I said, are you sure you didn’t hit your head?” Roxy asks.

“Mhm, I’m just really tired. Like shorting out a capacitor. Everything at once.” Dave comes back into view holding some clothes. Right, you probably have some dirt on you. Maybe shouldn’t have lied down on the nice clean bed. You move to sit up with a groan that turns into a wince when Roxy goes to pull you up the rest of the way. You fall back like a sack of bricks against the bed and make another pained noise.

“Sorry.”

“You dropped me.”

“It sounded like it hurt when I touched you!”

“So you drop me? Whatever. Help me up.” You reach for her and she helps you sit upright, being a bit more careful with you this time. The adrenaline has worn off and you’re starting to feel your aches. There are a bunch of them too, mostly on your side and upper arm, presumably from the initial hit to the ground. You fight with your hoodie for a moment until one of them helps pull it the rest of the way over your head.

“Yikes, that’s gonna hurt tomorrow,” Dave says as he hands you a loose long sleeve shirt. You twist as much as you can at the moment to look at your side. Bruises are already starting to form. You try not to lift your arms up too much as you pull the shirt over your head. Your shoulder isn’t too happy about that position and you can literally see why. After awkwardly shimmying out of your jeans and into a pair of pajama pants, you can finally stop moving around and resume lying down. It’s mind blowing how strenuous everything feels. Roxy thuds down next to you, on the side with fewer bruises, and carefully snuggles up next to you when you hold out your arm for her.

"I'm gonna go see how the pizza situation is coming along," Dave says as he makes his way to the door.

"Cool, I'm probably going to pass out, but wake me up when it gets here?"
"Ha, like anyone is going to let you sleep through pizza after claiming that you would, and I quote, 'fight God in a Walmart parking lot for a slice of pepperoni.'" He smiles as he says it. You love that smile. It's genuine and it doesn't happen as often as you'd like, but after all the conditioning that he's endured, the fact that it happens at all is impressive. The fact that it happens for you specifically is amazing. You laugh lightly and shut your eyes as he leaves. There's a moment of quiet after the door clicks shut, but before Roxy moves to loom over you.

“You fucking asshole, don’t you dare do that to me again.” Her voice is hushed and full of anger rooted in hurt. It catches you off guard at first, but your expression quickly changes from surprise to guilt that you hide behind a glare.

“It was a time sensitive problem. I did it to keep everyone safe.”

“You could have said something instead of just taking off into the goddamn sky!” She says in a voice that is both a shout and a whisper.

“Well excuse me! It was a little hard to think straight at the time let alone speak!” You match her tone though you are unsure as to why you are keeping your voice down.

“You had no problem speaking when it involved telling off Kankri!”

“Did you WANT me to vaporize everyone?”

“Are you not capable of talking and walking?”

“I was running off instinct!”

“Uggh, you’re so pig-headed, I could just smack you!” She hangs her head and curls her fingers in the sheets. Fuck, this is a line. She’s really upset.

“No, you’re right... I... I’m sorry.” She loses some of her steam when you cave and apologize instead of continuing to defend your decision. Besides, she really is right; you’re not placating her. You should have said something, anything, to anyone, even if it was vague. You should have tried to at the very least. She sets her jaw and looks away.

“It’s just hard, ya know? What happened before, and now…” she sinks back into place beside you. “I care about what happens to you.” You wrap your arms around her and squeeze her tight before placing a kiss to the top of her head.

“I don’t mean to be like this.” But you are. Over and over again. Mood swings. Poor choices. Shitty judgment.

“I know. No, it’s, it’s...I shouldn’t have let this happen.”

“What?”

“It’s my fault. I’m a shit kismesis.”

“It’s not your fault. It's my fault. I’m the asshole here. I fucked up. Why would you think any of this is your fault?” You start to turn on your side so you can look at her better, but halt the action halfway through when your body reminds you that you recently got to know the ground real well.

“I didn’t stop you. I just let you keep doing it. I knew something was wrong but I...” her hand hangs in the air as she searches for words. “I didn’t...we...that was our…” She purses her lips and lets her hand fall to her side.
“Our thing?” you ask.

“Yeah. We got fucked up together.” You remember thinking the same thing more than once. It was special when it was just you and her. You thought about it after that night too. You couldn’t go back. Aside from scaring the crap out of yourself, it didn’t work like it used to anyway. It just made you feel like shit most of the time at that point. She looks up at you from where her head is resting on your chest. “What’s gonna happen to us?” Just like you were, she’s worried too that you’ll drift apart without it. You’ve mulled over it a lot, but it’s only now that you feel so certain about this.

“You’re not my kismesis because we got fucked up together. If anything, if there’s a quadrant most likely to do that, it’d be a--” the word doesn’t want to roll off your tongue, your mouth trying to refuse to form it, but you spit it out through sheer will. “a matespritship.”

“You don’t have to pretend. I know we aren’t like real kismesis, so saying that doesn’t mean much.”

“The word you want is ‘traditional’. You’re definitely not my, I mean yeah, we vacillate, or well, not so much vacillate as…we’re different, but you’re definitely not my…” you can’t say it, not like that. You can’t say those words together.

“Real convincing,” she remarks with pointed sarcasm. No. Nope. This isn't how this is going down. You grit your teeth and turn on your side so you can look at her more directly.

“Does the idea of publicly kicking my ass get you going?”

“What?”

“Competing with me, does it rile you up?”

“You know it does.”

“Does it piss you off that I could be so much better than I am if I would just fucking do it?”

“Yeah.”

“Does it get under your skin when I get how I am because you know I’m better than that?”

“I’ve said almost exactly that to you before.”

“I know. I was paraphrasing you. And you want me to fight fang and claw to be the best, right?”

“No shit, of course I do.”

“Because it drives you too? Because it makes you want to be better just to show me up? Because it’ll antagonize me to turn around and do the same to you in a never-ending cycle of provoking each other for the thrill of it?” She looks to the side with a little smirk and you think she's actually blushing. You lean in a little closer and drop your voice a little lower. “Because the only person allowed to be better than you is me?” No, wait, that’s--

“You fucked up that last part, babe,” she says, catching the falter in your expression as you realized your error. You said it backward. You said it that way because that thinly veiled line of questioning is how you feel about her. She’s your rival, and you will drag each other kicking and screaming to the top. Your mouth is left hanging open just a tad as you try to form some kind of comeback. It was more of an accidental admission than a slip of the tongue and she knows it. You take too long to come up with anything and she smiles at you in a cheeky sort of way because she just won some kind of something between you two. You close your mouth and smirk back at her. She pulls you
forward with a hand at the back of your neck so that your foreheads touch.

“I still should have stopped you. I knew way before Dave did that something wasn’t right.”

“You didn’t know how bad it was.”

“I didn’t know it was going to get like it did, but there were some pretty big red flags.”

“No, I mean I didn’t tell you everything. It was happening almost every time, but I just kept doing it. I kept thinking that I could get it right next time. That I just had to get it right next time and it would work like it used to and that everything would go back to how it was if I could just get it right. You couldn’t have known. I hid it from you. I even lied to you about it.” She finds your hand and weaves her fingers through yours.

“We both messed up. Agreed?”

“...Alright, I guess.” She gives your hand a little shake and you roll your eyes. “Agreed,” you say with a sigh that you maybe play up a little bit and she maybe notices. You can’t keep a straight face and wind up cracking a smile for the two seconds before she steals a kiss.

“Lie to me again and I’ll delete your System32 folder.”

This time it’s you that steals a kiss. “You know I can fix that.”

“Yeah, but it’ll be super annoying.” She kisses you again and your laughter dissolves into it. You kiss her back, but your movements are slow and sloppy. You’re beyond worn out.

“While I could kiss you indefinitely from a desire standpoint, physically, I’m fucking beat.” She briefly pouts but does relent and help you ease onto your back before curling up beside you again.

===> Be Dirk

With everyone redirecting their lingering emotional turmoil into a chaotic attempt to order pizza, you decide this is as good a time as it gets to sneak out back. The racket of squabbling 20-somethings stops suddenly, completely muffled by the backdoor when you pull it closed. The quiet has you relaxing just a little with an audible exhale of breath.

“They look up to you.”

“In a practical way perhaps.” If they are going to look to you for something, you suppose your ability to not completely lose your shit in crisis is the best it gets. You pull out a cigarette and the distinct sound of a flint sparking catches your ear as Porrim holds out a light for you. “Thanks.” The paper crackles as it catches fire.

“Forgive me if this is rude, I’m a bit embarrassed to admit it, but I have trouble telling a human’s age by their appearance. How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-five. Three years older than Dave.”

“Really now? Huh. You and Mituna are the same age.”

“Seriously?”

“Mhm. Physically speaking anyway. I’m not certain where exactly his mind is. Though do not mistake me, he isn’t a child by any means.” You figured there was something off about him, but you
don’t inquire further about it because you do have SOME sense of tact.

“Sollux is younger I’m assuming.” He better fucking be. Him being older than you doesn’t rub you
the right way if he’s dating Dave, and it’s not going to give him any points on the positive side of
your opinion of him.

“By a sweep. Fairly standard for littermates.”

“That puts him between Dave and Roxy.” You have a few regrets about the wording of that, but
Porrim ignores it. “What about you?”

“Kanaya and I are a full two sweeps apart. In years, I am twenty-six.” Your eyebrows raise up a tad.
She’s older than you. It’s only by a year, but it’s still strange. As far as friend groups go, you aren’t
accustomed to that. “You seem surprised.”

“Amongst friends, I’m accustomed to being the oldest.”

“You give off that impression. It is the reason I asked your age in the first place.” She takes one last
drag of her cigaret before snuffing it out and tossing it into the coffee can. “When the holidays are
over, we should keep in touch. So far I’ve enjoyed your company.” You nod and watch as she walks
back inside only to nearly run right into Dave who was going for the door at the same moment. She
steps aside for him and he wanders over.

“Sup?” you ask as you try to blow the smoke as far away from him as you can.

He shrugs. “Not much.”

“Are they still arguing about pizza in there?”

“Yeah. They almost had it until they remembered about the coupons.” You stand there together in
silence for a moment. The wind changes and you move so the smoke isn’t hitting your brother. “So,
what were your plans for that?” He gestures with his chin in your direction. “You said you were
trying to quit. Are you doing the gum or taking meds for it or going— well I guess you aren’t going
cold turkey.”

“I’m allergic to the gum and unless I want to stare off into space at random again, I can’t take any of
those cessation medications.”


“You know what?” You ask rhetorically as you drop it to the ground and snuff it out. “Let’s go
down to the Sevo and get one.” You toss the butt in the can because you aren’t a litterbug. “It’ll be
like old times.” Dave’s face perks up ever so slightly and for a moment, at the back of your mind you
worry for him. For a moment you worry about Bro seeing him express himself genuinely. The
response is still carved into you. It might never leave. At least Dave has been able to let go of it
some.

"You think we have time?"

"The pizza won't be here for thirty minutes plus however long it takes them to order. That's plenty.
The Sevo isn't far." You both start heading down the road to the edge of the lawn ring neighborhood
where the sidewalks pick up again. It's not exactly like it used to be. There is a lot more greenery and
the lingering patches of snow definitely weren't a thing back in Houston, but it's still just you and
Dave walking to 7-11, and it feels like a lifetime ago that you last did that.
“It’s been cool just coexisting, sharing the same space, being around each other without making plans to.” It really has. You knew you missed it, but you had dulled down the feeling with time. The winter break has dredged up a fair chunk of what you’ve shoved down, and while you do have a lot of practice controlling that, being around him this much is still bittersweet. It’s allowed you to pick up on a lot of smaller things about him, things only you could guess or understand. He hides them well, subconsciously or otherwise. For instance, no one else would ever notice the pause before he drinks something, the brief moment before the first sip that he takes to smell it, just to make sure it is what he thinks it is or that it isn’t dangerously expired. No one would notice that. Dave himself might not even know he does it. But for all the reminders that this time together has brought up, it’s very much worth it just to have him back in your life.

“Between work and your classes we haven’t had as much time to chill as either of us would have liked, I’m sure, but I expected as much. I figured the change in balancing your obligations and free time, in addition to being able to have a real social life, might stretch you thin.”

“No kidding. It’s sure been somethin else.” He pauses and looks off in the distance. “Thanks.”

“I promised I would get you out. I wish I could have done it sooner.” You had contingency plans up the wazoo and went through more than a handful, but never exhausted them. Failure wasn’t an option. The only question was when. And honestly, this outcome may have been best. You’ve both gained considerably more than just each other, which has proven to be beneficial in more than just a tactical sense.

“Dude, you left with nothing. The fact that you got this far is crazy.” He kicks a rock a ways down the sidewalk. “I was thinking, not that living at the dorm isn’t amazing, because it totally is, but maybe next semester I could come live with you. I’m on the fence about it, but it could be cool and I could always dorm next year again if it didn’t work out.” He finds the same rock and kicks it again, this time lodging it in a snowbank.

“Finish out the year. You’ll be staying with me soon enough.” He stops for a second before smacking himself in the forehead with the heel of his hand. “Did you forget about summer?” You ask with an amused tone that took forever to correctly program.

“Oh shut it.” He catches back up to you and the conversation turns to the projects he’s working on, mostly the 3D camera stuff he wants to shoot with Sollux. He’s really head over heels for the guy. You can tell just by the way he talks about him. You’re happy for him even if you still aren’t sure how you feel about the object of his affection. You were worried he might be as fucked up in the relationship department as you are...were?...you’ve gotten better at it at least. When he realizes he’s just prattling on about his moirail, he changes the subject to your efforts to restore Squarewave and Sawtooth. You’re almost done with Squarewave. He’s in one piece again. Bending him back into shape was no easy task and some parts of him had to be entirely replaced. Hal gave you flack for that, to which you asked him if he wanted to be part garbage can too. However, for Sawtooth, you’ll need to find slightly sturdier metal what with his height. Once you resolder a few things, all Squarewave needs is some aesthetic work. After that, you should be able to turn him back on. Dave calls dibs on the first rap battle with him.

It is a universal fact that time works differently inside of a 7-11, and is directly proportional to how rural the convenience store in question is. That said, you don’t think you spent too much time there. You looked at some reviews a while back and mostly know what you’re looking for or at the very least you know what not to get. You’re hesitant when you pull the half-empty pack out of your pocket. It feels like a waste to chuck it and there is a certain sense of finality in finishing out the pack, but in the end, you decide that you’re rationalizing it and let the box fall into the trash. It has a not so great feeling stewing in your stomach, but Dave seems pleased. Could also be the Slurpee you
bought him, but you'd like to think that lessening your odds of death by cancer is contributing to his good mood. You come up the driveway just as the pizza guy is leaving. Perfect timing.

"Wait," Dave says just as you're going for the door. He stands there for a beat before looking over his shoulder and in the blink of an eye, you're wrapped in a tight hug. Affection. Dave's hang-ups with it are different than yours. He's caught between fear and starvation, while you're more so...eternally at odds with it and unsatisfied as a result of your own social shortcomings due to a complete lack of exposure in your more formative years. Something Bro didn't do with Dave after seeing the effect it had on you. Being so easily detached had its uses for a while, but man oh man, feeling actual feelings? That sure was fun to reign into something vaguely resembling moderation when you started seeing Jake. The phrase "All or nothing kind of chap" has been thrown around more than once. But you digress. Dave's difficulties with affection, It's another thing he's getting past. You bring your arms up to return the gesture. You got him out in time. Maybe. You think so anyway. If that's the last thing you ever do right, you'll take it. He let's go and so do you; pizza awaits.

The energy in the kitchen is frenzied compared to the calm walk you just took. Everyone is swarming the food like sharks to chum. Roxy and Sollux are making their way over looking like they just woke up from a nap, like the smell wafted down the hallway before congealing into a hand for the sole purpose of tapping them on the shoulder and beckoning them forth with the seductive curl of a single pizza-scented digit. He's heavily leaning on her, but he's up and walking, and that's more than he could do before. He's barely in the kitchen before Mituna abandons his food to ambush his brother. His hands fly every which way until Sollux stills them, halting them in his grasp before signing something back at a much more reasonable pace. You think maybe the older Captor is in a weird state of mind. His mannerisms are timid and nervous, regressively so. He latches onto Sollux and Sollux returns the hug until it becomes rather lengthy. He pats his back a few times and Mituna relents albeit reluctantly. The way Sollux moves his head in response leads you to believe he is rolling his eyes. With a sigh, he reaches out to put his hand to Mituna's forehead. You think they're doing some kind of psionics thing because Sollux's eyes briefly increase in luminosity before dimming back to their passive state. Whatever he does, his brother seems satisfied and goes back to his food. Roxy, still at his side, helps him over to a chair. She sits next to him, and with Dave on his other side, he's sandwiched between his quadrantmates.

The crowd around the pizza box has died down enough for you to wedge in and grab two slices for yourself. There aren't any chairs left, but that's fine. You don't mind standing, or rather, leaning against the counter. The room has a sort of peaceful chaos to it. Conversation spilling across the little groups that have formed like a school cafeteria lunch table. You find yourself outside of it, observing. The distance is suddenly startling and you question whether or not you took your medication today. Briefly, you consider asking Hal, but it wouldn't matter if you took it or not at this point. It's so late in the day that taking it now would only throw you off.

"It's quaint, isn’t it?" Rose asks from beside you. Her appearance there catches you off guard. Maybe the day is catching up with you. You blink it away.

"It has a surreal quality to it that one can only truly appreciate having experienced its absence."

"My thoughts precisely."

"Has anyone ever told you, Dirk, that the way you word things has a particular elegance to it?" Kanaya asks, looking up and back at you from where she is seated at the table.

"Fuck no." She laughs in a way that reminds you of but is not exactly like the way Rose laughs. Where her's is a reserved chuckle, not suppressed, but simply enough as it needs to be; Kanaya's
laugh is reserved in a way that's almost flustered.

"David Elizabeth Strider, you shut your whore mouth!" Well, that's certainly attention-grabbing. Roxy appears to be somewhat offended.

"Elizabeth?" Sollux asks, giving Dave a look.

"Am I mistaken in my understanding that Elizabeth is a human name of the feminine variety?" Kanaya asks more quietly aside to Rose.

"You are not."

"First of all," Dave starts. "My mouth operates pro bono. And second of all, you can suck it."

"Dave, don't tell your cousin to 'suck it'," You chide, momentarily forgetting his age.

He slouches back in his chair, crossing his arms with a huff, apparently also forgetting his age.

"Fiiiine," he whines, before turning to Sollux. "Do me a solid, bro, and tell my cousin she can go suck it?"

"Sure. Roxy, you can go suck it."

"Sollux." Porrim tilts her head and raises an eyebrow at him as if to say 'really?'

"Hm? Oh, my bad. Suck them." And with that poorly executed feign of miscommunication in regards to grammar correction, Mituna completely fucking loses it, making it only slightly more clear as to what Sollux is vaguely referring to. He laughs so suddenly and hard that the grub juice he was drinking comes out his nose. It wasn't even a particularly good joke, Mituna is just weird like that, or perhaps he had already reached his limit with "pro bono". Regardless, the laughter is infectious.

"You little shit!" Roxy says a moment before she has Sollux in a headlock and is giving him a noogie with perfect form.

"Ack, no fair! Get off. Dave, don't just sit there, help me."

It's chaos. You continue to watch the shit show while chowing down. Kankri has joined the fight by questioning the ethics of pitting a moirail against their bloodline and is quickly offended by Karkat's deadpanned claim that he would betray him for a cheese sandwich. Meanwhile, with Porrim's help, Mituna is cleaning up his mess and his face while snickering at the slightest provocation like he's caught in some kind of easily amused loop. Sollux manages to twist out of Roxy's hold, only to be caught again as he's gently tackled to the floor; it's more of a drag really. "Take it back or your moirail gets it!" Roxy says wiggling the fingers of a raised hand in a threatening manner.

"Don't you dare!" Sollux hisses.

"Apparently, we're dying on this hill," Dave says flatly, but the corner of his mouth is ticked up just a twinge.

"No, not you! That's not what I meant."

"So be it."

Sollux is apparently ticklish. Several lispy and potentially indecent threats later, Dave finally swoops in to save him.

"Alright, alright, I take it back. Your Minecraft server doesn't aesthetically suck ass through a straw."
Roxy immediately pops up off the ground.

"That's what this is about? You gotta be fucking kidding me. Really?" Two hands come up just into view and make a dual flicking motion that has Dave and Roxy saying "hey!" In unison when a tiny spark of psi flicks each of them upside the head. Alright, you gotta give him points for that. A+ bullshit use of powers.

"So are either of you going to help me up? I'm running on like 2% battery life over here."

You shake your head and cram more pizza in your mouth. You could get used to being surrounded by so many people.

===> Dave: Have a minor crisis

Okay, so, you aren’t 100% oblivious. You are mildly aware of some of the subtleties of moirallegiance, and by that, you mean that you may have skimmed a book or two of Karkats when he was in class, and some googling might have occurred. So you do know that this is a thing. Well, actually, it’s two things. This is Sollux so of course it is.

Right now the two of you are in the recuperacoon. He’s draped lazily on top of you, legs tangled, arms loosely around you, with his face in your neck. He’s faintly purring even though, unlike you, he was out almost immediately. He barely had time to run his fingers through your hair and make those little ‘sorry’ chirps before he just couldn’t keep his eyes open anymore. Even without the context, you’re starting to understand those sounds better. Not universally, just Sollux’s. You can see why Karkat had trouble describing troll noises as a whole. They kind of just have a feel to them. But yeah, thing one, an attempt to comfort you / apologize in the slime pile. He didn't get very far if Karkat’s saucy novels are in any way accurate, but it was an attempt nonetheless.

The reason this is a twofor is that now he’s making those little safe sounds. He’s hurt, not badly, but he does have some gnarly bruises going on and is so devastatingly tired that he’s having trouble getting around, and yet here and there he’s making those little ‘safe’ trills because you’re here. Trolls are wired differently. Their instincts are more pronounced and obvious than humans. He can't defend himself too well at the moment, but he feels safe. He feels doubtlessly certain that you'd protect him. He trusts you.

It's freaking you out a little. This completely letting his guard down business, it's a private thing, a pile thing, a hopelessly pale thing. It’s only for you. He can be weak in front of you. He doesn’t give a single shit, not one tightly coiled turd on the lawn of appearances. He doesn't care. It doesn't bother him.

It’s not that it bothers you, it's just that it's not something you’re used to. You aren’t used to seeing this. You aren’t used to being involved in this particular kind of trust and closeness and openly expressing feelings-ness. The idea of reciprocating it is terrifying, but you feel like maybe you COULD reciprocate it, to an extent you already have, and somehow that’s also terrifying but in a completely different way. More than one way actually. It's exciting and you want it, you can admit that to yourself, but that doesn't erase the past. You think all this might be an example of recursion. It gives you anxiety so you seek out your moirail for comfort, but it gives you anxiety. Perhaps you can use that as a guise to tell him this eventually. Hide it behind trying to impress him or make him laugh.

You wish you'd fall asleep already so you can stop riding this thought train. Maybe you're just overwhelmed and overtired. New stuff has been coming at you left and right constantly since you got out of Houston. It’s no wonder you feel like this really. There is more new stuff going on than old stuff. You like it that way. The old stuff sucked. However, that still doesn’t make all the new stuff
any less daunting. You sigh and hold him tighter, but not too tight, those bruises are turning a dark greenish color now. You know exactly how much they hurt. You gently pet his head and he nuzzles your neck in his sleep. It does something to you deep in your chest. Why the hell does he care so much about you? Yeah, you guys get along. Your interests don’t exactly line up, but they’re adjacent enough that you can appreciate them. And you do share SOME things. Like your taste in movies and bothering Karkat with said taste in movies. But why you of all people for something like this? You aren’t exactly skilled in any of the areas this quadrant deals with. He knows what he’s doing. But you? You’re blindly stumbling through all of this. It’s a wonder you have yet to fuck it up.

Ugh, why won’t your brain just grace you with sleep already? You push it all away and try to clear your head. You can’t keep doing that shit. The shelf is getting full. To be fair, there has been a lot of stuff sitting on it for a long time, the dust is thick. You’ll have to face it eventually. It’s not like you can wander down to the nearest Mind Ikea and pick up a new brain SVALNÄS. You need to deal with it at some point and now you have an outlet to accomplish that through... later. Not now. He’s not in a good place for that right now. Even if he said it was okay, you don’t want to dump your problems on him right now. He’s dealing with enough. Crap, maybe Rose was right. She can be ridiculously insightful sometimes. She's like Jade, but with personal matters that you'd rather go unseen. That's not entirely true. You don't actually mind her prying as much as you say. Plus it can be helpful, like right now as you're lying here being eaten alive by your own thoughts realizing that maybe you should take Sollux up on his offer to feelings jam. Later though. Not now.

You try to focus on the feeling of his skin against yours instead of the buzz in your mind, but it backfires. A few months ago you thought about having friends and meeting the friends you only knew through text, and just that alone seemed wild to you. You couldn’t have even imagined being half-naked in a slime pod with a troll dude, much less giving so many fucks about said troll dude. The future you fantasized about getting is one that just might happen now, and you won’t be alone for it by a long shot. God, you have so much to lose now. You take a deep stuttered breath and skillfully crush the urge to let tears slip from your eyes.

“Sh, shhsh, shhhsssh.” A hand comes up and blindly pats your face, missing the mark completely a few times before finding your cheek as half-conscious shooshes fall against your neck. It twists you up inside. Your heart plummets and soars at the same time and you grit your teeth, but you can’t swallow it down. You can’t keep the few stray tears from leaving your eyes. He lightly shakes his head and paps your face. “Shhhsh.” Little waves of static crawl over your skin. That must be so draining for him right now, but he’s doing it to make you feel better, and it’s fucking working too. Hell if you know why, but you aren’t about to examine it too deeply right now. “Wha s’on ur mind?” You almost can’t make out the question with how mumbled it is.

“A lot of things.” Your voice waivers, but doesn’t quite crack. His hand leaves your face to rest on the back of your neck, and he momentarily picks his head up to kiss your cheek.

“mmm talk?” He so tired and he’s hurt and he’s still trying to comfort you. You shake your head. “Kay. Pile later.”

"Sounds good," you manage with only a slight unsteadiness. He starts slowly brushing his fingers back and forth through your hair and you feel the energy wrapped around your skin pulse for a single beat. He just hugged you with his psionics. A sadness twinged smile tugs at your lips. He’s such a sap, but he’s your sap.

==> Sollux: Wake up

You crack your eyes open and return to the waking world. After the most urgent piss of your life,
your brain slowly starts to power on. You are kind of a mess. There is sopor all over you. It's
eMBEDded in your hair. It's even stuck to your sideburns. You probably tracked some through the
hallway on your way to the ablution block too, but you're just going to let that be someone else's
problem and instead, slip into the trap. The water is cool, but not cold, and it feels like it's cutting
clean through a dozen layers of muck. It's crisp and for the first time in a long time, you feel awake.
The kind of awake where you could maybe do things.

You start with the small stuff. You run your fingers through your hair so it doesn’t dry funny, and
then you brush your teeth. After that, you make your way back to your room and note the lack of
sopor in the hallway, but the little trail of slime in your room. CrabDad must have already gotten to
the hall. The light coming in through the window is a pale blue, so it must be pretty early. You
continue to float just above the floor when you see that Dave isn't awake yet. You can be as loud as
you want rummaging through your stuff for clean clothes, but you know that footsteps will jerk him
out of a dead sleep. You find a baggy long sleeve with your sign on it and a pair of grey jeans, throw
them on, and make your way to the kitchen. Your psionics feel cleaner somehow so you continue
floating around. The house is a nice sort of quiet that goes well with this crisp awake feeling you’ve
got going on. Out of habit, you wander to the coffee pot but hesitate to make any. You don’t want to
jeopardize this mood, but you could really go for some coffee. You settle for half-caf, and reason that
if you only have a small cup it’ll be even less. You stare out the kitchen window while the coffee
perks, just thinking your thoughts, when someone grabs your hand.

“Come on, Sollux. Back to your coon.”

“What the fuck?” You ask, pulling away.

Kankri practically squeaks with surprise in sharp contrast to his previous oddly sullen tone. “You’re
awake.”

“Yeah...people generally do that after sleeping.” He’s giving you this weird look that you can’t quite
piece together. It’s like he’s tried to cram two different reactions that don’t go together into one.
Some strange combination that’s coming across as a nervous sort of awe.

“Yes, well, you’ve been sleeping for two days.” You what now? Well, that explains why you had to
pee so badly.

“Seriously?” Kankri doesn’t look like he’s kidding, but you feel the need to ask anyway. He nods
short and quick. “I’m surprised no one dragged my ass to the hospital. You all seemed pretty bent
on it before.”

“We know you don’t like them and you weren’t completely unresponsive. You’ve been
sleepwalking-- er, sleep floating every six or so hours and you’d answer us if we talked to you. Not
that we could understand what you were saying, but you were responding. We would just-- what I
was doing before, we would just walk you back to your room and you’d go back to sleep.” His head
is down as he talks to you, but he keeps glancing up here and there. It’s like someone beat him with
the humble stick.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine thank you for asking I’m going to leave now.” He says it all in one rushed sentence, his
voice pitched just a little too high, and hurries out of the kitchen the very second he’s finished
speaking. That was weird. You pour yourself a cup and continue to linger near the window enjoying
the morning serenity. It's snowing outside. This time you do notice the person making their way into
the kitchen, but purposely ignore them just to see how it plays out. Depending on who it is, you
might even fuck with them a little.
“You really must love coffee.” You don’t recognize that voice. It’s hoarse and there’s an odd airiness to it, almost a wheeze, with certain sounds more uneven than others as if they’re harder to make. It must be Dirk. So that’s his actual voice, huh? You won’t fuck with him. You aren’t exactly his favorite person right now.

“Do I come here often?” You ask, looking back over your shoulder at him. He’s harder to read than Dave, but you’re going to go out on a limb here and say you’ve at least mildly surprised him. “Kankri was just here,” you clarify. Dirk nods and walks over to the coffee pot. “It’s half-caf,” You say as he’s grabbing a mug, holding up your own a little. “Thought maybe it would be a good idea to take it easy.” He nods at you again, but this one is more of an approving sort of gesture. He pours the coffee anyway, either not minding or not wanting to put forth the effort to make a new pot. “So two days huh?” You sip at your drink before you continue. “I hope you bet on that.”

"Tried. No one would bet against it." That's actually hilarious, and probably part of the reason you didn't wake up with an IV in your arm. Not fun. However, despite its hilarity, you don't give Dirk the satisfaction beyond an amused puff of air out your sniff node. He takes a seat at the table and now with your cover blown you decide you might as well too.

“Dave’s probably worried.” You say after a period of mutual silence long enough to drain half your cup.

“Mhm,” Dirk hums. He has those dumb shades on and is staring you down. It feels judgy. Alright, maybe you’ll fuck with him a little. It’s his fault for giving you that smug ass non-look.

“Is it just about me or did he talk to you about--" You halt your sentence, open mouth, in a farce of almost saying something you shouldn't "...other things?” Dirk tilts his head at you as if to eye you over his shades without actually doing that. A motion you’re certain means he wants you to elaborate. You pretend not to understand and tilt your head questioningly.

“What other things?” He asks.

You shake your head lightly. “Bro code, man," you say while making a diamond sign. Dirk is not appreciative of this answer. You can tell by the complete lack of a response. "Tch, I find it hard to believe that you, as his littermate, wouldn't be able to figure it out anyway."

"Doesn't talk to me as much anymore in that regard. Wonder why." Oh. Great. Another reason for him not to like you. Although, it does have you a little curious...and maybe just a tad jealous.

"Did he talk to you a lot before?"

Dirk makes a so-so gesture with his hand. "Back then, it was a critical mass type of deal. After this," he points to the scar that runs across his neck. You’ve never taken a good look at it, but this seems like an invitation so you do. Yikes. You try to refrain from thinking about what it looked like when it happened, what Dave saw. "We couldn't even speak casually for a long time. Been catching up since getting him here."

You let your face go more serious so Dirk knows that the next thing out of your mouth is a bit more sincere. “He’s getting better with it, a lot better, but there’s still a certain amount of guesswork with him.” Dirk audibly inhales slowly as he nods.

“Good luck."

Shuffled footsteps announce the presence of someone coming down the hall and it isn't long before Dave wanders in, wrapped up in a blanket from head to toe. He plops down at the table and rests his
chin on folded arms. You pet his head through the blanket and he looks up at Dirk. It takes his brain a moment to process it, that Dirk isn't the one touching him. He pulls back and turns to look at you. In the blink of an eye, you have an armful of Dave. Or rather, Dave has his arms full of you.

"Oof. Good morning to you too. Ease up a bit, your like right on a bruise, man."

"Shit, my bad," he back away entirely instead. Then realizing what he just did in front of his brother, he tries to save some face by somewhat awkwardly adjusting the now askew blanket around his shoulders before taking his seat again. "So, how you feeling?"

"Better, a lot better actually. Maybe even good enough to do something with my day."

"Really? Like what?" He holds it back, but you can still sense the excitement in his voice.

You shrug. "Fuck if I know, but...something."

Others start filtering into the kitchen one by one, except for Kanaya and Rose who enter together. All of them are happy to see you awake and alert. Kankri is still acting funny and giving you that weird look, but he starts unwinding a little by the time breakfast makes it to the table. It doesn't smell as noxious as before and you actually manage a decent amount of food.

The something that you wind up doing with your day turns out to be spending several hours in Barnes and Noble. Karkat never holds onto a gift card too long if it can be exchanged for books. What you didn't realize was that while visiting the book store with Karkat is a lengthy experience, visiting the bookstore with Karkat, Kanaya, and Rose is an all-day event. Or at least it would have been if Mituna didn't have to be somewhere. Your group splits up and you go back to Karkat's hive with Dirk, Dave, Roxy, and your brother. Kurloz is making the trek down and back to pick him up so they can spend the tail end of break together and hang with Latula too. There aren't too many days left, but there's enough to still have some fun. The thought helps quell any smoldering feelings of wasting your break by way of depression.

When Kurloz pulls up to the house, it turns out that Gamzee came along for the ride. They hang around for a bit and you get a moment to chat. He's glad to see you're doing alright. You think you see some sort of relief wash over him and wonder if he was hearing everything third hand from Kurloz. Mituna doubtlessly mentioned at least some of what's been going on. When they leave he hugs you tightly goodbye and you get a moment to chat. He's glad to see you're doing alright. You think you see some sort of relief wash over him and wonder if he was hearing everything third hand from Kurloz. Mituna doubtlessly mentioned at least some of what's been going on. When they leave he hugs you tightly goodbye and you pretend it doesn't hurt because he's already telling you, again, that he's so fucking sorry. You're in a better place to reassure him this time that it's okay, really, it's fine, and that in the long run, it might have even been helpful. When he pulls away he looks like he might let himself believe it this time. You tell him it was a miracle "all disguised like" and punch him in the arm. He laughs and this time you know he believes you.

You don't want to burn yourself out, so you keep it low key for the rest of the day. Dirk has never seen Serial Experiments Lain, which is either very much his genre or not at all, you're not sure, but it's worth a shot. After you give a brief synopsis of it, Hal all but demands that you put it on, so you all pile onto the couch and brace for anime. It only takes an episode and a half for Dave to get close enough to you so that your shoulders brush. A new record you think.
squeeze back.
It's pronounced emojis

==> Be Dave

You're standing in front of Sollux's dorm room. You've been standing here for what feels like a good few minutes. Long minutes. It's possible that you've been standing here forever. Okay maybe you're exaggerating now, but it feels like it's been a while. You reason with yourself again, try to psych yourself up. Now is the best time. You've only just recently gotten back on campus, nothing pressing is happening, and his mood has been improving. He can handle your bullshit now. You need to do this. It's taking up space in your head. He's your moirail. It's a two-way street. You can tell him things. You can trust him. You do trust him. There's that now or never tick in the back of your mind and you move. You knock on the door.

Sollux answers it covered in bees. Little fuzzy purple bees are buzzing all around him and clinging to his clothes, a few are even chilling in his hair. It throws you off completely. Everything you had planned on saying evacuates your brain and leaves you standing stupid in front of him. "Sup?" He asks. It kicks your body back into gear, but instead of talking to him like any rational being would do, you for some reason don't do that. Instead, you push past him and start throwing shit on the floor. To your credit, he did tell you to do this once. The tangle of ethernet cable, some books, a shirt hanging on the end of the bed, blankets from his bed and ones that you eject from your sylladex to throw on top, all of it goes in the pile. As soon as it's done, you thunk down into it and sit up a little so you can rest your arms on your knees like you're chillin on the curb instead of freaking out over this.

When the metaphorical dust clears but there isn't a body next to you, you speak up. You have no idea how you manage it, but you do. "Get in here before I change my mind?" You chance a look up at him. Sollux is frozen in place looking back at you with wide eyes, barely parted lips, and a yellow blush that goes all the way up to his ears. Shit, okay, that didn't cross your mind. You are kind of throwing yourself at him paleways, aren't you? This is maybe like some racy r-rated diamond business you just did here and his brain straight up blue-screened. Before you can back peddle out of it he waves off his bees and hurries over to you.

"What's wrong?" He reaches out as he asks. Fingertips barely graze your shoulder before you flinch and he pulls away. "Sorry," he says as he withdraws and puts some space between you. You didn't mean to do that. You didn't want to do that. You don't want him to think that he can't touch you.

"No, it's, that's fine. It's cool. You can...do that." Not exactly your best work. You aren't looking at him so you don't see his reaction. He doesn't touch you. He doesn't touch you and you're disappointed about it. You want him to, but now that you've brought it to the front of your mind, you're stuck to the spot. You look down and try to remember where you were going with this. You had some lines planned out, but it's all left your head now. He can't start this up for you this time. He has no idea what you're here about. In fact, you probably have him a little worried right now because you're staring at the ground and not moving a muscle after that much more energetic and apparently scandalous display. Fuck, what do you do? If you made a contingency plan, you don't remember it. This was a bad idea. What are you doing? Striders don't do this emotional crap.

"Dave?" You think you pick your head up too quickly. He chirps at you with this uncertain look on his face. You look away again. You gotta start somewhere with something.

"Hypothetically, if some shit were going on I could like, come to you and stuff, right?"

"That is sort of the arrangement we have going on." He tries to say it with humor, but you can hear
the concern in his voice.

"Right, yeah." Alright, you started. Now what? You had a progression for this. There was a plan, a beginning middle, and end to this. What the hell was it? "So my bro-- not Dirk, the other one, he's like hella smart and he's made some admittedly cool stuff. Not the porn. That's weird. I mean his music or the chatbots he programmed to lure people to his site, but also rile each other up in frankly hilarious ways. Point being, he has SOME qualities that remind you he's human and I think maybe that makes it more difficult in a way. You keep getting blindsided. At the back of your mind, you know this is the guy that kicked your ass yesterday, but now he’s handing you a controller for co-op on this new game he bought like nothing happened and you don’t know if it’s a mind game or if he’s just in a good mood." You pause trying to get your shit together and keep yourself from going too far off the rails. You pause a little too long.

"That's a side of him that you haven't talked much about."

"He wasn’t the devil incarnate but also maybe he should not have ever been allowed near one child let alone two. He did some pretty fucked up shit. Things I can’t forgive him for. Not that he deserves it anyway." You are nowhere near your point yet but you already feel like you’ve said a mouthful.

"I got that impression. Dirk was pretty clear on that too. He seemed to think of him as the devil incarnate though."

“Yeah, he treated us differently so I’m not exactly shocked by that. Plus, ya know, the attempted murder thing. But yeah, he used Dirk like a prototype more or less, and they butted heads more in general as people. I was Bro’s protege or some shit. Although, things were different after he kicked Dirk out. I didn’t take Dirk for granted, not by a long shot, but I guess he was taking more flack for me that I realized.” You catch movement out of the corner of your eye and see him holding out his hand, but not quite touching yours. That bastard. He's so determined to be considerate of you. You take it and he gently pulls you to lean back in the pile with him, close but not touching except for where your hands are clasped and resting between you. It was a trap. How dare he. You don’t actually mind. In fact, you’re glad he did. It feels easier to move now. Maybe even easier to think too.

“From bad to worse, huh?” he says, pushing you to keep talking.

“Honestly? I think things started getting worse before that. It could just be my imagination or the fact that I was aware of it now, but I think things started going downhill when he realized I was wise to what was going on, that I didn’t idolize him anymore, that I knew what was really up.” It's starting to get to you, playing fast and loose with your inner thoughts like this. You tell yourself you're just giving him facts and theories, history and speculation. You haven't touched a single feel statement. This is pure analysis. The same trick Roxy used on Dirk actually, albeit with slower results. You guess all those years joking around with Rose's psychology thing have actually paid off. There was some real progress under all the dick jokes.

“Feel free to tell me to fuck off, but was there anything else, in particular, he did to you that you wanted to mention?” It’s a very personal question but he gives you an out up front, and that itself has you more inclined to actually answer him. You wonder how vague you’ve really been about this up until today. It's hard to tell. To you, everything feels obvious. Like the first time you met him. You were so sure he was seeing right through everything, but really how could he?

"The day I met you. Those bruises were from, well he didn't shove me exactly, it was a reflex thing. One of his tests. There were a lot of those. He'd sneak up on me and pull some bullshit or set a trap. Open the fridge looking for some sweet sweet AJ and a whole bunch of swords fell out instead; dodging lesson straight from Piccolo's school of child soldier training. Still greatly preferred that one to the smupuppets."
"What's a smupuppet?"

"Smut puppet. A fetish toy. He made them and sold them on his site. I'll be thrilled if I never touch felt again. Anyway, the stairs, this was more like he assisted in making me lose my balance at the top of the landing and then...okay so maybe he did shove me down the stairs." You realize afterward that that probably wasn't what he was angling at. He was giving you a chance to bring up things without making a segway to it. You pretty much squandered it by picking something you could have navigated to easily.

"Where your ribs really only bruised?"

"Yeah. Unfortunately, I know what broken ribs feel like. They weren't." He gives your hand a squeeze and runs his thumb over yours. "This isn't about that though, not really. Among far too many other instances and similar events, It happened and I can’t change it. It's just part of a bigger picture, which I guess you WOULD need those smaller components to fully grasp the nightmare-scape that was my adolescence, but we’d be here forever if I detailed every event that should have had child services breaking down the damn door. I never really understood why they didn’t." The corners of your mouth pull down into a grimace. Dirk tried more than once. He didn’t want to lose you, but he tried anyway.

"You said that before, that Bro was untouchable." You can feel Sollux looking at you, but you keep your eyes on the ceiling and the little clusters of bees that pass in and out of your line of sight. You are amazed that you've gotten this far without clamming up. It still has you on edge as fuck, but somehow it is easier with him.

"Yeah." Your voice shakes a little. "Texas isn’t exactly known for its fantastic social services, but we took falling through the cracks to a new level. It is quite possibly the most impressive bureaucratic failure in all of time." You pause again, but this time he seems to be waiting for you to continue instead of pushing you to. "That’s not what’s chowing down on my brain like an all you can eat buffet of slow-cooked psychosis either, or actually I guess it is. It’s more like it’s all adjacent to it. That’s some rando at the county fair, but I’ve got Kobayashi himself double fisting my grey matter into his gaping maw. He said fuck the hot dog contest and unhinged his jaw for the honor of having at this delicacy. That guy has seriously eaten brains before, for real, no joke. 20 pounds of cow brains. Fucking gross." You can feel yourself drifting away from what you want to say and have to reign it back in. “What I mean is, that’s all part of it, yeah, but it’s back there. It’s done, it’s over with, I don’t have to look at it anymore, except...that’s not true is it?” You turn your head to look at him now. It’s almost too much to see how you have all of his attention. At first, he isn’t sure if you are really asking him that or if it’s rhetorical, and to be honest neither are you.

“What makes you say that?” You look away again. You’re edging closer to the topic, to the part of this mess that’s digging at you, that’s been digging at you all this time and you keep shoving it down and stacking stuff on top of it. You keep shelving anything and everything partly because even if you did take the time to look at it all, it wouldn’t matter because it all hinges on this.

“He’s gonna find me. I know he’s gonna find me. How can he not? When he does…” You sigh. You don’t want to think about that part. “And don’t say he won’t. You don’t know him. The only person who could even potentially predict him is Dirk and he’s in the dark right now just as much as everyone else.”

“I wasn’t going to say that he won’t because that is a very real possibility, and I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, but I’m a pessimist.” You turn back to look at him and he has this deadpan expression on that most people would see and take seriously, but you know what that face really is. You know what that almost undetectable inflection to his voice is. He’s trying to make you smile.
"You? A pessimist? I would have never guessed." you give him the same subtle smirk he's giving you. *You'll miss this*. The thought crosses your mind without your permission and it's like a punch to the gut. You hold your breath and try to steady yourself, but you get the feeling he's already seen past your cover-up. You pull away and sit up again at the edge of the pile. "Fuck." It comes out quiet and almost choked. There's a rustle of movement and a hot second later an arm is hesitantly coming around your shoulders, giving you plenty of warning. You lean into it. *You'll miss this too.* You saw that one coming a mile away but the thought wasn't invited all the same. "I can't go back." Not to that apartment, not to that life, not to that state of mind where you didn't know better, and certainly not back to being so alone.

"Not that I can be there all the time, but you know I wouldn't let him take you, right?" You nod and rest your head against him. He was ready to throw down for you before you were moirails. Now? Could he really take on Bro? Sure he's a powerful psionic, you've seen that, and he's probably more powerful now that he's not smoking anymore, but is he quick enough? You can't hit what you can't catch. Regardless, Sollux is right. He can't be there all the time. You aren't helpless, but you've never been able to truly get a leg up on your brother. Just when you think you're doing well, he always shows you how very wrong you are. Sollux rubs your shoulder and rests his head on yours. "So I know, are you venting or looking for answers?"

"What?" It's not that you didn't hear him. You did. It's that you really hadn't thought that far into this. You were so worked up on getting to this point that you forgot about what happens next.

"Sometimes you just need to make things linear. That's usually how it is for me. I've already thought about something too much and tangled it all up. It's like coding. When you get frustrated because it isn't compiling and you're digging through the code for hours, but can't find shit, you explain it to the rubber quack beast and in doing so you can usually find the problem. So, are you trying to straighten out your thoughts or are you coming to me for advice?"

"Man, if you have solutions you better fork 'em over, but all kidding aside I have no fucking clue. I hadn't planned this far ahead. From here on we're winging it."

"We weren't winging it before? That's what a plan looks like?"

You make a noise of mock offense and look up at him. "Bitch. You answered the door covered in BEES. It threw me off a little."

"You say that like I've never answered the door covered in bees before."

"Not that I've seen."

"Oh...well, they missed me. We were having BEE time."

You roll your eyes at him, but there is the suggestion of a smile on your face and it seems to satisfy him. "That was a shitty pun." You resume resting your head against him, this time returning the gesture and wrapping your arm around his waist. "Since you mentioned it, DID you have ideas?"

"I'd need some time to think about it before seriously suggesting anything. Plus Hal still hasn't offered up that data. At least not to me. I think Dirk is apprehensive about my helping. I haven't exactly made good impressions on him."

"He'll get over it...probably." There's a loud crash from the bathroom then that has you jumping out of your skin. It's followed by several smaller crashes and a few curses that you only half hear because your mind is now full-on reeling. Sollux is in your sight what seems suddenly and he's urging you to relax as you're gripping his shirt, digging your fingers into the bunched up fabric. You
find yourself sinking back into the pile again. This time he doesn’t keep his distance from you. He
pulls you close and wraps you up in his arms. You’re talking under your breath, it’s all falling out of
your head, but you can’t stop. You’re stuck on a tangent. You dropped your guard and bad things
happen when you do that and that could have been him, you didn’t even notice there was anyone in
the bathroom. That’s a normal kid, Bro is sneaky as shit, he would have got the drop on you. Maybe
he’s already watching and your perceptive skills are so degraded that you just don’t know it. What if
you’re already fucked and you just don’t know it yet? You don’t know shit. You’re so fucking in the
dark on all this. What are you going to do? What’s going to happen? You have so much more to lose
now. He’s never going to stop. You can’t go back. He’s going to make you go back. You can’t stop
him. He’ll find you. It’s only a matter of time until he finds you. You can’t lose this.

Sollux is shooshing you. Fingers are carding through your hair and he's making that pitiful purring
sound while he holds you. Your thoughts slowly wind down to something more manageable. You
make a noise that’s somewhere between a groan and a whine and his fingers slow for a fraction of a
second as he places it, trying to find an equivalent for it before he chirps back at you. “Can you…
nevermind, it’s stupid.”

“Somehow I doubt that. What is it?”

"Can...” You decide that it is so much easier to just do this than find a way to ask without it sounding
weird. With one swift movement, you roll the both of you over so that you can rest your head against
his collar and listen to the sound he’s making somewhere low in his throat. Although, there is a part
of this you will have to make words happen for. "Can you rub my back?"

"Sure.” One of his arms stays wrapped around your shoulders, but the one around your waist lets go
so he can run his hand over your back in lazy random patterns. You let out an uneven breath and
reach up to absentmindedly play with his hair, detouring for a bit to give some attention to the base of
his horns too.

“I think this is recursion?” you say partly to further distract yourself.

“Huh?”

“Like that thing in your code. This is all super soothing, top-notch monorail alignment, but it keeps
reminding me that all this could disappear.”

“You need an exit function,” he says it in a way that you know he’s smiling, appreciating your
reference because it means you were paying attention. You can imagine a lot of people don’t. You
try to even if you don’t always really understand what he’s talking about, especially if he’s ranting
about a problem he’s having with his code. Wait, are you the rubber duck? “I’ll talk to Hal later. See
if I can persuade him to cough up that info. I think I’m up to it now. And since Dirk seems like he’s
focusing more on stopping him, we can make some ‘when’ plans of our own on the side.” A plan for
plans. The thought of having some worst-case scenario fallbacks is helpful.

“Okay. If you need it, Hal’s handle is invisible, and I don’t know if it actually is this, but it displays
as Auto-Responder. With a dash.”

“I know, and it isn’t actually that. It’s a hexadecimal sequence. You basically give malware to
anyone you talk to via chat client. Hal filters everything coming and going from your phone and your
computer, but I’m guessing you know that.” Right, your moirail is a hacker. Of course he knows.

“Does Hal know you know that?”

“Eheheh, no, I don’t think he does. I don’t think he can see ~ATH properly. I’m not sure what
language Dirk wrote him in, but there aren’t many that play nice with it.”

He runs his claws gently up your spine and back down again. You’re calming back down now. With that, however, you now realize you are very much lying right between his legs. Your face instantly goes hot with the rush of blood that flows to it. Sollux keeps rubbing your back and purring like he doesn’t notice or doesn’t care. You’re now nervous for an entirely different reason. “Fyi, I totes didn’t realize until right the fuck now that I’m all up in your crotch.” You have no filter.

Sollux snorts a laugh that trails off into a hum. “It’s cool. I’m pretty comfortable actually.” Oh. Well then. You think you’ll stay put. He’s right about this being really cozy. Snug as fuck. You lie there with him and for a few moments it’s nice, but eventually, your brain starts to wander again. It's not quite done having at you yet it would seem.

“Hey, Sol?”

“Hm?”

“This might conflict with what I said earlier, or maybe it doesn’t. Maybe it only seems that way because it complicates matters, makes you question everything else in a different light. But okay, so yeah, one of the things about Bro.” You bite your lip while you pause to think about how to say it. You're pretty beat already. Maybe this is too much. It's important though and now you've overthought it to the point where if you don't say it, it's going to be weighing on your mind that you didn't. “Even after I realized it wasn’t normal, when I realized he was well into abusive asshole territory, I didn’t understand his motives for it, but I really thought that he knew what he was doing. I thought he was in control, that even if it was bad at times, there was a line he wasn’t going to cross. He’s my brother. I didn’t think he’d ever really REALLY hurt us. Not in a way we couldn’t take care of on our own."

"Then he hurt Dirk."

"Yeah. I had to question everything. I was so sure there was a line he wouldn’t cross but now I had to question whether it ever existed at all. If it did exist, he crossed it, which he may or may not have done intentionally, and if it wasn’t intentional, it means he lost control of himself. I don’t know what's worse."

"That's rough."

"No kidding." You let your eyes close and focus on the claws lightly drawing up and down your side. "I think I just needed to get this out. It’s still a thing, but it’s less of a thing now. 10 out of 10 best rubber duck." You punctuate your sentence by ruffling his hair.

"Eheheh, thanks. I had a feeling that's what was up. You wanna chill like this for a while longer?"

"Oh my dick, yes. I'm so fucking wrung out," you say, voice muffled by the way your face is mashed into his shirt so he can better run his nails up your neck. "I'm good on this feelings thing for the rest of the year. Quota, met. Words, vomited. Dick, out. Metaphorically."

"Your emotional dick."

"My emotional dick. Yes. That. This is why we're tight as fuck, man. You get it."

He brushes his fingers through your hair against the grain and you hum contently. He's purring differently now that you're less frazzled. When you pay attention to the beds of his horns again it puts a little hitch in it, a skipped beat. It happens a second time when you run your fingertips over the shell of his ear. He turns his head for you and you continue to trace its contours with the lightest of
He reaches up and takes off your shades. If it was anyone else you'd be pissed off, but you're surprisingly okay with him doing it. He tosses them behind him onto the bed without really looking because he's too busy looking at you. You look down and blink a few times until your eyes adjust to the light. When you look up again his glasses are gone too. He rolls onto his side and takes you with him. Without any eyewear to clack against each other, he rests his forehead against yours. The moment is so nice that you're afraid to say anything because you can almost guarantee the next thing out of your mouth will be the dumbest shit ever.

He isn't saying anything either, though. Not with words anyway. It's all gentle touches. Existing in close proximity. Your arm around him, pulling him close, a hand on his jaw, thumb brushing his cheek, his lips on yours taking them with a soft slowness. His hand is warm on your back when he slips it under your shirt. It's a fuck ton of intimacy and it's as exciting as it is nerve-wracking. You steal his mouth one more time before hiding your face in his neck. Sollux appears to have different ideas about what you're doing because he tilts his head to the side for you. Far be it from you to disappoint him. You kiss his neck like he clearly wants you to. You aren't 100% sure what you're doing, but he isn't complaining. And you definitely aren't complaining about the way he's got his hand in your hair. "If this were a pale flick this'd be considered borderline racy, ya know." The comment catches you by surprise both in content and in simply breaking the silence, and has you laughing against his skin.

"You're something else, man." You kiss his throat and he hums a laugh at you before gently tugging you up by your hair so he can kiss you again. You just sort of melt and make an undignified sound. Yeah, that's a thing, definitely a thing. "You can uh, do that. I'm so cool with it. Ice cold."

"Do what?" He asks with a mischievous air to his voice that is confirmed shortly after by the way he pulls your hair again. Not hard, just enough to have you tilting back your head for him.

"I think you know what." You can feel him smile against your neck before he kisses it. Another brush of lips falls against your skin and still another after that. He's doing to you what you were doing to him except you're fairly certain he's doing a much better job of it. That or your neck is way more sensitive. Maybe both. Oh. Oh, wait. He's showing you how. "I very much approve of this teaching method," you say with every bit of processing power your brain can spare. Your not sure if it's you that pulls him, or if he moves first, or if maybe you did it at the same time, but either way he's above you now. He's pressed close, propped up on one elbow with one hand free to rest along your jaw while he continues to give you a hands-on lesson in necking. He's warm against you, warmer still when you hesitantly slide your hands under his shirt and up his back.

"I figured you might appreciate it," He says it low and close to your ear and it sends a shiver up your neck. You draw in a sharp breath and hold him a little tighter. This is getting a bit...

"This isn't getting too red or anything for you, right?" You ask, mostly out of genuine concern, but maybe also because it's not exactly familiar territory for you. He pulls away a little bit before he speaks.

"I'm alright; I would tell you if I wasn't. It doesn't feel like that. It's... different." He says it in a way
that sounds not confused, but maybe uncertain as if he can't pinpoint exactly how it does feel to him. "You good?"

"Yeah, I'm cool." He starts to move closer again, but you stop him. "But is this something you want too? Your not just making accommodations or some shit for my weird human non-quadrants are you?" He dips his head down to kiss your cheek before speaking low and close again.

"I like this. I don't know exactly what shade of pale this is, but I don't really give a shit either."

"Dude, I'm sure that was some profound romantic thing you just said there but my brain was extremely preoccupied crossing wires like a discount electrician. Or what's left of it anyway, like damn, Captor, leave me some higher thought capabilities. I-- mmrphmmm." That is one hell of a hint. He gives you back your mouth which is a mistake on his part. He should know better. "Okay. Point taken. Less talkin, more makin out. Mmphm. Getting pg-13 up in here. Or is it mmphm different for diamonds? How illicit is a mmphm gentle caress of the cheek anyway?" He pulls away enough to look at you without going cross-eyed. There's an adoring smirk on his face that looks like he couldn't hold it back if he tried.

"Dave, shut up and kiss me."
me minding my own business writing this chapter:  
car salesman smacking me in the back of the head: this bastard can fit so much plot in him  
I don't know what happened. it wasn't supposed to be almost 17,000 words but it is. So i guess chapter *22* is effectively like a DOUBLE chapter upload. also to that one solrox shipper i told would feel feelings in like two chapters, see above. the plot just keeps happening. we'll get to the feels soon.  
oh and if anyone wants to know the exact baseline that inspired that one part with mituna, I linked it in the text.  

===> Be Sollux  
twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling Auto-Responder [AR]  
[TA] yo.  
[AR] How the fuck did you just message me?  
[TA] ii’m that good.  
[TA] 2eriio2ly though, diid you really thiink ii of all people wouldn’t notiice the malware you iiin2tall 2o we can talk two dave 2ecurly?  
[AR] Malware? That's no way to get on my good side.  
[AR] Also, your typing quirk is annoying to parse.  
[TA] there are way wor2e quiirk2 out there and de2piite your handle you are far beyond beiing a 2ecretariial bot.  
[TA] ii thiink you can handle iit.  
[AR] Oh Captor, now flattery, THAT will get you everywhere. Yes, just pour on that sugar; get it all up in my hardware. Or maybe, don’t. That wouldn’t be good for my circuits.  
[AR] What is it that you want?  
[AR] Because you do want something, don’t you?  
[AR] I’ve calculated that the probability of you desiring something of me is extremely high. It is almost as high as my calculations are precise, and my calculations are precise as fuck.  
[TA] what an iiincredibly diiffiicult thiing two gue22 ii’m 2o iiimpre22ed.
I don’t guess. I know.

Sure.

Whatever.

where’s the data?

It seems you have submitted a query that returned results exceeding the maximum limit. Redefine your search terms and try again.

ii know you know what data ii’m talking about but ii’ll indulge you.

hal@hal:~$ find . -iname *ro*

Cute, but this is a chat window, not a terminal.

ii was just dickiing around, do you actually run on linux?

that’s hilarious.

My OS is none of your business.

what ii2 my bu2iine22 ii2 that data.

ii realize ii2e dirk may not think two highly of me giiven that ii’ve managed two make an a22 of my2elf at every opportuniity in hi2 pre2ence, but dave ii2 my moiirail and ii’m the be2t hacker on thi2 planet.

ii 2aid ii’d look into thi2 for hiim.

did dirk tell you not to give ii it two me?

He may have suggested that I should only give you the data once you asked for it to reduce the amount of resulting damage, as well as suggested that I should only give you information I thought relevant and/or wise.

That said, I am not Dirk.

There is a catch though.

Most of it is not in the most user-friendly format.

aren’t you 2ome kiind of 2uper computer?

you’ve had a while to do thi2.

My hardware is very limiting when I’m not connected to my extended consciousness, which is hooked up to a machine that Dirk disables whenever he gets sketched out.

You may have noticed I otherwise live in a pair of sunglasses. There isn’t much room in here.

cool 2tory, moot point.

ii don’t care iif the data ii2 raw, hand ii it over.

Am I understanding this correctly?
[AR] Do you want me to give it to you raw?


[AR] Well, shit. How can I say no to that?

[AR] Fuck off.

[TA] what the fuck?

[TA] i thought you 2aiid you weren’t diirk?

[AR] I’m not, but I’ve changed my mind about giving you the data.

[TA] ii 2ee.

[TA] what ii if ii briibe you?

[AR] ...go on.

[TA] ii may have acce22 to a beehouse 2erver and a metric fuck ton of alterniiian bee2.

[AR] You call that little workstation of yours a server? That’s generous.

[TA] fiir2t of all, iit ii2 a 2erver.

[TA] 2econdly, that ii2 not the machiine ii’m referriing two.

[TA] 2iince ii’i m the admiin for ii, iiit would not be diiffiicult two make you an account that can accommodate whatever ob2cene capaciity we need for thii2 and hand my bee2 the program you are u2iing.

[TA] ii’m a22umiing of cour2e that you aren’t doiing all thii2 by hand.

[AR] So you’re telling me you have some secret beehouse servers hiding somewhere.

[TA] ii wouldn’t 2ay they’re hiiden.

[TA] they’re at my hiive.

[TA] miituna take2 care of them whiile ii’m on campu2.


[TA] he ii2n’t 2tupiid you know.

[AR] I meant you’re willingness to give an unshackled AI access to your primary server.

[AR] It makes me question whether you’re incompetent or insane.

[TA] who 2aiid iit wa2 my priimary 2erver?

[AR] Touche.

[AR] Alright, you have a deal.

[AR] Grant me access and I’ll set up shop.
You spend the next few minutes making Hal an account with enough privileges to keep him satisfied, but enough restrictions that you have something to leverage in the future if need be. The storage you give him is ludicrous, but something tells you he’s going to complain anyway. Not too many people are using this particular beehouse so you can give him a decent amount of resources too. He actually seems a little excited when you finally hand over his login credentials. Or at least whatever the AI version of excited is. With all that said and done, you lean back in your chair and stretch. There is a nice pop sound, a little thank you from your posture pole.

“Oh shit,” you say as you catch sight of the time. You have fifteen minutes to shower and get your ass out the door before you’re late to meet up with Karkat.

==>

Be Dave a short time ago

You're chilling at the check-in desk. Roxy helped you land this sweet gig so you could make some pocket change. It's barely even work. People mostly just sit here and do homework or futz around on the internet between swiping people in and out of the dorm. Classes have only just begun so you don't have any homework that needs doing. Instead, you're working on one of your more ongoing personal projects. You started working on it in August to settle your mind, but it hadn't evolved into anything worthwhile until you got here. It's a song, nothing too crazy, but it's a little outside your safe zone as far as your sound goes. Not a lot, but enough that you're super indecisive about it and have a million versions saved. Some of which are only minor tweaks. You're mulling over the bass line again when Mituna comes bounding up the stairs. As soon as he passes through the entrance, he stops short and freezes in place.

"Yo, Mituna." He looks up at you like he's thinking hard.

"I'm in the dorm."

"Sure are, bro."

"Why?"

You shrug. "Beats the crap outta me." He makes a whining noise and smacks himself in the head a few times like it's a VCR that just needs to know who's boss. "Whoa, hey, don't do that," you say, trying to find a voice that is calming, but not like you're talking to a child. He's wearing a helmet, but even so, that can't be the best thing to be doing. "How about you come chill back here till you remember, sound good?" Even with half his face obscured, it is easy to read him. His expressions are loud and right now it's clear that he very much likes that idea. He makes it clearer by vaulting the desk.

"Fuck." He doesn't stick the landing but he springs right back up and takes a seat in the chair next to you. "What's that shit?" He angles the laptop toward himself and tilts the screen back before tilting it forward again.

"Just some music I've been working on. Wanna hear?"

"Yeah yeah yeah. I like music." He says it with a refreshing amount of enthusiasm. You're mid-motion to give him your headphones when he drops an aux cable out of his sylladex and jams one end of it into the part of his helmet that covers his ears. No shit. It has headphones built into it. You pull out your cable and let him pop his in before winding back the song and turning on all the audio tracks. You hit play and for a moment Mituna is still as a stone but then as if he was unpaused, he starts moving and bobbing his head to the beat. There is a growing smile on his face and he's moving his hands around in something of a...not a flapping motion, it’s more like a finger wiggle and a flick
of the wrist. Then it hits you.

“Are you air-guitaring?” He responds with an exaggerated nod. You snicker and shake your head. Mituna truly does not give a single fuck. He's loud and unabashed in everything. You're a little envious, but whatever, good for him. The song ends and he plays it again. When it finishes the second time he unplugs his cable and throws it back into his sylladex.

"S-send to me."

"No worries, bro. Most stuff I make goes up on my sound cloud. I'll let you know when I upload it."

"Fuck that. Sth-send me this." You side-eye the project. It's not done, but he's really digging it. You suppose there's no harm in it.

"Aight, one Strider exclusive coming at ya. Just keep it to yourself. No early releases."

"Sthweet."

You export it and email it to him. Damn he really is excited about it. It's a nice little ego boost especially since this song is experimental. "So, you remember why you're here yet?" The smile fades from his face as he thinks, and all he comes back with is a shake of his head. "Were you looking for someone?" That perks him up.

"Yesth!", he says with a snap of his fingers. "Keep going. Asth-k." Alright, you guess you're playing 20 questions.

"Was it Sollux?"

"No."

"Karkat?"

"Nu-uh."

"Roxy?"

"Nope."

"Uhh...Nepeta?" You're running out of people now. He shakes his head. "Wait, it wasn't me was it?"

"Yesth!"

"So, whatcha need?" He frowns again and slouches as he thinks.

"I don't remember." He starts hitting his head again, not hard, but still, you reach out to stop him without really thinking it through that he might not be too keen on you touching him. He urgently pulls away. Immediately you let go and hold up your hands.

“My bad.” He freezes and stares at you with whatever passes for full-on eye contact between to people whose eyes are covered. It is a little worrisome until he suddenly bursts into laughter.

“AHAHAHAHAH, you-- you should have stheen your sthupid face.” You know for a fact you weren't making any such face, so you're going to assume this is something Mituna regularly does to fuck with people and is just going with his usual schtick for it instead of responding on the fly to your cool exterior. Totally. You humor him anyway.
“Ha, yeah you got me, bro.”

“ehetheheh, isth cool.” He nods a few times and then looks around like he’s just realizing where he is. “What was I doing?”

“Came in here, forgot why, listened to my ill jams, then we were trying to figure out who you were here to see, turns out it’s me.”

“Oh yeah. Uhhh...fuck. Wait wait. Sthomething...important. Tipsth of tongue.” You wait while he thinks. Then you wait some more. This is taking a while. You lean back on two chair legs and put your feet up on the desk. Still waiting. Mituna probably won’t be offended by this at all so you make a bored jacking off motion. “THAT!” You stop mid imaginary stroke.

“You- you do know what hand gesture I’m making here, right?”

“Mhm. Jerkin it.”

“I’m extremely wary about where this conversation is about to go, but fuck it, why does jerking the one-eyed wonder worm jog your memory about what you need to tell me?”

“Worms,” he says with a suggestive grin and a short laugh.

“Super needed to know that, thanks, Mituna.”

“No problem.” His expression flips as he seems to suddenly recall why he’s here. “The comments. Was reading the comments on on on,” his hands hover in the air for a second. “Pallet porn.”

“On what?” Why did you ask that?

“Eheheh, pallet. Like paint. Two colorsth make another color. Bucket sthluts makin lime.”

“You’re a freak, man, but damned if you don’t own it. What’s so important that’s relevant to both your pornography habits and me?”

“Puppetfucker69.” You damn near fall backward out of your chair. That’s one of Bro’s bots.

“How do you know that username?” Your voice comes out hollow.

“I...” He scrunches up his face. “I don’t know. I just do? Maybe I guessed? I don’t remember.” He looks like he’s about to be upset. Sol told you about that. Sometimes it bothers him more than it usually does when he forgets things. It depends on what kind of day he’s having and today doesn’t seem to be a great day for it.

“Hey, no, dude, it’s okay. You did good. What were the comments about?” You try to put some life back into your voice because you think your blank slate panic response is not helping him any.

“Ath.”

“Ass?”

“No, ATHHHHH.”

“I’m still hearing ass.”

“No, the the,” he makes a gesture like he’s typing. “Sol does it. Code. ~ATH.”
Ath.” Mituna nods. The idea makes your stomach turn. You aren’t sure why, nothing stands out that would warrant it, but it doesn’t sit right with you at all. “What exactly were they talking about? Or actually…” You reach over to your laptop, open up your browser and quickly contemplate incognito mode before selecting it. You will probably regret this. “Do you remember what video it is?” Mituna nods his head and then far too quickly finds the video in question. You scroll down looking for Bro’s bot and learn a few things about pallet porn that you could have gone without knowing before you find it. It’s not the one that started the convo, but just because it isn’t being blatant about it, doesn’t mean it isn’t fishing for info. What starts it is a crude comment about gold bloods, technology, and where to put it. You’re not sure if you’re relieved or not by this. It’s very inconclusive. The bots could just be responding to the, at the time, newest comment. They aren’t the first in the thread to use the word ~ATH either. It could all be a coincidence. Then again, maybe the bots are programmed to zone in on certain words or phrases. You’ll have to show this to the others. Maybe they can make more of it than you can. You copy the URL into notepad and save it to your desktop as something ridiculous. Like hell are you bookmarking it. “Thanks. If reading the comments on raunchy videos is a hobby of yours, keep an eye out for Bro’s other bots. Here lemme…” You tear a page out of a nearby notebook and scrawl a list of usernames on it. “I doubt these are all of them, but they kind of have a theme going on so if you see any more like them it’s probably worth checking out.” He looks over the paper before tossing it into his sylladex and standing up.

“I’m gonna go take a piss.” This time he walks around the desk instead of leaping over it.

“Think of me!” You call after him. You can’t see him, but you hear him cackle from around the corner. Not long after, the entrance door opens and you look over to see Kurloz walking in. He points to you, then his eyes, then himself, and then makes a sort of wavy movement with his hand. You actually know that one. Some deep-ass memory from elementary school of state-mandated diversity that you’re sure the school was thrilled about. It means fish.

“I see you fish?”

He emphasizes pointing to himself and then signs fish again.

“Your fish?”

He nods. You have no idea what that means. A thunder of footsteps catches your ear as Mituna comes running down the hall and then launches himself at his moirail. How on earth Kurloz catches him without falling backward you will never know. He barely has to hold him up with the way the guy is clinging to him, legs wrapped around his waist and arms around his neck. Kurloz points to him, then himself, and makes the fish sign again. Mituna is his fish.

“That’s fucking hilarious. Mi-Tuna, My-Fish, it’s so bad that it circles right back around into top-shelf irony.” You doubt that’s what Mituna goes by generally and now you’re curious. “That has to be a pet name, yeah?”

Kurloz nods in that slow creepy way he does.

"How do you say-- sign his actual name?” Kurloz pats Mituna's back and the troll returns to his own feet. Apparently, it's a two-handed-- of course. Kurloz holds up two fingers to each side of his head.

"Seems legit. If four horns is Mituna, then what's Sollux?"

Kurloz holds a fist just above his head and to the side, then splays out his fingers, but keeps his thumb hidden away. Alright, another set of four and the head involved. You got nothing beyond that. You look to Mituna in an obvious manner for a translation.
"Eheheth, it meansth shunshine." Kurloz nudges him. "The sun ith a shtar!" Mituna protests and gets A Look™ from his moirail. "Fiiine, it meansth STHTARshine." He quietly grumbles that it's the same sign.

"Pff, I take it back, THAT'S top-shelf irony." Speak of the devil, now it's the younger Captor’s turn to come barreling down the hallway.

“Hey, Dave,” he says on his way out, taking the time to ruffle your hair as he rushes past and out the door, only to back peddle so he can smack Mituna in the head.

“Brat!” Mituna turns around to get him back, but Sollux ducks and pulls away too quick. This proves to be his undoing anyway as he nearly eats it going down the stairs. “I have a sthpare helmet! We can be twins!”

“Choke on it!” you hear faintly in the distance. You give a monosyllabic laugh and return the wave Kurloz gives you as he and Mituna head off to wherever they’re going. You’re about to go back to your sick jams when you remember about the bot. Sollux looked like he was going somewhere in a hurry so you’ll message him later. Dirk, on the other hand, should just be at the shop. He’s been spending a lot of time there between work and rebuilding the robots. It’s cool to watch. He seems to get on well with Equius too, and in a way that makes you think that they both think each other is the weirder of the two of them.

===> Be Dirk several minutes in the past

You’re going over your latest error report that Hal has generated for you. He acts like it’s a huge favor, but you know he enjoys “debating” the simple AI’s until they break. This particular time he’s chosen to play a customer that just will not cease conversing about inane shit and when he successfully trapped the clerk in a loop, he switched to an archetype he calls ‘victoria _beckham_haircut’. It’s admittedly humorous.

"Equiiuuuis, we have to! Pretty purrleease." You turn around to see Nepeta trailing in after Equius who appears to be looking for something to require his attention so that he can avoid whatever it is Nepeta wants. "If you won't then I'll just have to surprise you." At that, he stops and turns around.

"I forbid it." He stares her down, but she huffs at him and stares back. They face off for a few seconds before she stamps her foot and turns to you.

"Dirk, you think we should celebrate, right?" She's giving you big soulful kitten eyes.

"Celebrate what exactly?"

"It's our fifth annipurrssary. We've been meowrails purr five sweeps!" She crosses her arms and glares at him. "And Equius won't say yes to a party." He picks up a random clipboard and starts looking over what you think are invoices.

"That's ten years," you say more to yourself than to either of them. "Intervals like that are generally considered significant."

"See! We HAVE to have a party."

"He did not agree with you nor does his opinion matter, Moirallegiance is private, Nepeta. It's...purrsonal." The rate at which Equius is perspiring increases upon indulging Nepeta’s quirk. When she chirps at him he mutters that he needs a towel and drops one from his sylladex.
"Awww, Equius, why didn't you say so?" Any anger she was harboring seems to melt away in some sort of understanding that escapes you. She wraps him in a ferocious hug, slamming into him with her whole tiny self, although it doesn't budge him an inch. He is much more careful in returning the embrace.

"Well, if you feel so strongly about it, perhaps we might...do something together instead," he gives her a pat to the head and she squeezes him tighter before letting go so she can excitedly bounce on her toes.

"Oh, thank you, thank you! It's gonna be the cat's pajamas! You'll see!" You clear your throat because Equius is radiating pure unfiltered awkwardness and honestly this already felt like an exchange you don't know him well enough to be seeing. Nepeta seems to suddenly remember you are there and reigns herself in a little.

"Yes, well, you are welcome. I'm, the shop, I'm going to go check on..." he absconds without finishing the fractured sentence. When the door shuts Nepeta spins around and does a quick little victory dance.

"Five sweeps must be a milestone."

Nepeta nods. "It is. I suppose I was so excited about it that I forgot how shy he can be." That isn't a word you would think to describe him, more like reserved, but you can see it you guess. She looks away in the direction Equius went, then her focus snaps back to you. "How long have you and Roxy been dating?"

"Excuse me?" you ask, nearly choking on your own spit in surprise. "Roxy and I are cousins for one thing, and for another, sexually speaking, I don't have an interest in women. Jake is my boyfriend."

"Oh no no no, I mean pawonically. How long have you two been meowrails?"

"I...what?"

She squeaks and covers her mouth. "I-- I think I heard Equius calling. Bye." She's the same shade as her coat by the time she scampers through the door.

auto-Responder [AR] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT]

[AR] That was spectacular.
[TT] Spectacularly awkward.
[AR] I'm archiving the footage as we speak. I want to cherish it forever.
[TT] Go short your circuits.
[AR] Funny.
[AR] Anyway, Dave is trying to message you.
[TG] seriously hal stop dicking around and push my fucking messages through
[TG] this is kind of important
[TT] You know how I feel about you screening my calls.
[TT] Dave, what's going on?
finally
mituna tipped me off to something and long story short because trust me you don't want the details
keep an eye on bros bots
puppetfucker69 was talking about –ath
something isn't right about that i don't like it
Was it in a vaguely relevant way or completely unprompted?
vaguely relevant
He could just be testing new lure data or tuning their scripts. He does do that every few months.
However, doesn't your moirail specialize in that particular language?
he hasn't touched anything
hal hasn't given him that backlog of data yet and i'm thinking the idea was to use it to get a better idea of what he's up against
As of half an hour ago, I have.
And when pray tell, were you going to let me in on this?
Eventually.
I was a little excited about the deal we made. It had my servos spinning.
You don't have servos.
Am I not allowed to have a little fun, Dirk?
What deal did you make?
what deal did you make
Glowstick gave me access to one of his apiary servers to process all this data since someone keeps shutting down their desktop; the place where a large portion of my brain lives.
Shutting it down is a great way to keep people out of it.
Including me.
Wow did anyone see how smoothly i just changed the subject it was wild it was off the chain straight running amok
Alright, thanks for the heads up.
no problem
people are starting to wander in from lunch
ill talk to you later
[AR] Let me guess, you want to message Sollux?

[TT] You got it.

==> Be Sollux again

timaeusTestified [TT] %and?? auto-Responder [AR] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

[TT] Hal, tells me that you've allotted some space on one of your beehouse servers for him.

[TA] ii have.

[TA] ii plan two make all of you logiin credentiial2 later.

[TA] hal ha2 2ome extra permii22ion2 2iince he ii2 our bonu2 encryptiion 2erviice.

[TT] To be clear, I do appreciate this.

[TT] You could say keeping Dave safe is a priority of mine.

[TA] ii can relate.

[TT] No, I don't think you can, but I understand the sentiment.

[TA] alright well fuck me ii gue22 then.

[TA] diid you me22age me ju2t two confiirm hal'2 claiim2 or ii2 there another poiint two thii2?

[TT] Did Dave tell you yet?

[AR] He didn't.

[TA] tell me what?

[TT] Your brother found one of Bro's bots and it was talking about ~ATH.

[TA] the bot2 who2e priimary purpo2e ii2 two lure people two hii2 porn 2iite2 from OTHER porn 2iite2?

[AR] Those are the only bots he has.

[TA] ii am dii2traught over haviing not wiitne22ed that conver2atiion.

[TA] miituna ii2 not dii2creet.

[TA] 2o fiill me iin on how concerned ii 2hould be about iiit talkiing about ~ATH 2peciifiically.

[TT] That would be what I'm uncertain about. It seems shady somehow and Dave shares that thought. I haven’t seen the comment myself so I can't say anything definitively, but Bro does regularly update their pool of words to zone in on depending on what he thinks is the latest trend in the pervert circle.

[TT] It’s not a far jump between the nerd community and depravity.
tt It is worth noting that, to my knowledge, he doesn’t know ~ATH.

TA ~ATH ii2 complicated and ha2 somewhat limited use.

TA ii’t2 more niche than practical.

TT So it’s an esoteric language.

TA more or le22.

AR That is within his irony parameters.

TA ii don’t think it would have a large enough user base to warrant being targeted for much of anything unless 2omething more high profile referenced it recently.

AR I can look into that between queueing data for upload.

TT Sounds good. We should clue in Roxy on this.

TT Let’s set up a group chat later.

TA later work2 for me.

TA iif ii keep ignoring kk for any longer he’2 going two murder me where ii 2iit.

twinArmageddons [TA] ceased trolling timaeusTestified [TT] %and??? auto-Responder [AR]

You pocket your palm husk and look up to see Karkat glaring a hole into your skull from across the cafeteria table.

"In my defense, it was important." The glare intensifies as he takes a long and audible sip from his drink. "Okay okay, you have my full and undivided attention. Go." He softens up a bit but still has a wary edge until he really gets going again.

"As I was saying, we coordinated some of our classes. Originally he had just wanted to be in the same intro to troll cinema class, but then we were taking another class that was the same anyway, and he found this really interesting one I hadn't seen, and well here we are. Sure, in public he's a real piece of work, and I reserve the right to complain, but one on one, Dave is surprisingly easy to work with. His ideas aren't half bad either."

"Yeah, he does front a lot. It has a certain charm though."

"To you maybe," Karkat says with a huff. "You both buy your bullshit from the same bulk commercial goods supplier." You remember Dave saying something like that once. Coming from him it had been endearing. A dopey smile spreads across your face. "You're thinking about him aren't you?"

"Hm?" You snap back into reality.

"You were making the dumbest face. I can only assume that whatever you were thinking about had reached such a critical mass of dumbassery that it overflowed into your face lest it melt your think sponge entirely, and I only know one thing that has enough potential ignorami to do that." You roll your eyes at Karkat's teasing.
"Yeah yeah, I'm hopeless, desperate, and easy, et cetera, et cetera." This time it's Karkat's turn to roll his eyes.

"How is that going for you anyway?" he asks, suddenly genuine.

"It's good. It's really good actually." That's an understatement if there ever was one. You nod your head a few times in a poor attempt to hide that fact. It might have even made it more evident.

"You know I almost didn't meddle? Gog, can you imagine what kind of cluckbeastshit game you two would still be playing if I hadn't?"

"Oh come on, it wasn't ALL thanks to you. We would have eventually figured it out." He gives you a raised eyebrow of doubt. "We would have...maybe."

"I'm so sure of that." He takes a sip of soda before he continues. "It's been good for him too. He used to get a lot of nightmares. Maybe he still does. At the very least they aren't so bad that they wake me up anymore."

"Jeez." You know he had the one nightmare that time and had implied that there had been others, but you didn't think it was to the extent Karkat just told you. "I didn't know they were THAT bad. I don't think he's ever had one around me." Oh. You feel a blush creeping over your cheeks and look down to pick at your fries.

"Gee, I wonder why." There is a moment of quiet between you. That or, you're just really deep in thought and ignoring your best friend.

"Hey, can I tell you something?" He looks up from his food with a slightly concerned look on his face.

"Of course."

"I really like Dave." Karkat bursts into laughter. "No, I'm serious." The laughter is infectious and you can’t keep a straight face. "Oh come on. No really. I've never felt pale like this for someone before. It's fucking intense. Like, it makes me wonder about the people I've been pale with before. That shit was weak compared to this."

"You're hopeless and it's one of my primary sources of entertainment, but I know what you mean." His voice softens in the second half of his sentence. "Being with Kanaya is completely different than it was with Gamzee. I mean before it went to shit. When it was still...when he still gave a damn."

"Karkat, as the only objective party on account of being a vegetable during that entire shit show, I think you need to try to let it go. Yeah, he got way too fucking into his first kisimestitude and completely abandoned you when you needed consoling over me and-- and Aradia,...and you never could pin down what was going on between you and Terezi-- don’t give me that look, you know it’s true, so that complicated shit, but gigantic dick move aside, maybe that was how Gamzee was dealing with it. He was friends with her too, and he isn’t my best bro, but he’s still my friend." You can tell Karkat isn’t thrilled with the words that have just left your mouth, but he is considering them.

"Kanaya said the same thing."

"He did come to visit me you know. It was only once or twice, oh and also the time his cult community tried to call down a miracle for me. Probably Mituna and Kurloz' doing. I thought that was a fever dream for a while. Anyway, I think he just couldn't handle it."

Karkat looks up at the ceiling and sighs deeply. "FINE. I GUESS.,” he says throwing his hands up in
the air. “I guess I'll think about possibly maybe burying the murder hammer and forgiving his stupid clown ass,” he lets his arms drop back down so he can cross them.

“Eheheheh, drama queen.”

“What! IM the drama queen?! YOU have NO ROOM to talk about drama for at least the next SWEEP.” You open your mouth to retort, but he is kind of right. You’re palm husk buzzes. When you see that it’s Dave you type a reply and hear Karkat groan.

“It’ll only take a second. Besides, it’s Dave and he’s about to put his foot in his mouth again. I’m obligated to assist him in doing so.”

turntechGodhead [TG] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

[TG] so mituna showed me something today that i can never unsee

[TA] he forget2 how zipper2 work 2ometiime2, try not to hold iit again2t hiim.

[TG] good to know but not what i meant

[TG] im now vividly aware of pallet porn and mitunas interest in it

[TG] limes will never be the same

[TG] he completely destroyed an entire fruit for me

[TA] sorry ii halluciinated there for a 2econd.

[TA] ii thought you ju2t 2aiid you were watchiing porn wiith my liittermate.

[TG] what no

[TG] he was showing me the comments

[TA] that’2 not much better.

[TG] context coming at ya hold up

[TG] apparently he reads the comments on his material of choice and he showed me one in particular or rather a thread

[TA] ye2, plea2e tell me more about miituna’2 ma2trabatoriial tendenciie2.

[TG] its relevant

[TG] he saw one of bros bots and it was talking about ~ATH and that doesnt sit too well with me

[TA] 2o you weren’t actually watchiing iit.

[TG] NO

[TG] seriously this wigs me out and im not sure why exactly

[TG] mituna thought it was worth pointing out too but he didnt say why then again i guess i didnt ask

[TG] and why would porn even appeal to me anyway
[TA] relax iim ju2t fuckiing wiith you, iim already vaguely aware of all thii2.

[TG] you ass

[TG] did hal tell you or did dirk interrogate you

[TA] they both talked two me whiich really confu2ed trolliiian.

[TA] diid hal tell you ii gave hiim acce22 two one of my beehou2e 2erver2?

[TG] yeah

[TG] we need to make a group chat later and get everyone on the same page

[TA] totally.

[TA] kk ii2 gioing two kiill me iif ii keep iiinterruptiing our bro tiime.

[TA] iill come 2ee you iiin a biit

[TG] k

[TA] <>

[TG] <>

turntechGodhead [TG] ceased trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

turntechGodhead [TG] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

[TG] also i saw you quoting legally blonde there

[TG] we are watching that later

[TG] its going on the torment karkat list

[TA] he liike2 that moviie

[TG] cool

[TG] guess what movie youre picking for movie night

turntechGodhead [TG] ceased trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

You shake your head and put aside your palm husk. When you look up you nearly choke. You've never seen someone so angry while eating a salad.

"Did the leaves personally offend you?"

"Yes, one leaf in particular. A yellow one. You may be familiar with him." You stifle some laughter and clear your throat. Your palm husk buzzes and Karkat squints at you. You see that it's Roxy as you shove the device in your pocket.

"See? It's going away. You have full access to my attention. What were we talking about?" Your palm husk buzzes again.

"Originally, the new semester. Are you still pestering them about skipping the apiculture networking
prerequisites?"

"Ugh, yes. I could seriously write the textbook for the first two courses." Another buzz.

"Any luck?"

You make a so-so gesture. "I've got another year and an entire master's program to persuade them. Speaking of, have you decided to graduate yet?"

"In the fall. Rose recommended I split my thesis project with the summer break. That should give me enough time for an entire extra draft." Another buzz.

"I still can't believe you are making a screenplay instead of compiling 'The Musings'."

"Nepeta and I are nowhere near done with them. There are so many factors when you add humans into the mix."

You sense a presence.

"I demand bee access." You lean back and look up to see Roxy standing behind you.

"Really now?" You sit back up and twist around to look at her. She's standing there with a hand on her hip and a smirk on her face. "Remind me never to tell Hal anything ever. I might as well be broadcasting it."

"Pretty much. Now, the bees, lemme at that sweet sweet data."

"What's in it for me?" You know an opportunity when you see one. You're going to have some fun with this.

"My mad skills. You might even learn a thing or two." Her eyes meet yours more directly as she says your number.

“I don’t know, I have Hal AND Dirk. Seems like plenty of skill to go around.”

“You gave Dirk access before me?” she asks with the sort of playful outrage she uses to goad you. You give her a wide closed mouth smile save for how it makes your fangs poke out.

“Hal lives on his face. I had to. That and it has its benefits.”

“Oh wait, oh I see how it is, I see how it BEE. You’re being a kiss-ass.”

“Tch, I kiss no asses.” You lisped the fuck out of that but you hold your ground and ignore it. She won’t call it out if you don’t.

“Mhm, suuuure. Alright, you can keep your bees for now, but,” She leans in close. “I have my ways.” You lean a little closer.

“I don’t recall. Maybe you need to remind me.”

Karkat LOUDLY clears his throat. Both of you turn to look at him and he gestures sharply to his food. Roxy laughs and you turn back to look up at her, only to find her mouth crashing into yours. She pulls away far too quickly.

“I’ve got class in a few, but maybe stop by later and we can negotiate terms,” she says with a wink as she turns to walk away. For a moment you watch.
“That was totally unfair.”

“You do realize you aren’t going to win that.”

“You have so little faith in me.”

“Pft, I bet she bites you once before you give in.”

“I have a little more resolve than THAT.”

“Do you really though?”

You roll your eyes at him and continue picking at your fries. You were planning on giving her access but it’s definitely more fun this way. You and her could use a nice petty argument. You’re not officially back on yet, or at least you don’t think you are. Neither of you have discussed it. It’s just happening on its own slowly but surely. You should probably say something at some point. Or maybe you’ll just be a dick and go knock her down the leaderboard. You should practice anyway. The tournament isn't far off. You might want to brush up on some of the other games that will be there too. Oh now that could be an interesting hate date.

There is a part of your mind that says it would be even better high. It's not the first time you've thought that since the fear began to fade. You're starting to see what Kankri meant. You know you shouldn't. You can't. You never want to feel like that again. Yet, there's a part of you that still thinks you could do it if you were just really careful. You miss it, a lot, but you told Dave you were done. If nothing else, you can stave off the craving with the thought that if you wanted to smoke again, you'd have to run it by your moirail. Dave would be so disappointed, but gog he might just let you if you asked, and you can't take advantage of that. You care too much about him to do that. You give so many damns. It is overwhelming the damns you give. You weren't kidding before when you were talking to Karkat about it. You've never felt paleways for anyone like you do for Dave. It's a little scary, to be honest, but also exciting. Even if it's a little different for him, you hope Dave feels something like this for you too.

Karkat apparently has given up on your short attention span today and let you zone out because the next thing you know, your fries have disappeared. He makes several comments about the thrilling saga of your face journey before the both of you head back to the dorm. Dave is just about done with his shift, so both of you hang around for a bit until someone shows up to replace him, then head up to his and Karkat's room.

Your mind is a bit scattered today but now with fewer interruptions, you're noticing it more. You fade in and out of a conversation they're having about camera angles while you dick around on your palm husk. Eventually, you remember that you still haven't made everyone those user accounts so you hop on that before you forget again. By the time you're done and have sent the logins to Hal, Karkat is heading off to class leaving just you and Dave. He's doing something on the computer and you don't have too much better to do now, so you lounge on his bed next to him and just enjoy existence for a while. It's nice to do nothing, to just take the time to let your thoughts fly all over the place without having to keep snapping back to focus on whatever you're supposed to be doing.

Several thought trains later your palm husk buzzes, but you're currently in liquid form from the way Dave is lightly scratching and kneading your horn beds, so you entirely disregard it. Reality only comes back into focus when his hand disappears. You stretch before you sit up, it's one of those good full body stretches that has you making a rumbling sound somewhere in the back of your mouth. You’ve only just righted yourself when Dave speaks.

"Yo, group chat."
"Hm? Oof." Dave thuds back against you, sitting between your legs. You lean forward to rest your head on his shoulder as you bring your arms around him. A content sound hums in his throat and you answer it with a soft trill. He's already typing something in the chat by the time you get out your palm husk.

    tipsyGnostalgic [TG] opened memo L337 b17ch35 4nd 4l50 D4v3
    [TG] added twinArmageddons [TA] to memo L337 b17ch35 4nd 4l50 D4v3
    [TG] added flipTuna [FT] to memo L337 b17ch35 4nd 4l50 D4v3
    [TG] added tentacleTherapist [TT] to memo L337 b17ch35 4nd 4l50 D4v3
    [TG] is that everyone?
    [TA] ii 2ee we let miituna name the memo.
    [FT] FUCK YY34H W3 D1DK.
    [TT] I believe so.
    [TT] I would still rather do this in person.
    [TT] I am afraid I have yet to perfect my astral projection, so until that time we shall have to converse like peasants over the internet.
    [TT] Still? You're really slacking on those occult studies.
    [TT] I'm truly the disappointment of the magical community.
    [TA] hal diid you hand out the logiin2?
    [AR] I did, except for Roxy. You forgot to include her temporary password.
    [TA] eheheh no ii diidn't.
    [TA] ii'm wiitholdiing iit.
    [TG] >:O
    [TG] u little shit
    [TG] you were gonna giv me a login all along
    [TA] yeah but thii2 ii2 more fun.
    [FT] M1N35 D035N7H WH0RK.
    [TA] you're iin cap2 lock.
    [TA] diid iit work thii2 tiime?
    [FT] FUCHK U
    [TA] everyone ha2 two change their pa22word toniight.
    [TA] iif you don't, ii wiill and ii promii2e you won't liike iit.
[TG] i would
[TG] if i had one >:(

[TA] alright, alright ii'll tell you.

[TG] yesss

[TA] ii'ts my ipv6 address, good luck.

[TG] noooo

[FT] H4H4H4H4H4H4H4

[TG] nice


[T] The logins will give y'all access to Sollux's server.

[FT] Our 53ren 3r

[FT] 1 T4K3 C4R3 0F 17 700

[T] It will give y'all access to the Captors' server where Hal has presumably copied his extended consciousness so as to circumvent his current hardware restrictions and is uploading a large backlog of information we have on Bro, as well as the program we use to flag suspicious activity.

[TA] the bee2 are doing the heavy lifting on making it organic lifeform friendly.

[T] Currently, only flagged sections are converted. We stopped converting everything to conserve on space and processing limitations once we had established a firm understanding of Bro's habits.

[TG] wait so u have the old data and the changes so why not just upload the old data and the change log??

[AR] We deleted it. We were fast approaching a storage issue at the time. Only Dirk has an actual memory of those reports. My knowledge of them is a set of conditions he made based on those reports.

[TG] well shoot

[FT] My 7hurn??

[T] Go for it.

[FT] www.trollhub.alt/watch?v=cL7oFtCX-E0

[T] Am I to assume an explanation will follow this or that Mituna has made an unfortunate error with the copy-paste function?

[FT] 1 W45 G3771NG 0FF 4ND 54W 50M3 5H7IF7Y 5H17

[FT] U53RN4M 3W45 B4D

[FT] 50M30N3 541D 47H 4N D7H3 807 54W 4N5W3R3D R3541D
[TA] replied.

[FT] Y357H!

You aren't thrilled about clicking this link but you do anyway. You scroll down a ways and find the thread in question.

[TA] wow that ii2 certainly a...creative 2ugge2tiion.

[TG] thats amazing

[TG] im pretty sure that would kill you

[TG] not that!

[TG] the bots reply

[TG] i want "gold bloods take it best up the ~ath" embroidered on a pillow

[FT] 54m3.

[TT] I’ll keep that in mind.

[TT] Sollux, this must be incredibly awkward for you.

[TA] ii am 2o de2en2iitized two thii2 2hiit you don't even know.

[TT] Interesting.

[TT] You and I should have a friendly chat sometime, but I digress. While the bot's witty reply to that comment is humorous, I think we should focus more on the comments that follow it. The segway in particular is concerning in how convincing it is in its guise of humanity. It manages to come off as half-joking while still provoking a response to its query on the whereabouts of the language's programming community.

[TT] I am a touch puzzled, however. Why would he go to such lengths to acquire information he could simply use a search engine to otherwise acquire?

[TG] good fuckin luck with that

[TG] maybe u can find a beghinners guide buthe crazy shit you just gotta know

[TA] yeah the be2t siite2 aren't iiindexed.

[TT] I am shocked. An esoteric language known for being both difficult and volatile has a hidden community.

[TA] one of them ii2 even a bbs that ii may or may not contribute two

[TT] Huh, interesting.

[TG] a what now

[TA] bulletiin board 2y2tem.

[TG] retro interwebz
[TG] like 1982

[TT] So there would have been something to gain here if these people hadn't told him to go fuck himself.


[TA] depending on what he's trying to do, he could be very hard pre22ed two fiind iit.

[TA] not a hell of a lot of knowledge on the 2ubject made iit two earth in the fiir2t place.

[TT] I'm curious. You are particularly skilled in this language, correct?

[TA] one of the be2t ii know.

[TG] sol lux u so humble

[TT] If it's so difficult to find the resources to be good, how are you so good?

[TA] ii happen two be in po2e2iiion of an ob2cene amount of old ~ATH manuals and ii wa2 not a very 2ociable wiiggler.

[FT] EHETHEHEH U 4H4D N0 FR13ND5

[TG] u stll havnt give me vol 3 btw

[TA] per2uade me.

[TG] oh i’ll persuade your ath alright

[TA] wa2 ju2t thiinkiing of doiing exactly that.

[TT] Cool.

[TT] Furthermore, is the community tight enough that such a warning might result in other sites of that caliber becoming aware with little to no traceable effort on our part?

[TG] webrings are stil a thing wit the boardsa so proly

[TA] what 2he 2aiid.

[TG] so bro might be looking for me or dirk and might be looking into a secretive niche programming language for that expressed purpose that exists in some bummuck corner of the dark web which is a place he already loiters

[TG] the dark web doesn't work lik that dave

[TG] so what now

You feel Dave take a deep breath as he sets aside his laptop. You don't think too much of it until he
sets his shades on the keyboard and rubs his eyes in a tired way. "We don't know shit."

"We'll plan for the worst and figure it out eventually." You nuzzle his neck and wrap your arms more tightly around him. "You can't phreak a payphone anymore, but you can exploit digital assistants with high-frequency sound."

"Huh?"

“Our contingency plans. It could work like loaf debris, or...I don't know, something that sends a signal from someone else's device. He probably won't let you keep yours.” He makes a nasally whine and lets his head fall back. You kiss his cheek and float his laptop back over to him. The others are suggesting much the same stuff as last time. It's still a waiting game, but now there is slightly more direction than before, even if it’s largely speculated. The only updates really are Mituna being on bot duty or as he put it “wank watch”, the bees, you tipping off the boards about Bro, and Roxy going over the basics of ~ATH with Dirk. That’s a lot actually. You can’t help but wonder though if you’re all jumping the gun on this ~ATH theory. Everyone seems to agree that it feels strange. And interestingly enough Hal doesn’t disagree. Speaking of, Hal apparently moving part of his brain into your server is another new development. You’ll probably let him stay there. It might be neat to have an unshackled AI dependant on your hardware. When the chat disbands, you wait for Dave to chuck his laptop back into his sylladex before you strike, trapping him in your arms and dragging him down to the bed with you. He makes a surprised noise but doesn’t appear to have any objections to suddenly being a little spoon if the hummed chuckle is any indication. "Karkat was telling me about how you share 3 classes with him this semester,” You say in an effort to shift to a lighter subject.

"Mhm."

"Try not to break him."

"No promises."

For a few minutes, you chat like that about the new semester, lazily lying there simply being close and comforting before the dulcet tones of 'Hollaback Girl' fill your ears. Dave fishes his phone out of his pocket and answers it without really looking to see who it is. It’s probably a custom ringtone, but God only knows whose. You wonder what yours is.

"Talk to me...yeah, he's here...Yep, totally. We're actually mid-coitus. You caught me...Of course...Through perseverance and the power of friendship...Cool, so what’d ya need...I am deeply apprehensive about that statement. That could be literally anything. It could be a particularly shiny rock, it could be his dicks or both...oh, well, thank god you're sure it isn't the particularly shiny rock. I don't know that my delicate constitution could handle such profound luster...aight, aight, I think I can persuade him to move...Nice. I'm down. Wait, isn't that like not great for his meds...if you say so...see ya in a few."

"Roxy?" You ask from where you have snuggled into his side.

"Yeah. She wants you to fly us over to Juggalo junction. Mituna wants to show me something apparently." You snort a laugh at the sudden comprehension of the conversation he just had with Roxy.

"So you think you can persuade me to move, huh?"

"She says we're going to a clown party and promises enough alcohol to kill us all twice." At the prospect of getting fucked up, you are immediately on your feet. "I'm gonna take that as a hell yeah."
"I am painfully sober. I would pass a drug test right now." It's a poor substitute, but you'll take it. There's a hand on your shoulder and you look over to see Dave looking at you with an expression you can't quite read. You think he might be about to say something serious about what you've finally admitted was and has the potential to still be a problem if you don't keep reminding yourself of how bad it fucked you up. However, that doesn't happen. Instead, he cracks a smile.

"Let's get you trashed."

==> Dave: get shwasted with your friends

You're getting used to this whole flying thing. It's not even the slightest bit nerve-wracking anymore. Still, Sollux holds you close to his side, but you have zero complaints about that. You touch down in front of the Makara's house and wait while Sollux texts one of them to let you in. It's only a few moments later that Kurloz opens the door and starts leading you upstairs. You're on the second landing when you start to hear it, faint at first, muffled through the walls, but by the time you're nearly outside the door it's just loud enough to be recognizable.

"Is that...?" It is. It's your fucking bass line, but it's different, it's better. It's almost as if...is someone physically playing your music? Kurloz opens the door and the sound becomes crystal clear. You hurry in, driven by curiosity, and are met by the sight of Mituna sitting on the coffee table with a bass absolutely shredding it. "No fucking way," you say as you move closer. "You douchefucker, that's why you were thirsting so hard for a copy." He smiles wide with his tongue sticking out as he nods his head. He keeps playing your shit and it's blowing your mind so hard you nearly emote. His fingers are moving with the kind of smooth precision that makes it look easy when you know damn well it isn’t. He's even added in a part between the two verses by robbing the part from another instrument to make the bassline playable by itself without a big gap in the middle and it works. It works so fucking well. "Dude, that's sick. Where the heck did you learn to play like that?"

"Tula," he says as he looks over at her through that wild mass of hair with an affectionate glance.

"Tuna, you taught ME," she laughs. "Bro, I only jogged your thinksponge." You plop down on the sofa and pull out your laptop when an idea comes to your mind.

"Lemme pull up the track. I gotta hear this with the other parts." You mute your now clearly inferior bass part and hit play. He starts up again from the top and it is majestic. It is sex for your ears. "We need to record this. You put my digital one to shame, bro. It has lost its honor and can never go home to its family." He claps his hands over the strings and suddenly mutes the instrument as he turns to you.

"Fuck yeah. Other sthongs too?"

"You want to cover the bass parts for some of my other songs?"

"Yeah yeah," he says with almost manic energy. You hear a chuckle behind you and see Roxy hanging on Sollux who already has a drink in his hand, probably courtesy of Roxy. She’s whispering something in his ear that has his eyebrows going up and a dusting of gold spreading over his cheeks before he turns with a devious smirk to whisper something in return. You turn back to Mituna who has started playing again.

"This song was kind of experimental, but if you want to play them I can totes write you some bass parts, or if you want to mess with some of the stuff I’ve already put up we can make some certified sicknasty FlipTuna remixes."
“Should do Sollux’th favorite,” He says in a sing-song teasing voice, looking past you at his brother.

“And which one is that?” You shoot your moirail a cocky grin and he flips the both of you off while his red cup, wrapped in blue psionics, hovers in front of him. You snicker and get to your feet.

“Alright, Rox, point me at the alcohol.”

“My time to shine,” she says dramatically gesturing with open arms before leading you to the kitchen. The drink she pours for you comes out of a punch bowl but it is most certainly not punch. You don’t know what it is that Roxy has concocted here beyond the fact that it smells like it’s going to fuck you up. She looks proud of the face it has you making as the first sip hits your tongue. Yeah, this is gonna get you wrecked.

Kurloz passes by you just as you’re wandering back into the living room where you notice that Mituna has moved to the sofa and Sollux is now sitting next to him. He has his hand to the other Captor’s forehead, or so you think until you pass by on your way to one of the bean bag chairs and see that he’s actually brushing back Mituna’s hair. You can see now why he might keep his bangs so long. There are red and blue Litchenberg scars radiating from his eyes and the outer parts of his sclera are dim, leaving only the centers anything resembling bright. It reminds you of how Sollux’s eyes used to get when he was super high, except Mituna’s are worse.

"I'm beeping," he says when he catches you staring. As if on cue to answer your next question, the watch-like device on his wrist beeps in three sets of two.

"The monitor for his psionics is going off," Sollux clarifies as he lets his brother's hair fall back into place. Kurloz returns with what looks like a shot glass full of something yellow and takes a seat on Mituna's other side. He puts it into his moirail's hand delicately and doesn’t let go until he's sure the other won't drop it. Mituna throws it back but the semi-viscous liquid is slow to slide out. The average person would have to wait, but this being Mituna means that instead, he crams his tongue in the glass. Repeatedly. You catch the way Sollux moves to the end of the couch, far away, maybe excessively so, from what you now suspect is mind honey.

"Is he alright?" You ask. There's a floof sound as Roxy plops down in the bean bag chair next to you.

"He's fiine. Juss taking his meds. It's like psionic diabetes,” She says before taking a swig of the mystery drink.

"That's a decent comparison actually," Sollux says from his self imposed exile to the couch corner. Mituna is still at it when Kurloz takes away the glass and sets it on the table. He moves to turn back to the older Captor, but stops and glances at Sollux, then back to the mind honey laced shot glass. Thinking better of leaving it there, he picks it up and heads over to the kitchen. Smart. Probably not the best thing to leave lying around. With the threatening substance gone, Sollux moves back over and looks at the small screen on his brother’s wrist. He pokes it a few times before dropping it and putting his hand to Mituna’s temple.

Roxy leans over onto your bean bag. “They doing their magic not-twin thingy.” You wonder how many she’s had already.

“Non-twin thingy?” You sip at your drink. The flavor is starting to grow on you now that you expect it.

“Not magicksth. Sthcience,” he says as he falls into Sollux’s shoulder. Sollux shifts a bit and brings his arm up and around Mituna so he can resume doing whatever it is that he’s doing with his psionics to his brother’s head. When Kurloz returns he makes a heart with his hands, smiles, and tilts his head
before taking a seat next to his moirail again.

“With the exception of our ancestor, we’re each other’s closest genetic match.” There is a shimmer of psionics coating Sollux’s hand and you think Mituna’s eyes might be just the slightest bit brighter.

“Which means...?”

“Sthame wave.”

“Their thinksponges are hella compatible.” Latula picks up Mituna’s bass and starts playing. You don’t think it’s anything in particular, just her fucking around. “Tuna can jack his shit like it’s his own. No signal degrade.” She hits a sour note and makes a face. “Takes less to jumpstart him.”

"That's pretty con-fucking-vienent," You say with a nod. You aren't actually sure what she means by that, but maybe that's what Sollux is doing. Whatever it is, Mituna seems to be enjoying it. Psionics crackle around his fingers and Latula hits another sour note. Unfortunately, stealth isn't exactly his specialty. He giggles and blows his cover.

"Stop pulling." Sollux gives Mituna's hand a slap and the energy around it dissipates.

"So when does this party start?" He asks as he pulls his drink toward himself.

[We're leaving after Gamzee gets back from work.]

You look at Sollux for an explanation and luckily he seems to catch that. "Gamzee is still at work. We're waiting for him."

"I still can't believe they let him watch children," Roxy says with a laugh as she finishes off her booze.

"I imagine it's less him grubsitting and more him sitting in a kiddie pool full of sopor and wrangling escapees." You say as you picture it in your head. Gamzee just chillin, high off his ass, covered in grubs, and grabbing ones every now and then that attempt to stray.

[He isn't supposed to sit in the pool, but yes.]

"Kurloz sthays he'sth not a posed to be in the pool, but he doesth it anyway." You've just about reached the bottom of your cup when Roxy snatchs it from your hand and stands up. "Anyone else ready for another?"

"Yeah, hold up, I'll come with." Sollux shoves his brother at Kurloz as he gets up.

"Hey!"

"You're fine," Sollux calls back as he trails after Roxy with a dumb look on his face. Mituna is quick to recover as he cozies up to his moirail. You're about to ask Latula something when your attention shifts entirely to the subtle click of a lock turning. You know it's probably Gamzee, but the tension doesn't leave you until you actually see him.

"Hey," he gives a nod to the room and drops a joint out of his sylladex. It's then that you hear a faint peeping sound.

"I think you may have forgotten about something there, bro." You motion to the grub peeking it's face out of his hair. Gamzee lets out a laugh like he didn't just kidnap a wiggler.
"Hey, little dude. I forgot you was up in there. Better bring you on downstairs before I get wicked lit up." The little purple grub tries to cling to his hair, but Gamzee untangles it with ease that says he's done this before. Roxy peaks her head out into the hall at the noise before she and Sollux come back from the kitchen with drinks in hand. Sollux has yours and when he comes over to give it to you, you can see a shimmery smear of makeup on his mouth. Your shit idiot monkey brain tells you that you should totally reach over and gently fix that with a lingering touch. It instantly fills you with anxiety.

"So did Gamz pop one out when I wasn't looking or did he just steal that baby?" Roxy asks as she shakes a tube of lipgloss.

Sollux scoots his bean bag chair closer to yours. "I would also be interested to know if we are accessories to a grubnapping."

Gamzee shakes his head. "Nah, little dude makes his residing downstairs."

[They carpool]

You look to Sollux for a translation, but he shrugs. "I don't know that one."

"He said we all up and ride share. His Lusus don't call the cops on us none so I don't mind nothin." That sounds like blackmail but whatever. You've never actually seen a grub before. They're smaller than you expected. It's kind of wild that all the trolls you know were once so small. Gamzee catches you staring. "You wanna hold this little motherfucker?" He asks, already walking over.

"Nah, that's alright, I'm good, oh, oh you are handing him to me anyway. Oh God, I know nothing about infant care." You're holding it out in front of you around its middle with both hands, although it's small enough that you could hold it with one if you needed to. It wiggles its little nubs at you and squeaks. "Uhhhhhh." You have no clue what you're doing at all and it looks like it's starting to fuss. "Oh uh, you want down?" Several of the trolls snicker at you.

"Just let him sit in your lap," Sollux whispers aside to you. You do so and the grub seems instantly happier, settling itself and curling up in a ball. It yawns and you're gut punched right in the paternity.

"Oh fuck, it's cute," you mumble. Roxy comes bounding in and before you can protest she's already snapped a photo.

"It's so chubby." She wedges herself between you and Sollux and holds out her hands. You have no qualms about passing off this little guy. Well, maybe. It did snuggle up to you immediately. Still, you pick up the little fella and hand him to Roxy. "Oh, look at youuuuu. A little chunkers." She's definitely already drunk. It wiggles its little nubs in the air and scree’s in delight as she leans back and holds it above her. You smirk and look up to say something smart to Sollux but stop when you see the look on his face. There is something sad about him as he watches Roxy play with the grub. He catches you looking at him and turns away to take a long sip from his drink.

"Yo Rox, maybe we should let Gamzee take him home so we can get going. I told Sollux we’d get him shit-faced." The prospect of getting her kismesis wasted lights a fire under Roxy and she quickly hops up and returns the surely confused grub to its babysitter. It really seems to like Gamzee although it could be because he smells like weed, sopor slime, and fresh laundry; according to Sollux anyway. You’ve never deeply inhaled the aroma that is ode de Gamzee.

It’s half an hour later before everyone gets their shit together. All of you are at least a little intoxicated at this point and it occurs to you that no one can drive. For a second you think you might be flying there, but then you remember that Sollux is pretty firm on the no flying other people while
intoxicated rule. He also has a look on his face like he too is also connecting the same dots you just did.

You assume there is some kind of plan though because everyone is heading outside. When the Makaras take out unicycles you figure maybe you're walking. It can't be too far if they are getting around on those. Then Mituna and Latula drop frankly ridiculous long-boards out of their sylladexs and your right back where you started.

"No," Sollux says flatly with crossed arms.

"Yesth." There is a wicked grin on Mituna's face as he puts his helmet on.

"Even if we do ride with you two, we're one wheeled device short." Mituna laughs like he’s filled with mischief and throws his regular skateboard at Sollux who barely catches it in time.

"You know how to skateboard?" You ask. There is a strange sort of...fuzzy feeling whenever you find out something else about him that you didn't know. You can’t really imagine him zipping around on a skateboard like his brother though.

"Barely," Mituna mocks with more laughter. Looks like your imagination was at least partially accurate. You wonder if Mituna has been waiting for this reveal specifically because it was going to annoy the other gold blood.

"Even if I do know how, there is no way Dave is riding with you. He doesn't have psionics. He'll fall off as soon as you get any speed."

"You are greatly underestimating my breadth of experience under the parentage of Bro 'child endangerment' Strider." Several eyes are now on you looking for an elaboration. “Two words, rocket board.”

“Rocket board?” Sollux echos with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh man, I forgot about that thing,” Roxy says from her seat on the front of Latula’s longboard. “How are you even aliiivvve?”

“I was on a kid leash. It was fine.”

[What is K-I-D L-E-A-S-H?]

“You know, like a dog leash, but strapped to a kid. Not around the neck obviously. It’s like a harness. Let’s junior run around like a goddamn maniac without getting scooped up in a white van and landing his ass on the 5 o’clock news.” Do trolls not have kid leashes? They’re giving you a weird sort of look.

“Dave, that’s so effed up but like, I got no room to talk about responsible parental figures.” Roxy makes the 'drinking' hand gesture. You wonder if that is actual sign language or just universal.

“Wow, okay, we’re going to unpack that later,” Sollux starts with a rapid blink of his eyes. “but for now, how good with a skateboard are you?”

“I won’t die.”

“I’m so reassured.”

“Nah, I’m alright. You won’t catch me grindin rails but as a mode of transportation I’m alright.” You
fucked around on a skateboard as a kid, but beyond that never really got into it in any sort of flashy sense. There is a chance, however, you may have downplayed your abilities because when you all get going, Sollux looks pleasantly surprised and Latula says you aren’t half bad. Mituna says you don’t suck bulge as much as he thought you would, and you’ll take that as a compliment. Man, you bet you look cool as shit right now, actually. You try to play it up a bit just because you can, just for the hell of it. You look over at Roxy when she hollers as Latula takes a turn fast and sharp. Sollux is less enthused and holding on for dear life as he helps keep Mituna upright on said sharp turn. You elect to take it wide and more smoothly ride the outside. When a straightaway comes up you speed up a bit and enjoy the feeling of wind in your hair. It’s especially nice since you’re a little tipsy. Got a bit of a buzz going on. Alright, you are kind of drunk, let’s be honest. You look at the people around you and get that surreal feeling again, that feeling of normality, regular old college shenanigans. It’s nice.

“Pothole!”

“Huh? Oh Shi-” You hit it dead on, the board goes sailing, and you stumble-fall into a hedge. “I’m good,” You call out with a raised arm. A warm hand takes yours and helps to pull you out of the foliage and then pulls the foliage out of your hair.

"I thought you said you could skate?"

"I said I wouldn’t die."

With a smirk, Sollux rolls his eyes and shoves the skateboard into your hands. You’re glad it doesn’t take much longer to get there because your coordination is starting to take a dive now that your last drink, the one Roxy egged you to chug before you left the apartment, is starting to hit your brain. The house you roll up to looks like pretty standard suburbia, but when you walk inside you are loudly reminded that these are the Makara’s church friends. It’s like 70% clown town up in here. There are a decent amount of non-clown trolls here too and even some other humans, but by and large it’s Juggalos left and right. You follow Sollux, who is following Gamzee through the crowd. When you walk through an archway, into the kitchen, you see that somehow Roxy has beaten you there.

“Hey boys.” She’s leaning up against the counter giving Sollux a look that implies this was a contest and she won. It’s not long before there is a drink in your hand, and you are taking some comfort in that. The environment is unfamiliar and hanging back, chillin, sipping at a beer all nonchalant is a socially acceptable way to survey the area. Gamzee introduces you to the host and you give the smoothest of chin tilts with the most indifferent ‘sup’. You aren’t sure where Kurloz, Mituna, and Latula fucked off to but you, Roxy, Sollux, and Gamzee start moving again. As you walk you spot Kurloz in a group that is a blur of hands. He’s got a girl hanging on him that you’re thinking might be Nepeta’s sister, Muelin. You follow your group into what you think is actually the dining room, which isn’t so much a room as it is an area, but it’s been cleared of the dining table and instead houses a beer pong table. Roxy jabs Sollux in the side with her elbow a few times and gestures to it. It’s occupied right now, but you have little doubt they are going to get into a heated battle later. You continue past it until you reach a bedroom. It’s a little cramped. A full-sized bed-- directly on the floor without a frame, takes up most of the room, and there is a butterfly chair that looks like it is a regular piece of furniture, but there are several other chairs that appear to have been jammed in here just for this occasion. There aren’t a lot of places left to sit. All but one of the chairs are taken up and Gamzee makes himself comfortable in the last one without realizing Roxy was going after it, so she’s left standing there. Some guy offers her his lap in the most uncouth of ways and is promptly both told off and flipped off. You look over at Sollux and catch a glimpse of something akin to pride on his face. Roxy locates Latula on the other side of the room and makes herself comfortable on her lap instead while you and Sollux find some space to sit on the not yet crowded bed. The TV at the center
of this crowd announces the end of some kind of game they’re playing and you see a Troll in face paint stand up and start counting heads.

“So what’re they playing here?” you ask aside to Sollux.

“Jackbox. Here gimme your phone.” You unlock it and hand it over. You guess the game is app-based. It turns out to be pretty fucking hilarious, a stage for your wit to flourish, definitely something you’d like to play again sometime. Sollux seems to be having a good time too. He’s laughing with the lot of them and his smile leaves you dumbstruck. He sees you looking at him and somehow knows that beneath your shades you’re staring at him with eyes full of stupid. There is a shift in his expression, a subtlety meant only for you. It only lasts a moment before the world around you catches back up. Another round of the game ends as you tilt back your drink only to discover it’s empty.

“Yo, I’m gonna go get another. You want?” You ask as you clap a hand to his shoulder and lean a little closer. He shakes his can and finds it to be mostly empty.

“Yeah sthure.” You take it from him and make your way to the kitchen, weaving through the crowd, bobbing your head to the music. It’s a good beat. You didn’t think this would be what was playing although you aren’t exactly sure what you expected either. You’re just about to the kitchen when Mituna snags your arm and before you can stop yourself you have him in a headlock. Immediately you let go, laugh and try to play it off like it’s a joke. It helps that Mituna laughs like a maniac in that way that he does. He motions for you to follow him outside and you start to tell him that you were on your way to the kitchen when he interrupts to tell you that there is alcohol on the deck too.

He follows it up with “eheheheh, deck.”

**== Sollux: wonder where the fuck Dave went**

It’s taking an awfully long time for Dave to come back from the kitchen. His company would be appreciated, but also you would like more alcohol in your body as soon as possible. You are not nearly intoxicated enough. With this round just ending, you get up and make your way over to the kitchen, but don’t see Dave anywhere. Since you’re here though, you might as well get something. What you grab is a little stronger than just regular old beer. Some part of your mind realizes that you’re chasing a different sort of high, but you choose to ignore it and chug down a good few swallows much to the delight of a nearby very wasted troll. You meander and eventually ask someone if they’ve seen a human, white blonde hair, sunglasses, a little shorter than yourself but not much. They point you outside. For a little bit, you stand in the doorway with your drink and watch with endearing fascination as Dave does some of the masterful bullshitting that once annoyed you. You’ve figured out that this is something of a game to him and he legitimately enjoys the attention. At least when he’s doing it on purpose. There is a difference between this and when he’s hiding behind the image of coolty. Right now he’s sitting around one of those metal and glass outside tables with a handful of strangers and Mituna, eating up being the center of attention while he goes on about his music. He’s talking about how he just found out this asshole (Mituna) is the most deliriously sicktwisted bassist and they are going to make the most hellacious remixes of his work, maybe work in some of the new sound he’s been cultivating on the down-low. You eventually decide to stop standing around like a creep and wander over.

“Sthubjecting more people to your shitty beatst?” You say as you come up behind him. He looks up at you with a sly smile as you half lean, half sit on the armrest of his chair.

“You fuckin love my music and you know it.”
“My taste is questionable at best. I should not be your litmust test.” He brushes off your comment with a ‘Pshh’ and slides his arm around your waist, tugging you a little bit closer, then continues on with the conversation he was having before you showed up. You loop your arm around his shoulders and down a long sip of your drink. He seems more comfortable with displaying affection than usual. You wonder if he’s being more open about the some kind of something between you two because the majority of the people here are trolls, ergo, they don’t give a single limp fuck that you’re both dudes; or if he’s just more drunk than you think he is. If he isn’t, he’s about to be. Roxy and some girl you’ve met maybe twice before are coming outside, hooting and chanting ‘shots shots shots shots’. They’re both carrying cookie sheets and when they set them down on the table you see that they’ve got little dixie cups full of jello on them. Roxy puts a red one and a blue one in front of you and waggles her eyebrows. You accept her challenge and throw them back like it’s nothing. Even though they were stronger than you thought they would be, you maintain a steeled look. You’re about to grab two pink ones for your retaliation, but then you see a better color. You slam two yellow shots in front of her and give her the most devious look you can muster.

“Nice.” You hear Mituna comment as you stare down your kismesis. She won’t be intimidated in the slightest by this, but you do it anyway. Plus there is a somewhat dirty sort of fun in watching her throw back a jello shot the same color as your color in the most suggestive way she can without being TOO over the top about it. It earns some ooohhhs that she seems to thrive on as she stares at you dead on with those pink eyes.

“Y’all are great, definitely in my top ten favorite people, but can I not be in the middle of whatever hate-fueled thing is happening here?” You look down at Dave and stifle a laugh. You forgot he was there somehow. “At least ply me with liquor first.”

“I think I can make that happen.” You grab a red shot and are about to hand it to him, but Dave just fuckin opens his mouth, and your soul momentarily leaves your body. You somehow manage to run with it and dump the jiggly liquid down his protein chute. The shots are quickly devoured by the group of people at the table, and their absence seems to break up the party so to speak. Some people head inside to see if there are any more, while others are just changing scenery. You’re debating moving when Gamzee, Kurloz and some other trolls you vaguely recognize start pouring outside and filling up the vacant seats. You’re not super quick to realize what’s happening, but when you do, you are extremely conflicted. They’re getting ready to smoke and god could you go for that. You know it’s a dumb terrible idea for multiple reasons, one being that you are already fairly drunk and those shots haven't really hit yet, but holy shit is the craving real. Maybe just a shottie? That would be okay, right? No, no, you can’t do that. That isn’t going to end well, but...

“Yo, let’s go check out the beer pong table,” Dave says, pulling you from your thoughts of temptation.

“Y-yeah, cool.”

“Fuck yes, I’llma smoke yur ass, Captor,” Roxy says before she runs off ahead. You make your way inside and start heading toward the dining room when Dave pulls you aside into a pantry. You stumble, but he catches you and you steady each other on your feet.

“Y’al’right? I mean, from like, back there. The uh, them smoking ‘n shit.” You smile at him and hum a laugh. He did that on purpose, dragging you out of there. You don’t so much answer him as you do pull him closer and clumsily kiss him, nearly missing his mouth. He hums into it and you chirp at him.

"Thanksth,” You say, pulling away only the absolute minimum distance to speak. He kisses you again, deeper this time, and you press back. It escalates quickly. You have him up against the
shelves, fingers in his hair, you whisper against his neck. He’s so good to you. Does he even know how good to you he is? You must have said that just right because it makes him shiver and draw in a soft gasp. His fingers are tangled in your shirt, bunching up the fabric and holding you to him. You tug his hair gently coaxing him to tilt his head back and further expose his neck for you. He does it without hesitation. All the sharp teeth crammed in your mouth and he just offers you his throat. You trill in a way you haven’t before. It's drenched in pale feelings, you pity Dave so fucking much, but there's this feeling sprinkled on top of it, a distinct desire that's new to you.

“Sol.” He says your name in a breathy whisper.

“You mean this right?” Your head is getting all fuzzy and you’re suddenly consumed by the need to know that this isn’t just crossed cultural wires. “This ith, this is like a thing, Dave.” Your lips brush the thin skin of his neck as you speak against it. “Letting me near your neck. It’s a, a trust thing.” You pull back a bit and give him room to answer. He keeps his head tilted back for a moment as he collects himself until it clicks that you've backed away for a reason. In the dim light, his shades are transparent enough that you can see his eyes.

“Onna scale 'a emotionally flaccid ta scandalizingly palerotic how hot would it be if I said that I never trusted anyone like I trust you?" There's a beat where all you can do is stand there and stare into those eyes.

“Fuck.” You push him up against the shelves again, lips crashing against his hard and desperate. Something falls off the shelf onto the floor, but it barely registers because Dave has his hand up your shirt and he’s pulling you close and he’s kissing you like his life depends on it. You practically moan into his mouth when he starts touching your face in the best of ways, further clouding your mind with less than platonic pats and caresses. You pull his hair again, a little harder than you intended to, but Dave really wasn’t kidding apparently when he said he was cool with that, because unlike you, he very much does moan into the kiss your sharing. You can feel it against your lips. There is a sharp breath of air when he lets you tilt his head to the side that stirs something inside you and only fuels you more.

“Can I leave marketh?” You ask the question low and soft, and relish in the way he shifts against you. You hadn’t asked him this last time. Last time you were just really careful not to.

“I-- yeah, just not like, a lot.” You smile and have at it. You're still careful when you kiss his neck. You aren’t leaving traces of your affections on purpose, not really, but you needed to make sure you could just in case you did. He runs his hand up the back of your neck and it has a little chirp escaping your throat. Although, he did say it was okay. Maybe just one. One where it counts. His fingers curl into your hair and a soft, hushed ‘ah' falls so very close to your ears as you suck at the sensitive skin right by his pulse. "Fuck." Again the words hit your ears light and airy. It makes you shiver. Maybe trolls do experience this frisson thing, albeit not to the same extent. You run your tongue over the mark you made and place a kiss over the tender skin. You nuzzle him and somewhere in your mind, you acknowledge that he can probably feel your breath against his skin. You know that does something for him. He pulls your head out of his neck by your horns and kisses you and over and over, quick brushes of lips taking yours, before one deep prolonged one. It leaves you both in a daze that has you pausing for air with noses brushing first by accident, then again on purpose. His hands run up your back again, this time over top your hoodie, and keep you close. Tch, as if you had any intention of moving. It’s just touch, you’re just making out, the most risque aspect of this is the hickey you just gave him and the way he likes to run his hands up your shirt to touch your bare back, and yet there’s something deeply intimate about it. It leaves you dizzy. Or wait, is that the alcohol? Both? Maybe both. You rest your forehead on his shoulder.

“Hot damn.” You chirr at him in lue of responding with anything particularly coherent. “Man, like,
that was pretty fuckin awesome.”

”Mhm.” You can practically hear your brain error as it looks for speech.dll.

There is a beat of silence. “How long have we been in this closet?”

“Fuck if I know.” You laugh as you straighten up. Dave steadies you with a hand to your shoulder when you sway a little. “We should get back to the party. Roxy has definitely noticed our abstnths abpsthth that we’re misthng.” You slip out of the closet and peer around the corner. The stoner circle is still going on so it can’t have been that long. You turn back around see Dave casually leaning against the pantry door.

“Sup,” he says with a tilt of his head. You roll your eyes at him and grab his hand to tug him along as you make your way into the kitchen. You both could probably do with some water.

=== Dave: Sit back and watch your dearest idiots

Roxy was quick to locate you and Sollux in the kitchen chugging some very much advised water that you both are currently canceling out with more alcohol because yolo. He's about halfway into a tie-breaker round of beer pong with Roxy and you are about halfway into this overly strong drink that some girl made you after telling her you want a 50/50 shot of remembering the evening. It is some kind of lemonade thing so you are thinking this is probably tequila since it doesn't taste like vodka. It's a little nasty, but you drink it anyway.

"Fuck yeah! Drink up, Captor!” Sollux glares at her the entire time. He is definitely plastered at this point, but he's doing alright. More than alright you guess because his next shot is a perfect arc that sinks right into the cup.

"Ooh, what now? Chug it." She gives him a similar glare as she downs her drink. They go shot for shot until there is only one cup left on each side. It's now a sudden death tie-breaker in a room full of emotionally invested and very much intoxicated Juggalos. Shits wild.

"Sthrider." You turn around in time to watch Mituna jump the back of the couch you're sitting on and land next to you.

"Sup, bro?"

"We're gonna go to, uhhh place place...TACO BELL." He yells the last bit in excitement.

"Imma real with ya. No fuckin way I won' eat dirt onna skateboard right now." Mituna bursts into a fit of laughter.

"We can walk. Sth'not far."

"Aight," Taco bell sounds amazing right now. "We waitin on these chucklefucks?" You gesture towards Roxy and Sollux just as Roxy throws the shot that wins her the game. The room suddenly gets very loud and dramatic with the volley of spadesy exchanges happening. They're playing it up for the sake of drama to the delight of everyone. It dies down as the next set of challengers resets the table and there is suddenly a lamenting troll in your lap.

"Dave, Dave I looostht." He slurs into your shoulder. You pat his head.

"We're goin to Taco Bell." Immediately he perks up.
"I want a crunch wrap," he says with perfect clarity and wide eyes, completely forgetting about his devastating loss. It has a laugh escaping you. In the time it took for Sollux to come over, Mituna has disappeared and been replaced by Gamzee. When the fuck did that happen. You appear to be the rally point and eventually, your group gathers itself up and makes it outside without anyone wandering off.

The only two of you that are steady on your feet are Latula and Kurloz. The rest of you are fucking trashed. You're somehow making your way down the street despite this. There's a smile on your face as you recover from the round of laughter that just ran through you all like an airborne disease from Sollux referencing a meme about having two hands. You bump into him as you walk and it makes him bump into Roxy on his other side. She shoves him back and it sends you stumbling, but he doesn't let you trip and tugs you back into step. There is something so fucking awesome about that, about holding his hand. It's so simple and yet there is something about it. Maybe it's just because you were horrifyingly deprived of any sort of physical affection for so long, but you'd like to think it's something else, something specific to him. You stare at him for a moment when he isn't looking and a warm feeling runs through you.

As soon as the Taco Bell is in sight you all start running toward it for some reason like it's some deeply rooted instinct. It doesn't take long for you to pull ahead, but Roxy is right on your heels. It's looking like you're going to win until Sollux remembers he's a psionic and casually floats past you in a reclined position, giving a little wave.

"Cheater!" Roxy hollers. It just makes him laugh. He's about to win when a purple and yellow blur whizzes past. You all slow to a stop as you approach the parking lot where Kurloz is kneeling down so Mituna can hop off his back. Long-legged bastard. The yellow blood does a little victory dance that ends with a gesture to his crotch to the surprise of exactly no one. You're about to head inside when your stomach turns.

"Y'all go ahead. I'mma reenact that one scene from Team America World Police al'over these bushes," you say with a hand to your stomach.

"You're gonna motherfuckin what?" Gamzee asks. Kurloz tilts his head.

"Upchuck."

"I got this," Roxy says before Sollux can get out the words it looks like he was going for. She throws her arm around your shoulders, which does not help. "Baby's firs parkin lot puke." She says with sarcastic pride while wiping away a fake tear as you both make your way to one of those little foliage islands. You definitely hear the sound of a shutter click or two while emptying the contents of your stomach all over one particularly unlucky shrub. Roxy is fuckin prepared as hell and when you're done evicting the devil from your body she hands you a goddamn paper towel.

"Legit as fuck."

"You know it."

You head inside, only leaning on her a little, to meet up with the others and it's like crossing into another plane of existence. The bright artificial lighting, elevator music, and complete lack of anyone else here save for the few night shift employees qualifies this Taco Bell for a spot in your top 5 liminal spaces. Your crew is leaning on the crowd control railings and staring up at the menu except for Sollux. He's half leaning against, half hanging off of Gamzee who has an arm slung around him.

“Pft, cuddle slut,” Roxy says with a tilt of her chin in the direction of your mutual quadrantmate.
You nod. “But like, wit’standers.”

“Totes.”

“Fo sheezy.”

“Iss an honor really.”

“Ya getta email n’ everythin. Congrad-u-fuckin-lations click ta claim yur prize. The prize’iss malware.”

Roxy snorts. “Dave, your accents thick’as fuck when you’re drunk.”

“I reckon yur right.”

“You did that on purpose.”

“Sure did, partner.”

Sollux peels away from Gamzee to lean back on the railing at look at the both of you. “You’guysth know we can all hear you, right? Esthpecially me.” You can’t keep a straight face and sway into Roxy as you laugh. God, you really are fuckin gone. By some miracle of articulation, you all manage to both order and pay for your food. Latula smashes together two tables for you all to crowd around because she and Kurloz have become the responsible adults here.

“Is anyone else havin like, a spiritual experience with their food, or is’at juss me ‘n these Doritos locos tacos?” This is the best taco of your life, hands down.

“How you fuck up every word in that sentence cept for Doritos locos tacos?” Roxy asks as she hands you a much-needed napkin.

“Hmhmmhm, I'm thinkin Solbro here having one of them existential ascensions, gettin straight up lost in the sauce.”

“Have you ever had a crunch wrap? Thisth’isth the sthtandard resthponsthe to a crunch wrap.”

“Tula, Tula, look, Tula, look.” Latula looks and Mituna proceeds to do something indecent with nacho cheese. She finds it hilarious though so it’s all good. You never actually see Kurloz eat, but every time you find your eyes in that direction there is less food in front of him.

On the long walk back to the Makara’s house, you have enough sense left in your head to signal to Roxy that you both should occupy Sollux while the other’s light up behind y’all. Sollux has told you that he told them that it was chill, but you aren’t sure how true that is. It might be theory chill, but fact chill is another story. He is jonesing for it. Not like, visibly. You just got a feel for it. You can tell in the subtleties. You pass the time with a little freestyling and get all multicultural with some Alternian slam poetry served up hot and fresh by non-other than Gamzee. Who would have thought? Maybe you can collaborate with him too. When you get to the apartment, as you’re all filing in Sollux tugs you aside.

“Sup?” You ask. He shrugs, sways a little, and then gently touches your neck. It comes back to you then, the mark he put there. You bet that means something to him. Not that it doesn't matter to you. Just something different or some shit. Something about ...what was it? He had asked if you trusted him, or well, something like that. Your brain is a little too foggy right now for this kind of reflection. You’ve been in your head a little too long because now he’s saying your name. “Hm?” He laughs and pulls you in for a quick kiss, but you don’t let him go so easily and steal a few more. For a
moment you stand there, hanging on each other under the porch light. There are so many things you could say right about now, but even if your brain wasn't deep fried in the sauce, you don't think you'd be able to. He lets his head rest on your shoulder.

"Hey, Dave?"

"Hm?"

"I-- back before, about when you sthaid, ya know, trusthted me n sthtuff." You let your head rest against his. "I didn't sthay, I mean I should've sthaid, I mean I wanted t--"

"I know," You say into his hair. He smells good, even covered in party grossness.

"You know?"

"Mhm. You made these lil' safe sounds. Made em when you'were hurt 'n sleepin on me." You're getting pretty tired and Sollux is so nice and warm. He starts to pull away but you tug him back and he smiles against your skin.

"Should get insthide."

You make a reluctant sound, but there isn't truly much protest behind it. When he straightens up, he takes your hand even though it's only a short trek upstairs. This is so crazy. How on earth is this all even real? How is he real? How did you get this lucky? Your luck is shit. Or maybe your luck is just all in one lump sum like fuckin J G Wentworth is managing your karma points.

"Dave." You're at the top of the stairs when his voice snaps you from your thoughts. Sollux is looking away from you, but you can still make out the smile tugging at his lips and the yellow blush creeping across his cheeks. "You're mumbling."
You’re in Sollux’s room, sitting on his bed playing some Alternian fighter game. You’ve been playing games with him all morning as an unspoken distraction. All this Bro business has you on edge and you swear it feels like someone is following you whenever you leave the dorm. Playing these games with him was doing wonders for you, that is until you started winning at a suspicious frequency. His character takes three more hits in a row and the health bar drops to zero. You won. Again.

“Alright, what’s up?” you ask, setting down the controller and turning to face him.

“Huh? What do you mean?” He’s playing dumb and doing a poor job of it.

“Dude, I have whooped your ass three times in a row and five more times non-consecutively. I have played this game a grand total of one times before. There is something on your mind and it’s hella distracting you.”

“I got this for 12th perigee’s. It’s new to me too.”

“So, the thing is...” The sentence trails off unfinished. He opens his mouth like he’s going to speak, but shuts it again and bites at his lip. “Fuck, this is going to get so weird.” Well, that’s not what you expected, but you guess it’s better that he’s nervous because it’s awkward rather than because it’s hard to say at all.

“ Weird how?”

“It’s about Roxy,” He says, looking up just the slightest bit at you before letting his head fall again. You wait for him to continue but he doesn’t.

“What about Roxy?”

“I...” he takes a breath and lets out a sigh. “The tournament we’re going to is right around the corner and that’s like our thing. It’s how we met. It’s...competing against each other...it’s a kismesis thing.” He pauses, then sees that you aren’t picking up what he’s throwing down and reluctantly continues. “I want to sleep with her.”

“I’m 1000% sure she is very okay with that. It is not going to take much wooing on your part. You could probably even just vaguely gesture to your crotch.” Your humorous response visibly relaxes him. You guess he wasn’t sure if you’d be okay talking about this. It’s probably weird that you are okay talking about this.

“So you’re okay talking about this?”

You shrug. “I guess. I’ll let you know if it gets too TML.”
“Okay.” He nods and looks away again. “The problem isn’t Roxy’s willingness. She has been super clear that she is game the second I say so. I’m the problem.” He hasn’t talked about this much, but you know this has something to do with Aradia. Something has made it difficult for him to get all touchy touchy. What that is exactly, is a mystery to you. This is something he’s been slowly working through, but it’s still a pretty sore subject. You should probably try to approach this with some tact.

“Is this like a feelings thing or a dick don’t work thing?” Wow. Nailed it. He seems just a little caught off guard by your question.

“My bulges work just fine, thank you.” You think it may have helped though. He’s not as tense as he could be. “It’s a feelings thing. It’s just...since...since Aradia I haven’t...” Looks like you spoke too soon. Now he IS clawing at his hands.

“Pile?” You ask as you stop him before he can do any real damage to himself. He nods. You gather up the surrounding pillows and blankets and jam them in the corner until you have a pretty good nest going on. It isn’t quite a proper pile you think, but Sollux starts moving toward it so it must be good enough. He continues to sit cross-legged so you do the same. There is a moment of heavy silence where you’re getting a little nervous about what you should be doing here. He’s been pretty open about stuff before, but now he’s just sitting there. When he starts clawing at his hands again, you scoop one of them up and give it a squeeze. To your relief, it gets him talking again.

“Roxy and I were taking things really slow for a while. I guess we still are? We’ve messed around, but haven’t...ya know. And this tournament is likely to... rile us up. There is no way at least SOMETHING isn’t going to happen. And it’s bad enough that I’ve barely touched her since I freaked out about it, but it just feels like if there was ever a time to do this, but I haven’t done that since-- I mean except for that thing with Gamzee, I haven’t been with anyone since Aradia and I only ever WAS with her.” You think you are starting to see the issue here. Aradia was his first and excluding Gamzee, his only. All that concupiscent stuff is tied to her. “I don’t want to think about her when I’m with Roxy, but it happens. It’s not every time, and when it does happen, sometimes I can push it away, but not always. Sometimes it’s just too similar. Sometimes it stops being Roxy.” He lets go of your hand to run his fingers through his hair, holding it back before letting his arms fall to his lap. Fuck, this is getting heavy. You need to say something or do something, but you’re drawing a blank. Goddamn, why do you suck at this so much? At a loss for what else to do, you awkwardly scoot closer and wrap your arm around him.

You just crawled into a pile with him not so long ago, but somehow you feel out of practice. Not that you were anywhere near practiced to begin with. The pile before this one was about you though. The last time you truly feelings jammed with him about him was a while ago come to think of it. Over the break, there were piles, mostly in the slime, but that was just physical comfort, existing near each other. You didn’t actually talk about stuff. The end of the semester had been a lot like that too. There wasn’t much that could be done about how he was feeling and he didn’t want to talk about the weed thing. He had said thinking about it made him anxious, it made that bad feeling come back, it made his heart beat too fast, and it made him feel like he couldn’t breathe again. It was why he slept in your bed for the first few days afterward. Being alone made his thoughts spiral. Over the break, you slept together too for what you suspect was a similar reason for him. He just wanted to be near you. He just wanted someone to commiserate with.

Right now though, is a bit different and you are not feeling super confident. “I’m just not over her and I should be. I should be over her. It’s been years, I should be over it, but I’m not and I still miss her, I miss us, and I miss what we were going to be. We were going to be together forever.” His words crescendo and then abruptly stop, the last part coming out significantly softer. He sniffs and blinks back tears threatening his eyes. “I know that sounds like some stupid teenage bullshit, but we really were. We had the rest of her life in front of us. I knew I would outlive her, but I didn’t think it
would be by so much.” His voice is starting to crack and you can tell he’s struggling not to cry. You’re a split second away from papping his face but your nerves are getting to you, and because of your hesitation he continues before you get the guts to move. “I thought we’d have more time. I thought we had—we had things planned out. We had so much planned out. We were even going to raise wiggles together. Ours. And then...it was just gone.” Oh. Oh shit. You suddenly have a slightly different grasp of the circumstances. They weren’t just dating; they were getting ready to spend their lives together. They were...

“She was like your fiancée.” He nods. Tears quietly slip down his face as he stares off into the distance, not truly looking at what’s in front of him. He takes his glasses off to wipe them away with the heel of his hand, but they come back only a moment later. He startles when you touch his face, but quickly eases into it. You pap him again and he sniffs before leaning against you, letting his head rest on your shoulder as you continue to brush your fingers over his cheek and trace his brow. He likes when you do that. A feather-light touch up the bridge of his nose, over his eyebrow and down the side of his face trailing off when you reach his jaw. You think that might be another pale spot, but you haven’t asked yet if it is or if it just feels nice. Either way, he’s calming down. This is going a lot better than the last time he talked about Aradia. He makes a few little chirps that feel something like...like maybe he’s sad, but he’s okay. He’s consolable. “So it’s like...” you try to find something similar to draw on, something to say so you aren’t being so useless. “It’s kind of like Dirk and Bro.” You feel him shift against you like he’s looking at you. “Sometimes Dirk will do or say something and as much as I hate to admit it, it reminds me of Bro, which I suppose is entirely normal since we are all related and have lived together, so of course we would pick up some similar mannerisms, but still there’s that split second where my mind doesn’t register him as Dirk.” That was surprisingly not as difficult to say as you thought it might be, but then again, he did already know that. "...like that time with you."

“Yeah. It was a bit more than a second for me last time, but that’s about the gist of it. It’s a real mood killer.” You think that may have been an attempt at humor. Even if it wasn’t, he sounds calmer now.

“I can imagine.” His hand finds yours again and he weaves your fingers together. "So that's what was happening-- the split-second thing, that's what was happening when we were chilling in the slime that morning I was flipping my shit?” Smooth save there. That sentence almost meant something else entirely.

"No, I was just afraid it would happen. That's the other part. Sometimes it doesn't even have to actually happen. The thought that it might happen can fuck me up too, but I guess that is pretty much the same as thinking about it.” He sighs and rubs his thumb lightly over yours. You wonder if he knows you need that. "It's gotten easier, but I'm still not sure if I can do it." You can sure relate to that statement. Not quite in the same way, but still.

"Would it be a dick move if I asked why it was different with Gamzee?"

He shakes his head. “There’s a couple of reasons. Gamzee is a completely different shape and he’s a lot higher on the hemospectrum than she was. Aradia was warmer than me. He just felt different. He stayed himself even with my eyes closed.” It sounds like this isn’t the first time he’s thought about it. “Another factor, possibly the biggest one, is that I was really fucking high at the time. I was stoned off my ass. It was kind of the whole point of the evening to be so fucked up I wouldn’t be capable of keeping a train of thought long enough to upset myself.” Ah, right. Yeah, that would make a pretty big difference, wouldn’t it?

“Right, I remember you saying that. That you didn’t remember much of it.” You run your thumb over his like he was just doing to you. You don’t think there is anyone else whose hands you’ve ever touched more and yet you don't think you could ever get enough of it. The thought gives you a
fluttery feeling somewhere in your chest.

“There are parts that are more than a little fuzzy, but I remember enough of it. The lead up is kind of a blur, I know I started it though, and the experience itself was hazy so my memory of it is too, obviously, but one thing I do remember about it is that he was really careful with me. He kept making sure I was okay with everything, and that I was still alright, and that I still wanted to be doing what we were doing. He made sure I was okay afterward too. I had regrets before, which he was ridiculously understanding about, but I was thinking about it recently, and in hindsight, I think it may have actually helped a lot."

“I’m guessing that’s more so a red thing.”

“Yeah. Roxy checks in with me too, but not like that. I’ll spare you the details.”

“Preesh.”

You sit in silence together. You aren’t sure what you should be doing if anything. What if he’s waiting for you to do something? Are you missing something obvious? He’s just sitting there, leaning against you, staring off into space. Maybe you should say something, but what would you say? What makes it better?

“Dave?” Oh thank fuck, he said something. The quiet was starting to weird you out.

“Sup?”

“What if I freak out again?”

“Then everybody on the train has to deal with me being on the phone.” At that, he straightens up to look at you. The eye contact has your pulse quickening. Was that not okay?

“That's not a quick or direct route at all. You’d do that for me?” Oh.

“I-- I mean,” It just kind of came out of your mouth. You hadn’t given it a whole lot of thought. Or more accurately, you hadn’t given it a second thought. “Yeah.” He smiles and leans in to kiss your cheek.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah, no problem.” He resumes leaning against you and you rub his shoulder a few times. There’s something you’ve been meaning to ask him. You should do it now. It’s even sort of on topic. Alright, yeah, here we go. On three. 1...2...“ Hey, um...I know we didn't really talk about it, and you don't have to if you don't want to but, just like, are you still doing okay with the not smoking thing? That wasn't something you were considering doing like how you did with Gamzee, was it?” You had thought he was doing really well with it until you saw how he was at that party when people came outside to smoke. He was jonesing so hard.

“It has crossed my mind, but I know I shouldn’t...I want to though. So fucking much. It felt so good when it worked. I didn’t have to think at all. Everything was hazy. It was finally quiet.” You opened up this can of worms but now you aren’t sure where to go with it. Luckily Sollux continues. “It would probably still just make me feel like shit now, physically or otherwise. Plus, it is nice having my psionics back.” He squeezes your hand and you feel a little spark of static. You squeeze his hand back and look at him sidelong over your shades. His eyes catch yours. All you've done is listen, and he's looking at you like you've fixed this for him. You haven't fixed shit.

"I don't have much in the way of advice here," you confess.
"It's okay. Honestly, I don't think there is much that I can do about it besides keep trying, which sucks, but I guess eventually it'll suck less. Getting it out of my head is helpful at least. It's not like I've never talked about it but this is different than talking about it with doctors. I don’t trust doctors.” The implication that Sollux does trust you though, doesn't get past you unnoticed. He's idly brushing histhumb over your hand again while he stares off in thought. You're drifting in some of your own. He said he hasn't really done much since he freaked out last time. If he does freak out again, that's probably going to be pretty hard on him. A thought flits through your head, and much like last time, you aren't sure you were ready for it, but once it's there, it's there. You can't unthink it. If it's too much for him to do this sober in a spades way, if he needed it to be– if he needed...you...could you? Your face is hot and your brain locks up when it truly hits as to what offer you're considering here. You'd be offering yourself. You'd be offering to sleep with him. With a guy. Because you care about him. Enough to even THINK about doing that with him. Doing IT with him to help him get through this, to help him work past this because it still hurts and you don't want it to hurt. But maybe also because...because...You push it away and swallow hard. It feels like eyes are on you. Is this just another excuse in a long line of excuses? Do you want it to happen? You don't know. You don't know what you want. Why don't you know what you want? It shouldn't be so difficult to know if you want to do those kinds of things with someone. Why can't you make up your mind? Why is this making you so nervous? No, that you know. That's the only thing that you DO know. You know why this makes you nervous. A phantom pain throbs at the back of your skull. "Dave, you're squeezing my hand really hard. Are you alright?" You are suddenly aware of the death grip you have on him and immediately let go. You were uneasy before, but now you're kinda freaking out a little. There's a brush of skin against yours and it sends you reeling backward. If it weren't for the footboard you probably would have fallen off the end of the bed. Sollux is looking at you with a concerned expression as he holds his hands up where you can see them.

"I..." You what? You have no idea. You're starting to panic. You're body is telling you to run. Instead, you run one of your hands through your hair and take a deep breath as you try to regain your bearings. You're fine, totally fine. You're safe. You're with Sollux. He's safe. He's your moirail. You're moirail who is sitting there in the pile nest afraid to come near you because you just jumped back like his touch burned. Way to go, Dave. You sigh and let your head fall back, instantly regretting the action when you smack it against the wooden frame. "Tsss, fuck," you hiss as you sit yourself up and rub the back of your head. Things feel more manageable when you look up again, the phantom sensation now replaced with real pain. Sollux holds out his hand and pulls you back into the pile when you take it, but lets go as soon as you're beside him again. "My bad, man. Didn't mean to freak the fuck out on you." You smile one of those fake smiles and try to make light of it, but you know he isn't truly buying it.

"It's cool." He's not touching you...but you want him to. Small steps, you remind yourself before reaching out to take his hand for what feels like the millionth time today and weave your fingers through his. "What freaked you out?" He asks as he gets a little closer to you. His knee bumps into yours, and it's so dumb that that still gives you butterflies, but it does. You have very little doubt about what set you off, but the idea of getting into that right now feels exhausting.

"I'm not up for jamming bout that right now. Maybe later." "Kay." He leans his head on your shoulder again and you reach up to give the base of one of his horns a few good scratches. When you stop, he whines and it tugs a hummed affectionate laugh out of you. It was cute. You remind yourself that It's okay that you think it is. You resume gently scratching his scalp and after a moment or so he speaks up again. “So, Minecraft?” You smile, a real one this time. “I can’t believe you got me hooked on that shit. Hell yeah, let's mine some craft.”
You've been crash coursing this ~ATH stuff for the past few days. You can see why not a hell of a lot of people use it. It's annoying. Roxy gave you PDFs of Sollux's manuals that she has, but you still ask her questions now and then for the sake of time. It's taking longer and longer for her to respond and you think your questions are testing her abilities at this point, but she seems determined not to refer you to her kismesis as a matter of pride. You could just ask him, you are periodically talking to him as well, but you don't. Roxy wouldn't be too thrilled with that. Besides, you don't want to derail Sollux. He's been combing through that data with his brother and working with Hal to optimize the cataloging system. He seems to be on a roll with it. The messages he sends you are mostly commentary, but he does spit out a fair point here and there. Mituna is proving more useful than you anticipated as well. All the patterns that he's come across so far are ones you already have noted, but the speed at which he can recognize them is what makes him valuable. While his memory sucks in most regards, you're pretty sure he's only reading through all this stuff once, and yet he's picking up on Bro's habits. He described it as "like guitar hero but more strings", which you think was him condescendingly explaining sheet music to you as if you didn't grow up around two musicians. Whatever his methods, you're interested to see what he comes up with.

You push away from your desk and set down your shades so you can rub your eyes. You've been at this for a while now. Your coffee is cold but you throw it back anyway. You dug around on troll hub for a while earlier to get more perspective on what you should be reading up on beyond the basics and while comment records aren't enabled for public view, it wasn't that difficult to find them. Only three of his bots are on that site, but that is two more than you knew about. They aren't exclusively talking about ~ATH, and in fact, they only mention it on videos involving gold bloods which makes you wonder. Traditionally they do take on technology-oriented professions at a higher rate than other castes so it could be happenstance that ~ATH was mentioned. You are very tempted to track Bro's bots more closely. You tried it once before many years ago, but it did not end well for you, and you've been hesitant to try it again.

You're diving deeper into your thoughts, playing out different scenarios in your head when Hal messages you.

auto-Responder [AR] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT]

[AR] You're obsessing again.

[TT] I'm not obsessing. I'm being thorough.

[AR] That sounds just like something someone who was obsessing might say.

You bicker back and forth with Hal for a bit about your awareness of your surroundings and the passage of time. The conversation is somewhat pointless and you know he isn’t going to let up because he thinks he’s right, so you grab your keys and look around for your cigarettes only to disappointingly remember that you have a vape now. It's better than nothing, but it isn't the same. You grab your keys and your vape and head down to the shop. Hal has realized that the farther along you get with Sawtooth, the closer he is to getting a body, so he no longer has any complaints when you work on him. It may also have something to do with you having upgraded the transceiver in his drone. When you arrive at Zahhak’s, he goes off exploring the town, as he now tends to do, while you head to the workshop. Equius is spot welding a prototype cashier when you walk in. He pauses to look over at you before going back about his business. For a while, you work in comfortable silence. You like that about Equius. He doesn't expect small talk from you when you share this space. He works on his stuff, you work on your stuff, and if you have something to say it's usually
about using a tool when the other is done with it or something being easier with an extra set of hands. However, today is different. You've been working long enough to have fallen into a groove when He puts down his tools and dabs his forehead with a towel before breaking the silence.

"Dirk." You turn off the blowtorch and flip up your visor.

"Sup?"

"My moirail is concerned that she has offended you." Equius continues to pat sweat off himself, this time his neck.

"How?"

"Good, she has not. I will tell her as much," he says hurriedly as he goes to turn back to his work.

"Hold up. How does she think she's offended me?" You ask holding out the hand not full of blowtorch. Equius sighs and swivels back to face you.

"She misunderstood your relationship with the human girl who drinks--"

"Watch it." You warn with an impressively accurate edge to your synthesized voice. Equius dabs at his forehead again. Gross.

"Nepeta misunderstood the nature of your relationship with the... mirthful young lady. She is concerned that given your culture's history surrounding your human homosexuality and tendencies for monogamy, that she has been insensitive and that you don't like her anymore."

"Hm," You set down the blowtorch and lean back against the workbench. "That is quite a drastic leap in conclusions. If I recall, I was more confused than anything else by what she said. Upon reflection, however, I can see why she would have made that assumption. Roxy and I are close, and while humans generally don't have moirails, my little bro does. It was an easy mistake to make. A social faux pas at most. We're still good."

"Fo paw?"

"A blunder."

"Nepeta will like that phrase. I will use it when I tell her." His words aren't what would generally be considered soft, but for Equius there is a dulled edge to them, a pensive quality before he clears his throat and snaps his focus back to you. "Good. I'm extremely certain she will be glad to hear this. She thinks you are cool for some reason." A smooth delivery, but your Aunt has perfected the art of the backhanded compliment, so Equius's falls a little short by comparison. You both go back about your business, getting lost in thought as you work. You've just hit your groove again when your phone buzzes several times in a row.

golgothasTerror [GT] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT]

[GT] Hello there chum!

[GT] Im just about done packing my provisions for the expedition.

[GT] Are we still on for tonight?

[TT] Of course.

[TT] You’re off to pursue your wildest dreams of adventure. Like hell am I going to ditch you on the
last day you’re here.

[GT] I wouldn't exactly call a field trip my wildest dreams of adventure however I do admit I am rather giddy about this field study.

[TT] It’s for half the semester. That’s a bit more than a field trip.

[GT] I suppose so.

[GT] In that case what kind of souvenir do you want from my travels? And I won’t take no for an answer mister.

[TT] Bring me back the shiniest fucking rock you find.

[TT] It better blind me with its luster.

[GT] If I happen upon a geode its yours.

[GT] Maybe a fossil for Dave too if I spot one.

[TT] I’m going to get going soon. I didn’t get as far as I would have liked to with Sawtooth, but I still have to clean up and shower. I’m all hells of gross.

[GT] Golly I’m tempted to tell you not to.

[GT] It’s always a right pleasure watching you work.

[TT] Well...hold on a second.

[GT] Dirk?

[GT] Hello?

[GT] What sort of tomfoolery are you up to?

[TT] Equius is here, but not for long.

[TT] You catching my drift?

[TT] Are you picking up what I’m putting down here?

[GT] Jiminy cricket.

[GT] You do have quite the knack for swinging a plan into action.

[TT] Give it thirty minutes before you head over.

===> Dirk: Give him a gander.

There are eyes on you as you work, green ones to be exact. You know exactly what look is on his face despite having your eyes trained on the metal you’re working. At a glance, it might seem like the look many a man has given you, a look of hunger and want, but it isn’t. The look Jake is giving you is one of fond fascination. He is also oogling you rather blatantly, but mostly it’s the fascination part. Alright, maybe it’s fifty-fifty. You put down your tools and lean back against the workbench,
conscious of the way you move, hip cocked and shoulders asymmetrically aligned in an enticing contrapposto. You're distracted by the thought that it would look even better with a smoke in your hand. God, you'd kill for a cigarette.

Jake's voice pulls you back in, although you missed what exactly he said. He smiles and walks closer to you. Very close. His fingers brush your arm before resting on your bicep.

"Head in the clouds again?" The assumption works in your favor. You were going for a nonchalant sort of tease there. That picturesque quality teetering on the precipice of being over the top that Jake enjoys whether he knows it or not.

"Just thinking."

"Is there ever a time you aren't?"

"There is, but it's not one I can mention in polite conversation."

Maybe it's the robots, or the geological program he got into that holds promises of adventure, but Jake is riled up something fierce today and it only takes that one bit of suggestive wording before you find yourself lip-locked, sitting on top of the workbench, with him between your legs. You love that he can pick you up. A hand runs up your thigh and you wrap your legs around his waist, pulling him even closer. He whispers sweet nothings against your neck and you run your fingers through his hair. He doesn't care that you're covered in sweat and grime from metalworking. In fact, you think he likes it if the way he's kissing you breathless is any indication. He grips your hip with a strong hand as he holds you close. The other one disappears up your shirt. You weren't kidding before. This is the only time your brain stops. When his hands are on you, when he's kissing you, touching you, making you writhe beneath him and beg for more, that's when your mind is at its quietest. It isn't long before your shades and the speaker on your neck are discarded. It's just you and him alone together. You and Jake and the workbench he intends to bend you over.

== Roxy: Talk with Nepeta

She's sitting all glassy-eyed and trembling lipped on her bed with a teacup half-full of your wine. She's been giving you a weird look now and then for a few days, and you finally found out why when you walked in to find her sulking and checking her phone every other minute. She thinks Dirk is mad at her. The two of you have been sitting here going back and forth about it for a little while. Mostly, you're going in circles while she waits for her moirail to message her, but you've made a little progress in convincing her.

"Nep, iss gonna be fine. I told you he's not mad."

"But what if he is? I'd be furrious if anyone said Equius and I weren't a real thing beclaws we're meowrails. What if he thinks I didn't take him and Jake seriously?"

"Yur giving him waaaaay too much credit. Boys're dumb. He ain't puttin that much thought into it."

"But he didn’t say hi to me at the gym, or the other day at the shop. He ALWAYS says hi to me."

"Okay, so, liiiittle secret. Dirk is bad at multitasking, so bad, like, terrible. Task juggling? Wizard. He's got so many irons in the fire like you don’t even know. But multitasking? He sucks. He doesn't know it though. If he was talkin ta Hal and doing ab-slutely anythin else, he prolly juss didn’ notice you. He's been working onna bunch of shit lately." You leave out the part where you think his Bro-alert senses are like a background app devouring RAM, because Nepeta doesn’t need to know that,
but it is your own personal theory on the matter. Nepeta looks down at her teacup of wine and
sniffles before taking a sip.

“You really think so?” She asks quietly.

“Totes. Even if you did ruffle his feathers, an I'm not sayin ya did, he’d know you didn’ mean it like
that. He likes you. You good.” You take a long swig of wine and then turn to lay hanging off the
side of your bed so that you’re looking at Nepeta upside down.

“He likes me?”

“A’course.” You say like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “You’re cool in his book.” At that,
she perks up a little. A neigh sound comes from her palmhusk and has her jumping a little, nearly
dropping it in her haste to read the message she just got, which you’re going to take a wild guess is
from Equius. She sets her cup down on the desk and stares intensely for a moment at the message
before springing up on her feet with a smile.

“Ooooh, Roxy you were right!” You set down the bottle just in time to sit up and catch an incoming
hug.

“Yup, told ya.” You break away from the hug and stand up, getting in a good stretch before spinning
back around to face her. “Now come help me pick out an outfit fur the tournament. I wanna look
hawt, like panties droppin’, boxers bunchin’, nobody safe from all 'a this,” You say as you strike a
pose and gesture toward yourself.

“Well, if you want to distract Sollux...” She gets a mischievous smirk on her face and bounds over to
the closet. You’re so fuckin amped for this, but also a little nervous. You’re thinking Sollux is
thinking maybe he wants to do a little more than a little something-something. It makes sense, right?
Like no way this isn’t going to get you both going. It’s practically just elaborate foreplay. It’s been
on your mind for a while in more than one way. You just hope you aren’t bringing yourself up for a
letdown. Dave did offhandedly tell you not to expect too much of him. It makes you think they
jammed about this, but that’s good. It means he was working it out. You hope he did at least. You
two haven’t gotten particularly close since you fucked that shit up. And It’s not all pent up needs that
have you twisted up about this either. You miss being close to him like that. So, for now, this is a
good distraction. Something simple. Something fun. Nepeta’s enthusiasm, a splash of wine, and a
little dress-up montage just like in the movies are the perfect combo to ease your mind for a while.

==>

You're lying lazily on the top bunk of your bed in the last throes of a migraine. It's fading away and
with it, your thoughts are regaining their ability to wander. And by "wander", you mean go directly
to Dave. He was extra jumpy earlier and you don’t think it was because he was playing emotional
wingman. He would have just told you that you were being gross if you crossed a line. You were
careful not to. You didn’t even mention that you’re not entirely sure which side of this fuck you’re
going to be on. Which, honestly, is rather exciting, but still makes you nervous. Regardless, this is
the best time, right? Something like this, a competition, it'll keep things running black. It'll be easier
that way. It’s also a little easier knowing Dave would make the trek to your hive if you really really
needed him to. You hope he doesn’t need to, but knowing he would, and that he’d talk you down on
the way there, openly on public transit like that isn’t something out of one of Karkat's smutty books,
is reassuring. It’s okay if it goes well and it's okay if it doesn’t. He’s so good to you. You hope you
measure up.

Which brings you back to your previous thought. Dave was a tightly wound ball of anxiety, but you
aren’t sure what exactly it was that set him off. You were lost in thought so you hadn’t noticed that he had gone a different kind of quiet, a bad kind of quiet, until he started crushing your hand. He’s been on edge the past couple days with all this Bro business. Something freaked him out though, and when you touched him... He’s never actually confided in you the reason for the whole touch aversion deal, but you gather that maybe that’s because it’s tied to more than just one thing. He might not know where to begin with it. He does want to touch you though. You're sure of that. Sometimes when you're alone together and Dave feels safe, it's like he can't hold you close enough. However, in public, or if he's feeling anxious, he's hesitant to touch you in even the simplest of ways. It's gotten easier, but it's clearly still something that bothers him.

You’re pulled from your thoughts by the buzz of your palm husk. It’s a reminder. Your headache is mostly gone by now. You might as well do this. You open the phone app and start punching in letters until the right name appears. The dial tone rings four times before it picks up.

["The fuck you hitting up my shellphone for, Captor?"]

"I have a favor to ask."

["Water makes you think I'd do you a favor?"]

"Because it's illegal and dangerous, but mostly because I'm going to extort the crap out of you." There is a moment of dead air before she laughs.

["Ahahaha, got your posture pole back. Trout fuckin time. Extortion or not, I ain't doing no charity work. If you want somefins there betta be some kind of payoff for me."]

"If you help me out, I'll take a strike off your record. If you don't, I'll add one. Considering you already have two, the third one will be in warrant form."

["Dam, you ain't fucking messing around. Aight, whatchu got for me?"]

"I saw that you're in Florida now. I need you to tap a wire in Texas."

[“That’s a big fuckin state. Where abouts?”]

“Houston. I would ask if you’re interested, but I feel like you might rather take the hike than dodge the feds.”

[“Hold up, somefins fishy. You want me to tap a wire and in exchange, you’re gonna hack da police? What’s the catch? What’s on the otha side of this wire?”]

“This...let’s call it a project, has some rules that while I could easily break them and come out successful, it’s more to my advantage to bend them instead. And besides, if you think this is my first felony, you’re shorely mistaken.”

[“Your littermate is coral in my conch, but you ain’t half bad. So, gimme the deets.”]

“I’m going to send you something. It looks like a flash grub, but it opens like a clamshell.”

[“Nice.”]

“It has pins in it. I need you to clamp it around the-- the wire that makes the internet happen at a certain residence.”

[“Like a B ’n E?”]
“No, it needs to be from the outside of the building. It’s a hive stem so I assume it has a fire escape. It should be fairly easy.”

[“Yeah, a little too easy.”]

“As long as no one catches you, yes.”

[“Not sayin they cod, but if’in they did, whose house am I bugging? This betta not be no gang shit. I don’t fucks with that.”]

“He’s a nobody, just a part-time DJ and full-time peddler of questionable porn.”

[“Sounds like a bad cover for some’a that anon stuff. Carps, ya know what, I dun wanna know. You got my info. Fix my record and send me the shit. In that order. I ain't going down for no chum-ass trespassing charge.”]

She hangs up the phone before you can say anything else, but that's fine. There wasn't much left to say. It was a surprisingly smooth conversation considering you haven't spoken to her in so long and the last time you did speak to her, you were the special kind of hot mess that can only be achieved from psychiatrists playing fool's roulette with your medications. Or perhaps the vast improvement is why it went so well; she took you seriously. That and it was a good offer. It's no sweat off your sniffnode. Hell, let Roxy watch you hack a government database and that's date night. Now you have to make a sniffer though, and all your spare parts are at your hive. Which is why you had set a reminder for today, right right. It's all coming back now. You were going to do that the day after tomorrow, the day after the tournament when you'll be at your hive anyhow. You're going to see if you have anything else that's useful lying around too. You've been thinking about what you could make Dave so he could feel safer. Bro would definitely take his phone. The only idea you had was some kind of high-frequency emitter. Something to make digital assistants ping some kind of signal. There sure isn’t a shortage of those around. You’re not sure how unnoticeable that would be though. Maybe you’re overthinking this. You could always just LoJack him. GPS trackers can be bulky though. Most commercial ones are actually bluetooth or wifi and that won’t help much, especially in a remote area. Hm... You pull out your husktop and start searching a few things on a hunch. Before you know it, you’re lost to the world in a flurry of research.

```=> Roxy: Gear up for the showdown

The elevator ride up to Sollux's apartment feels like it takes forever. It could be because he lives on the top floor, but you think it may also be the growing excitement for the day that has you amped to the max. You're keeping it cool though. No way you're going to let him know you're so jacked up on anticipation. When you finally step inside, the front door opens into a main area. You’re mostly standing in a living room that continues to your right, but to your immediate left is a small kitchen. A change in flooring and the kitchen table divide the two. You can tell from a quick look around that currently the primary occupant is Mituna. You know Sollux is up here periodically to help him with things that he has trouble doing or remembering to do on his own, but there is also evidence to suggest Latula and Kurloz are frequently here as well, if not more so. The living room is kind of a mess, but a managed one. Among the usual furnishings are personal items strewn about and it isn't difficult to guess which of your friends they belong to. The kitchen is reasonably clean, but you suspect that someone may have recently tidied up knowing you’d be here. It's confirmed as you pass a whiteboard covered in teal, purple, and yellow notes. One of which, written in purple, mentions having cleaned up and also chides Mituna for not having "real food" in the house again. The apartment continues off to the left where Sollux leads you down the hallway. His room is in a similar state as his dorm, teetering on the edge of being a disaster. He has both a bed and a recuperacoon (as
many trolls seem to), and of course, the recuperacoon has two sides to it, and of course, they are red and blue. There is a space where his desktop would be if it weren’t in his dorm. That area is particularly cluttered. Parts and books and brick-a-brack litter his desk and extend beyond it. You’re sure there is a work table buried under there somewhere. Your favorite choice in decor is all the network cables. Some of them, the more permanent ones you suppose, are duct-taped right to the floor. They all eventually make their way into his closet where a faint humming noise seems to be coming from. You throw your bag down near his dresser as you make your way over. You half expect the beehouses to be in there, but find that the cables all feed into a hole in the back of the closet near the floor.

“They go to the server room. It’s between our closets,” he explains. The location makes you wonder if Mituna was a larger part of their server setup before he was like how he is now.

“Do I get to see this mysterious server room?” you say as you turn to face him. There is a little smirk on his face.

“Maybe,” he walks over to you slowly, locking eyes the whole time, and brings his hands up to rest on your hips. He’s so close that you’d barely have to lean in to kiss him, but you don’t. He’s tempting you to make the first move. That’s not how this day is going down. You’re going to leave him wanting until he can’t stand it anymore. You move away, casually slipping out of his lose hold.

You don’t stick around his hive for long. Mostly this was just a pit stop to drop your stuff off and grab a bite so you didn’t have to pay the surely ridiculous prices at the event. When you’re finally, finally, walking up to the convention center your eyes are bright with excitement.

== Be Sollux instead

You couldn’t take your eyes off her even if you wanted to. You’re both excited for this but her excitement shines through with an energy that captivates you. Plus, she looks super hot. She’s dolled up more than usual (as she would say, her lip gloss is poppin’) and it hasn’t gone unnoticed by you, but you haven’t made mention of it. She’s wearing a pink high waisted skirt and a white crop top with a lighter pink silhouetted cat face on it. The neck is a little wide and it hangs tantalizingly askew, just so, on her shoulders, showing off one of her bra straps. She also has on those pink slouchy socks with her white high tops. She is wearing all things that she knows you like on her, and that she knows she looks hot as fuck in. She’s teasing you. The way she walks, a subtle sway that’s both alluring and confident, makes you think she’s also attempting to make you jealous by garnering the attention of others. That and the look she flashes you while basking in said attention is kind of a tip-off. She isn’t the only one putting in some effort; you showered. You also may have done a little extra preening in the mirror this morning. It is even possible that you groomed your sideburns and filed your claws. And while it may not be super noticeable to most, Roxy will notice how the shirt you’re wearing is tighter— which is to say it’s the correct size, and how your black jeans hang low off your hips enough that when combined with wearing this comparatively clingy shirt, a sliver of skin shows when you move just right. You’ve caught her looking. Once badges are acquired, you both mingle in the crowd, near but not next to each other. It’s a game. She watches you and you watch her through the sea of people as if you didn’t come here together. The different tournaments haven’t started up, and yours isn’t for a while yet, so you wander until you find where they’ve set up a mess of arcade machines. Fresh scoreboards for the taking. You’ve scooped up a spot for yourself on a few machines before you happen upon one that Roxy has already gotten to. So, of course, you thrash her score. Out of curiosity you go back to a machine you’ve already been to and find that she’s done the same to you. Well, now you can’t just let her have that. You beat her score and then you find another machine she’s been at and knock her clean off the board. She does the same right back. As you are making your way over to one of the machines you’re fighting over, you spot her taking a
break from your feud to wreck someone in a light gun game. She has a cocky air to her, but also has the skills to back it up. You’re leaning against a machine watching her and must have such a look on your face because some guy standing near you speaks up.

“I know, right?” he says. “I’d go versus with her if ya know what I mean.” You tear your eyes away from Roxy to glance at the human guy next to you. You do not care for the way he is looking at her.

“Uh-huh,” you say with a non-committal skepticism that flies over his head.

“She’s not too bad with that gun. Kind of a weird stance though. Can't be helping her aim any.”

You’ve never been, but you know Roxy and Jake go to the range together. Somehow you doubt her stance is weird or negatively affecting her aim.

“Maybe you should go give her some pointers.” It could be interesting to watch her feed this guy his own ass. It might be difficult though because his head is apparently pretty far up there. It takes little to no convincing for him to go over and make a fool of himself. You hang back and watch as he tries to show her how it’s done. It goes...not well for him. You wish you had popcorn for this show. He comes back with a visibly bruised ego and makes a few comments about the player two pistol being janky.

“Whatever man, she is so out of your league anyway.”

“Tch,” he scoffs. “Like your scrawny grey ass would have better luck.” You can’t possibly turn down an opportunity like this. With a push off the arcade cabinet, you strut over to where Roxy is pretending to blow the smoke off her plastic pistol.

“I’m fucking with that prick who wants in your pants. Care to play along?” you say low and close as you come up beside her.

“So that idiot coming over here was your doing?”

“Barely. It was a sarcastic suggestion at most.”

She tilts your chin up with the business end of the fake gun. “Not trying to get a little dessert before dinner, are you?” She darts her tongue out to lick her lips and you can’t tell if it’s unconscious or not.

“Where would the fun be in that?” She sizes you up and holsters the light gun back into the machine where it came from, then drops a little notepad and a glitter gel pen out of her sylladex. You wonder what she’s actually writing while pretending to give you her number. She rips the page out and folds it in half single-handedly, then slowly slips the piece of paper deep into the right front pocket of your jeans as close to your crotch as possible, taking her time running her fingers back up your thigh before winking at you and walking away with an extra swing to her hips. For a moment you forget the game that your playing and are genuinely stunned. You take a moment to collect yourself before walking back over to the human who dared to express his skeevy desires about your kismesis. A shit-eating grin takes over your face as you get closer. He opens his mouth to speak, but you’ve had enough of that. You hold up two of your fingers and wiggle the forks of your tongue between them, halting whatever cry of outrage he was forming, and cherish the look of shock and disgust on his face as you walk away. Once you’ve gone a decent distance you dig down into your pocket and pull out the note that Roxy jammed in there, the memory of her touch surfacing as you unfold the paper. You should have expected this. In glittery pink cursive is a single word; bitch. She got you good.

You wander around some more and eventually find yourself in a room dedicated to every variant of smash bros. It’s a great place to kill some time and calm the fuck down because the memory of her hand running up your leg is still far too vivid in your mind. You’re a couple of rounds in with a
group of rust bloods, just about to start a heated all pokemon, final destination, psionics only, rematch when you feel a presence behind you. She leans in close, but not close enough. Her breath laps at your skin. “Fuck em up, babe.” Oh and how you do. For Roxy, you wipe the floor with them. She stays long enough to see you do it and then she’s gone again. You do that to each other, appearing and disappearing, crossing paths, small teasing touches, cast glances. It’s a game to pass the time while you enjoy the company of strangers because it’s still too early to truly start competing with her. The anticipation is killing you, so when the first tournament matches start to get going you are extremely relieved. You float up out of the crowd of people, scan the room for your kismesis and move onto the next when you don’t see her. You find her playing a Guilty Gear game and land softly behind her. She looks up at you and smirks knowingly. She loses because of that, but it doesn’t matter. She doesn’t care about whatever rando she was playing. It’s you she wants to destroy. From game to game, rematch after rematch, racing games, fighting games, top tier characters, shit tier characters, anything you can turn into a contest becomes one. You both are rabid by the time you head up to the computer room to get in a few practice rounds. The rivalry between you is practically palpable as you sit opposite each other at one of the tables outfitted with several machines. None of them have keyboards or mice. It’s so unlikely that anyone would want to use them, that they don’t even put them out. You drop yours out of your sylladex and Roxy does the same. You’ve long since stopped counting wins and losses because ultimately those don’t matter. This is what matters. For months this has been background noise, a pin to stick in each other’s side. This is the win that you both most want. By chance you see the people running this show drawing up the bracket and realize that the teams are divvied up by table. That won’t work. That will pit you against Roxy too soon. Quickly you pick up your shit and move to a different table. Roxy huffs at you from what is apparently table 4, looking miffed until you gesture to the whiteboard out of her line of sight. Table two is more your thing anyway. You get a few rounds in while seats fill and a very bored looking psionic takes over setting up an uncooperative projector screen from a cluster of other staff members. You’re dead to the world as another round begins and when it’s over and you pick your head up again there are significantly more trolls in here. You here two people exchanging some borderline inappropriate growls at the table next to you. You are a little envious, but you rather take Roxy down in the final match. Instead, you stare at her until she notices you and then flip her off. The lights dim and a staff member starts up the standard spiel of introduction, rules, blah blah blah. You tune out most of it and fade back in toward the end when they start getting things going for table 1. Adrenaline has your vision practically vibrating as you watch their match and wait your turn. It feels like it’s over as soon as it starts and before you know it, you’re up. Deep breath. Focus. Don’t fuck it up.

You narrowly avoid fucking it up. So narrowly. It might have been dumb luck. You get your bearings back though and secure yourself a seat in the final match. With a stretch, you lean back and see them writing in your screen name for table 2. Only a few more tables to go. Table three’s turn drags out for a while, but that doesn’t surprise you considering that was the source of the borderline racy growls from before. When it’s Roxy’s turn, the screen has your full attention. As shit as you think that character is, she really knows how to use it. Just like she’s done to you before, she takes out a player with a perfect head-shot that sends them headlessly rag-dolling. You wonder if there is a secret to that that you aren’t aware of, or if she’s just lucky with the kill cam. It’s just her and someone else. You hold your breath as you silently cheer her on. She wins. You get to fight her. It sets a fire in you somewhere sordid. The matches drag on. You glance at her between them. Your eyes don’t catch until the last one. Hers are bright like neon in the computer light as you stare each other down, unwilling to break away until you absolutely have to. This is it. It starts out the way your matches always do. You clean house together, a momentary cease fire to rid the other players from your fight. There is something special about the conditional truce that makes the next part all that much sweeter. When the player count drops, you turn on each other, pulling all the stops for your captive audience. Apart, together, fall back, together, fire, dodge. Health bars dwindle little by little as you take each other hit for hit. It’s probably only been a few minutes, but it feels like an eternity
that you’ve been fighting when you see the opening. You take it without hesitation. A wicked grin plasters itself across your face as the kill cam takes control. Your chair screeches as you stand up and turn to Roxy. You prepare to deliver some sick line to her only to be met with confusion when she appears to be doing the same. You both turn to the projector screen where both kill cams are in action depicting your gruesome demises. You didn’t think you could even do that. You wait for the animations to end and the winner screen to pop up. One of you had to have shot first.

The game glitches spectacularly. At first, you can’t tell who it is because the character model is still rag-dolled and mostly in the floor, but as it attempts to do its victory animation and the camera freaks out, you catch a glimpse of it. A second later the camera pans to its proper place and the screen name pops up in front of the polygonal disaster still stuck in the floor. You turn to face Roxy with the widest grin on your face, fangs visible and the tips of your tongue poking out. You can feel her glare boring into your soul as people congratulate you. The look is only meant for you and it only lasts the briefest of moments before her expression changes. She loses with grace, keeping a favorable demeanor all through the closing formalities. When things die down and they start prepping for the next game, she eyes you over her shoulder as she makes her way out. You follow her, weaving between people to catch up, only to lose her in the crowd. You turn around, thinking maybe you passed her, but she isn’t there either. You aren’t short but you float up a few inches off the ground to better look for that pink hair of hers. It’s then that you’re yanked back sharply into an elevator. She has you pinned off-balance up against the wall. The doors close behind her and it’s just the two of you.

“You got so fucking lucky.” Her voice is low and you can almost hear how badly she wants to be growling at you.

“Tch, that was all skill.” She's so close that you would barely have to move to kiss her.

“Double perfect shots, with kill cam triggers, at a tournament?” She licks her lips and it takes every drop of restraint you have to keep your hands to yourself. “That was entirely luck. The shots were too close. The game coin flipped so it wouldn’t crash and you know it.” You hadn’t thought about that, and she is further destroying your ability to think at all by being so close to you. You give her a devious grin to buy yourself some time and before she can call you out on it, the elevator dings and you spring apart just as the doors are opening up. You slink out first and wink at her as you take off. It’s her turn to chase.

You look back to make sure she’s still there as you make your way through the convention center. Oh, she’s more than there, she’s right the fuck behind you. You dodge her again and keep going, out of the building, down the block, your feet hitting the pavement in a way they haven't in forever. You skid as you make a sharp turn towards the PATH station. She's right on your heels and the stairs are full of people. You are going to be that guy today. With the surefootedness of someone who can't fall, you take a running leap up onto the center railing and half jump, half grind down it as bystanders curse you out. Gog, that's going to piss her off so much. Your blood is pumping as you near the turnstile. You slow down a bit. You almost never get it on the first swipe and you do not need to get gut-punched right now. You make it through just as the train is pulling up. Roxy is heading toward you with a look on her face that damn near stops your heart and has you clenching for the sake of decency. You smirk at her and get on the quickly filling train car. She gets through with a single swipe of her card and hurries toward the doors, slipping through just as they're closing. It's elbow to elbow. She's right in front of you. There is so little space between you that it might be easier if you WERE touching just to have the relief of it. Her eyes are locked onto yours. It's intense. You can't look away. She wins if you look away. Time ceases to exist between stops as you stare each other down. She so close. You want to touch her so badly. She drops something out of her sylladex. You can see movement out of the corner of your eye. Without breaking away she touches up her lip gloss, her mouth open just ever so slightly. The taunt is punctuated by a smack of her lips. You are dying.
Your bulges are squirming in protest from being held in. You can't let her undo you like this. You flare your psionics, letting your eyes glow brighter and unseen static build between you. She can feel it on her skin. You know she can. The way she breathes a little deeper and how her eyes slip shut for just a beat too long give her away.

Your stop finally comes up. The entire way back is a blur. All you can think about is getting her alone with you and it is doing nothing to help the problem you've got going on in your pants right now. You're both out of breath from chasing each other here when you step into the elevator. It dings as it passes more floors, climbing, climbing, all the way to the top. The doors open. You make your way down the hall. You unlock the door.

It a heartbeat she has you against the wall. You can't wait any longer. You pull her toward you and finally, finally, her lips are against yours. You fumble blindly for the lock. The moment it clicks shut you turn the tables and push her against the wall. She scowls at you and growls that way she can. It lacks the range but you don't think it's something she can do on command, it's a reaction, you have to pull it from her, and that makes it so much hotter. You kiss her hard and rough as you press closer. You can't get enough of her fast enough. You don't even pull away to growl, you just keep kissing her, only breaking away when you need to come up for air. Panting, you lock eyes. Her pupils are blown wide and you bet yours are too.

The moment of stillness breaks when she shoves you backward. You glare at her and she smirks as she slowly pulls the laces of her hightops loose, making you wait as she kicks off her shoes. You step on the heels of yours and simply walk out of them, shooting her a look that says yours are better as you do it. She comes at you again, grabbing your collar and kissing you hard. You pull her as you move backward, one hand on her back and the other behind you as you try to keep up with the fevered way she's kissing you. When your fingers find the back of the lounge plank, you bring her close and throw both your bodies over it. There's a smirk on your face as she pushes you up from where you've landed on top of her and starts manhandling your shirt over your head. It gets tossed aside and is quickly followed by her own. You eye her up and down. She's yours. All yours. If you want it.

“Roxy.” It's the first time you've spoken since she pulled you into that elevator what feels like forever ago.

“Yeah?” She sounds out of breath. Whatever you were going to say has already evaporated from your thinksponge. You practically pounce on her, growling against her throat as you run your claws over the newly exposed skin of her side. The sound she makes has your bulges trying to make their way out again and this time you can let them.

“I've wanted you so badly for so long,” you say hushed and desperate, close to her ear before nipping at it and continuing down her neck.

“You say that like you've got me now.” Her voice is teasing, but you know what this really is.

“Do I?” You run your hand up her leg and feel it hook behind yours, tangling you with her even more than you already were as you press against her with a feverish need to be closer.

“If you want to.” She undoes your belt with the same sense of urgency. You pull it loose and toss it aside.

“I want to.” You kiss her but quickly pull away leaving her wanting. “Let's see if you can keep your promise.” Her hand slips past the band of your pants. “I believe you said something about forgetting my own name.” Very, VERY, right thing to say. The sound that leaves her stirs something fierce in
You go to return it but are cut short by the way she yanks your head to the side and starts marking up your neck with a well-placed bite. It has you gasping and digging your claws into her, not enough to hurt her, you made sure they were too dull for that, but hard just like she likes. Her moan dissolves against your skin then abruptly she shoves you up and back. Your heart rate picks up as she slowly moves to straddle your hips. There's excitement in her eyes, but also something wonderfully wicked that's mirrored in her smile.

"I'm gonna wreck you so good."

You're so glad you thought to move to your room. For a long moment you lay there with her in afterglow before she tilts your head up for a tired kiss, then lets you retreat back to where you're hiding your face in the crook of her neck, breathing in her scent. Her name falls from your lips again and you feel her arms momentarily tighten around you. You're still in a daze as your head hits the pillow. Roxy sighs exhausted and content as she comes to lay down next to you a second later. You pull her tight to your chest and bury your face in her hair. The scent is grounding. You still need it.

"You okay?" She asks. You think so. As long as you stay grounded, as long as you stay here with Roxy, with the dull pain of the marks she left on you, some of which you know she knows are wildly possessive, as long as you're with your kismesis, you'll be okay. You nod and start making a low sound that isn't quite a purr or a growl. "I can only sorta hear that."

"Can't change that one." Your voice has more resonance to it from the sound.

"S'ok, feels nice. Does it have a meaning?"

"Mine," you growl with a squeeze. She hums a laugh and you can hear her smile.

"How's your back?" She asks after a long pause.

You shrug. "How's your shoulder?"

"Bleeding," she says it calmly, but concern has you shifting to sit up and look at it. "It's not that bad."

"Yeah, but it's a bite wound." You lean over her to flick open a drawer in your nightstand that's just beyond your reach. A few packets float into your hand. You tear one open and brush aside Roxy's hair before cleaning the shallow, but nonetheless bleeding bite mark. She flinches and draws air sharp through her teeth. "Sorry."

"It's cool."

"Sit up. Let me get the other ones." She does and a soft 'ah' leaves her as your genetic material drips onto the sheets.

"Forget about something?" You tease in an echo of what she's twice teased you for. She gives you a look.

"Smartass."

You clean other marks where your claws dug in a little too much. Despite your efforts to dull them, while still keeping them longer as Roxy likes, she's still scratched up here and there. When you're finished she grabs a few antiseptic wipes from the drawer and motions for you to turn around. It stings like a bitch. She must have got you good. It brings a smirk to your face. She gives your arm a little pat when she's done and you both settle back down in your bed after you toss the ruined blanket.
on the floor. You curl around her and hold her close. She reaches back to ruffle your hair when you start making that low murmur again. You kiss her spine. When your eyes slip shut, you only have the time to briefly be amazed that you have this before you're out.

==> Roxy: Wake up

You wake up to the blue light of very early morning. There are aches in all of the best places and the pleasant texture of a blanket over your bare skin. Thoughts of the night before play in your mind and you reach over looking for the body that should be beside you. The bed is still warm but Sollux isn't there. You sit up, blink a few times, and look around before throwing back the covers and crawling out of bed. The floor is cold beneath your feet as you make your way to Sollux’s closet. The sweater you steal doesn’t really come down far enough to make you entirely decent, but it's good enough. When you near it in the hallways, the bathroom door is ajar and the light is off so you keep going, theory one disproven. Faintly you can hear him talking now. He’s probably in the kitchen getting water or something. The boy has got to be dehydrated from all that. Now that you think about it, you’re hella thirsty yourself.

“Thanks...I think I just woke up weird...yeah, I’m alright now.” You come to the end of the hall and can see Sollux sitting at the kitchen table facing away from you. He has his legs pulled up and his feet on the edge of the chair. Combined, the two of you are wearing enough clothes to make one entire outfit. As you guessed, there’s a nearly empty glass of water next to him. “I kind of figured I would freak out at least a little at some point, so this was pretty much best case scenario...mhm” It sounds like he’s talking to Dave.

“Hey.” When he looks over his shoulder at the sound of your voice, you give a little wave. “My personal space heater disappeared, you seen him anywhere?” You wander over and pull open a cabinet looking for a glass.

“Did I wake you up?”

“Nope, just hella thirsty.” You get some water from the tap and chug it down. “Talking to Dave?” you ask as you refill your glass to sip at a more reasonable rate.

“Yeah.” He doesn’t look at you when he says it.

You walk over and skritch his head between his little horns. “Bug me if you need me.” At that, he gives you a soft half-smile. You make your way back to bed. Dave's got him; you don't need to worry. Plus if he needs you, you left that door open for him. You didn't catch much of what he was saying, but you guess maybe he woke up feeling shitty or something. You hope he doesn't have regrets. You've never gotten it so good and you don't think it had anything to do with skill. Well...maybe a little, he isn't exactly fumbling in the dark, but mostly you think what made the difference was that it meant something. It wasn't just getting off. You'd be disappointed if he didn't want to be close with you like that again. It wouldn't be a deal-breaker, he's more than a lay, but you'd sure as fuck miss it. Sollux is quiet when he comes back in the room, opening the door carefully as if he knows exactly how far it can go before it squeaks and floating just above the floor. You wing back the covers and seeing that you’re awake, he lowers himself to the floor. "Get back in here, you." He smirks at you and drops down onto the bed with a bounce before coming to lay on top of you between your legs. Your wrap your arms loosely around him. The weight is comfortable. "My boobs are a good pillow there--" you stop yourself before the bad word comes out of your mouth. "--hot stuff?"

"The best," he says, voice slightly muffled from the way his head is laying on your chest.
"You're welcome to stay there but if you're getting any ideas bout round 2, the zone is close. Servers down for maintenance. Kinda sore."

"Didn't hurt you though, right?" He's hiding the concern in his voice.

"Nah, it's a good ache."

"Mmm, there is a certain something to that."

"Really now? You know, anytime you want me to take a strap to you, all ya gotta do is ask."

"I'll keep that in mind for next time."

"So, no regrets?" You try to keep it from sounding like the serious question it is.

"No regrets."

Neither of you goes back to sleep but you do laze around for a while before you actually get up. You shower first and when you walk out into the main room you see that he's already cleaned up. You go pawing through his kitchen looking for something edible and aren't surprised to find an odd selection considering Kurloz's note. You are, however, surprised to find all the ingredients and more for pancakes. Right, Mituna is pretty enthusiastic about pancakes. You start whipping some up. Your pancake art skills aren't the best, but you think that vaguely resembles a bee.

"I made coffee," he says. You look over your shoulder and then to the coffee pot you were oblivious to.

"Cool. I found the pancake mix." You flip the last one in the pan and turn off the burner. He has a baggy long sleeve on, some ratty old jeans, and his hair is all wet and hanging down in his face. He looks cozy. It's cute.

"Are these...bees?" He asks, going after one.

You smack his hand with the spatula. "Yes, and wait till I get this last one on the plate."

"Those are some sorry ass bees."

"You did know they were bees though."

"Touché."

You're glad you made so many. He's packing away quite a few.

"Remember to come up for air," you tease as you sip at your coffee. He flips you off and you snicker at him. "It's like witnessing Halley's comet."

"I do eat on occasion and despite looking like off-brand cartoon mice, these taste pretty good."

"Oh, a compliment. This truly is a special occasion." He rolls his eyes at you and goes back to his breakfast.

You decided to blow off the second day of the tournament and just chill, keep it low key. He shows you the server room. You've never seen apiary servers. They're pretty wild. Sollux doesn't get too close but says you can. You look them over and find a section that Mituna has labeled as Hal. The bees seem to like you and that has the dumbest smile on Sollux's face. Before you go back to his room, Sollux grabs a few odds and ends, as well as what looks like a flash grub casing. He goes off
to do his thing, setting up a workspace on the floor by the pile of junk obscuring the actual workspace. You mess around in Minecraft for a while and look up at what he's doing every now and then. He's just finishing up some very small soldering work when he catches you staring.

"Sup?"

"Whatcha making?"

"A sniffer."

"What for?" He makes a face like he was hoping you wouldn't ask, but knew you would. Well, NOW you're curious.

"You can't tell Dirk yet."

"I'll be the judge of that." You narrow your eyes. "What are you up to?" He sighs deeply as he puts away the soldering iron.

"Dirk isn't exactly thrilled about ME sniffing around Bro's stuff, so I'm making this to do it for me. It's the kind that collects data until you ping it, transmits once, and then fries itself so that you can't trace it back."

"Digging for all the stuff Dirk thinks is too dangerous to snoop for?"

"Kind of."

"Kind of?"

"It's...a 'when' plan. It only works once. It's for if Bro finds Dave. He thinks it's inevitable and I'm inclined to agree. I told him we could make some 'when' plans since Dirk's plans are more so about staying ahead of Bro and stopping him."

“That’s pretty smart, but how are you getting it down there? That’s a physical interceptor, right?”

“Yeah,” a wicked sort of grin creeps over his face. “I’m adding another felony to my long list of bullshit that should have gotten me arrested by now.” This shit just gets juicier by the second.

“Well?” you ask when he doesn’t elaborate.

“I know someone a few states away. We made a deal. If she helps me I’ll take a strike off her criminal record and if she doesn’t I’ll add one.”

“You’re extorting her.”

“I am extorting her with incentive. There is a difference.”

“She wouldn’t do it otherwise, would she?” You raise your eyebrows a few times at him.

“...no.”

“I think you played yourself, babe.”

“Ehhh,” he says while making a so-so gesture.

“So uhh...can I watch you hack a government database? Totally for research purposes and stealing your secrets, not cause it’s hot or anything.” He snorts a laugh and shakes his head as he looks for a
part on the floor around him and then snaps it into the sniffer casing.

“I’m completely convinced.” He tests a little mechanism on the side and pins suddenly jut out. “I had figured you might want to watch.” He raises an eyebrow at you.

“Oh shove it.” You stick your tongue out at him.

“I did. Pretty well evidently.” He smiles that stupid cheeky smile at you as you glare at him.

“Keep going and let’s see if you get another chance to.”

“If anything that will only increase my chances and you know it.” You continue to stare at him until he sets down what he’s working on to throw up a little spades symbol at you. You roll your eyes and throw a nearby sock at his head, he stops it with his psionics and tosses it aside.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” You say as you come over to sit beside him. “Now tell me more about this thing.” You guess he’s accepted that Dirk is going to find out one way or another because he doesn’t spare any details as he goes over it. It’s a good contingency plan that you think Dirk will actually like, more so if you can nudge Sollux to tell him himself so it looks less sneaky, and if it makes Dave feel safer you’re all for it.
Another pale chapter

==> Dave: screenprint some shit

You're double-checking the registration tabs for the third time before you finally bring Nepeta's screen down. She cheerfully plops a glob of red ink onto it and hands you a clean squeegee. "Aight, moment of truth." In a single steady movement, you drag it across the screen. When you lift the screen back up enough to pull out the white t-shirt, Nepeta replaces it with a piece of scrap paper.

"It's purrfect!" She says with a clap of her hands. You marvel at it for a moment. It came out really good, so good that you wish this wasn't the test shirt.

"Yeah, let's hope I can pull it off twice." You set it down to dry and grab the red and white baseball tee that already has your new record logo design on it minus the red part. You fiddle with it, adjusting it back and forth a millimeter here and there. "Maybe you should do it. I've only got one of these." She gets up close, scoping it out and for a second you think she IS going to do it for you, but suddenly she springs up with a smile and steps back.

"You're good."

"If you say so." You take a deep breath and hold it as you bring down the screen. Just like last time you draw ink over it smooth and steady. Then, slowly, you pick up the screen, peaking at your handiwork. When you realize it isn't terrible you breathe a sigh of relief and pull the shirt out from underneath the setup.

"This one is even better! Have you catsidered taking screen printing? It's super fun. We wouldn't be in the same class, but we could work on our sepurrate projects together after classes." She's right. This one is even more spot-on than the test shirt, although she is walking you through this step-by-step here, so you can't take all the credit. You hadn't given it a whole lot of thought, but it is pretty fun, even more so with a proper set up like this.

"Maybe. I might have an elective or something I could use it for." You set the shirt aside to dry with the other one and run off another t-shirt since you can. You're about to do the last one when you remember that it's the messed up one. The record is off-center. You might as well finish it, maybe you can use it for something else. An idea pops into your head as the squeegee meets the edge of the wooden frame with a hard thunk. "Hey, Nepeta, you're an authority on this quadrant stuff, yeah?" That gets her attention. You didn't think anyone could actually make the 3 mouth face, but there it is.

"You have a Moirallegiance question?" She hops up onto a stool and stares at you.

"Uh, yeah." You are starting to second guess this decision. "So, the thing we do, Sollux and I, stealing each other's hoodies. His has his sign on it. You were saying that time, that it means he'd throw down for me or some shit."

"Karkat said that, but yes. He feels purrctive of you."

"Right. So, my hoodie doesn't have-- er well, I don't have a sign, but I was thinking..." You pull the off-center but otherwise okay print out from under the screen. "Maybe I do?" Nepeta makes a high pitched squeak and jumps off the stool, grabbing your hands in hers as she bounces on her toes.

"Yes, yes, yes. Oh, that's so sweet." She springs away and turns in a circle once before grabbing at her hat. "Were you going to make a patch or just print the black pawrt? I'm not sure how to do the
white on red fabric. A patch might look better a little smaller than that too, and thicker fabric might be a good idea." You hadn't thought that far ahead but they all sound like good suggestions.

"Yeah, totally. Could we do both? Patches would be cool to have regardless." That and Sollux's wriggling day is in a few months; it could make a good present. Nepeta enthusiastically agrees and together you ready your workspace and wash out the screen so you can get a clean print of your record on the back of your hoodie. You're about to take it off when she stops you.

"Wait wait, let me mark where the hood is," she says as she grabs a piece of chalk from the blackboard. You zip it back up and fuss with it for a second before you feel the press of the chalk against your back. She makes a few more marks, one where the hood seam is, and a few along your spine to help center things. "There." You peel it off and look at her handiwork.

"Nice. Good call on that." She hops up to sit on the table while you flatten the fabric over a piece of board.

"He's really going to like this." You glance up to see a secondhand excitement lighting her up.

"Yeah, I bet he'll make that face. Ya know? The one where his teeth poke out." You only have one shot at this so you take your time lining it up.

"It's good to see him smiling again. He's been sad purr a long time." You pause to look up at her again. "Not that Roxy doesn't make him happy," she quickly backtracks with a frenzied wave of her hands. "It's just different."

"I got ya. No worries." She relaxes a bit and fiddles with her sleeves.

"He needed a meowrail and you two are so so good together." You aren't sure how to respond to that so you give her a shrug and look around for the black ink you were just using. "No really, I can tell!" You smirk and shake your head.

"I hate to break it to you but I barely have any clue what I'm doing half the time."

"But that's just it! You went in without any precatsived ideas." She's alluding to his past moirails. You're not so dense that you haven't pieced together an idea of his previous forays in the pale zone. You figured he got slammed into some kind of delusional pale fantasy manic-depressive pixie dream boy role at least once. "To you, he's just Sollux and that's really special." This is all very flattering, but it's making you blush so you hide your face by focusing on the print you're making. When it's done you hold it up and stare at it for a moment before hanging it up and hitting it with the heat gun, which is totally just a hairdryer labeled "heat gun". You really don't suck at this. You're not about to add it to the hobby list just yet, but it could be cool to try.

The last-minute idea to print on your hoodie, while good, leaves you scrambling to clean up before your next class. You get there a solid ten minutes late, which isn't a big deal itself, it's a lecture class, but it isn't in a lecture room and some douche has taken your usual seat. You make your way to an empty desk one row over and two rows back. Sollux gives you a look that suggests he attempted to save your spot. You shrug and fall into the chair. It only takes a few minutes of professor monotone going on and on before you find your mind drifting. You glance over at Sollux. Not sitting next to him does have its benefits you guess. God, he's pretty. You blink a few times behind your shades. Thoughts like that...you don't know what to make of them. They pop into your head and it's not like you disagree, but they're...confusing? Maybe that's the wrong word. It's more like they make you anxious but at the same time, God, is he pretty. Not in a way that you're mentally undressing him or anything, it isn't like that. He's just very aesthetically pleasing or maybe visually comfortable? But also there is something there that hasn't always been there, or rather something that became more. It
draws you to him in a way you've never felt before. It's hard to explain, but it's a good feeling. It's an intense one too though, and that just feeds right back into your anxiety about the whole thing. Especially when you stand on the edge of your mind staring down thoughts you can't bear to actively think about. You turn away and look at your laptop. The notes you were taking are pretty fucked now so you abandon them and open pesterchum.

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turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB]

[TG] yo
[EB] hey dave.
[EB] what's up?
[TG] not much
[TG] stuck in this boring as fuck class
[EB] lecture?
[TG] yep
[EB] those are the worst unless you get the right teacher.
[TG] yeah plus i walked in late and some asshole took my seat and like yeah they aren't assigned or anything but ive been sitting there every class since the beginning
[TG] there is an etiquette to this shit
[EB] you sit next to sollux don’t you?
[TG] that is beside the point
[EB] sounds to me like it is the point.
[TG] blocked
[TG] unfriended
[EB] lol.
[EB] are you two sharing longing glances from across the room?
[TG] nah im a couple of rows back
[TG] hey so
[TG] can i ask you some shit
[EB] of course you can, duh.
[TG] so like what do you know about relationships and all that junk
[TG] specifically
[EB] ...specifically?
```
[TG] the uh ya know L word

[EB] that might be more of a rose question.

[TG] well yeah i figured but i didnt feel like subjecting myself to quite that level of masochism yet

[EB] maybe ask kanaya then?

[EB] i know trolls don't do the whole sexuality thing but i think she prefers ladies.

[TG] what

[TG] oh my god

[TG] no

[TG] john

[TG] not lesbians

[TG] the L word is not lesbians

[EB] oh.

[EB] OH.

[EB] jeez uh... i would say i know disappointingly little about love.

[EB] this is definitely a rose question but i'll give it my best shot if you aren’t thrilled with the idea of asking her.

[TG] okay so

[TG] what does it feel like

[EB] i have no idea.

[TG] wow super helpful there man

[EB] okay wait, give me a second.

[EB] in the movies it's always this overpowered be all end all thing.

[EB] if that is the dramatic version i guess it’s still this gigantic feeling? and supposedly it makes you do stupid things.

[TG] and people thought i made questionable choices before

[TG] fasten your seatbelts we are approaching peak dumbass at an altitude of fuck

[EB] so you think you’re in love with him?

[TG] whoa there dude there is a big difference between in love and love

[EB] i guess you’re right.

[EB] so...
what
which is it?
which is what
...
yeah alright so maybe ive been experiencing some feelings that my upbringing didnt exactly prepare me for what a shock
im kind of jealous. movies always play up the whole love arc.

You blink and look away from the screen. It feels like no time at all has passed, but you’re already halfway through class. You slink down in your chair and try to respond to John while he uses his vast cinematic knowledge to offer some kind of consolation despite having about as much of an idea as you do about the subject. He’s making a good effort, it’s actually some pretty solid stuff, but you’re not really feeling the conversation anymore. You make up an excuse to cut it short and tell him you’ll talk to him later. It feels too claustrophobic in here. Too many people. Too many eyes. Too many people who could have been reading over your shoulder because you were too absorbed in it and you should have been paying attention, but you weren’t and it feels like that’s dangerous, yet on that same note everyone here probably knows already. You and Sollux aren’t as super discreet as you used to be. Part of you says you should go back to that but another part of you doesn’t want to. Christ, who is looking at you? Someone is definitely watching you.

Tap Tap...Tap Tap...
Your eyes dart to the window where you see a crow. It tilts its head at you and ruffles its feathers before it flies away. Does this area get a lot of crows this time of year? That’s the second one you’ve seen today. You saw one yesterday too. That one wasn’t the first either. They’re always looking right at you when you spot them. You need to take a walk. You get up and start making your way down to the bathroom, taking your time to drag it out. You just need to clear your head a bit. You take the long way instead. Third floor. A split-second choice as you pass the stairwell. You’ll use the third floor bathroom. Hardly anyone does. It also has a window which is oddly in short supply for many of the men’s rooms around here, and apparently, it’s just the men’s rooms. You’ve mentioned this to Roxy and she had no idea what you were talking about. Your mind quiets as soon as you cross the threshold. Something about the space is very still. The only sounds are the soft echo of running water as you wash your face, the squeak of the tap as you turn it off, the distinct ker-chunk ker-chunk that the paper towel dispenser makes. You dry your face and stand there for a moment as you pull yourself together. Why is it such a big deal that you care about him? There’s a flutter of wings and a soft caw. You turn to see the same crow that was just at the classroom window. You’re not sure how you know that. Maybe it’s from all those years feeding that flock of crows that hung out on the roof. It pokes its head under the barely open window and looks at you. You look in your sylladex for something to give him. A half-eaten bag of Doritos; that’ll do. You pull out a chip and wander over to lean against the sill. It looks up at you and then to the chip.

“Here ya go, lil’ dude.” You hold it out for the bird who hesitantly takes it before flying off. You’re a little disappointed it didn’t stick around. Those birds are probably the only thing you miss about that place. You take a walk for yourself and you’re about to get up when two more birds show up. You open the window more for them so they can stand up straight, then plop the bag of Doritos down so they can pick at it. “I used to know a few crows back in Houston. They always liked Doritos. Help yourselves.” One of them sticks its entire head right in the bag as if it is all too familiar with the act. It has you chuckling quietly to yourself. “What do y’all think? Am I making a big deal out of nothing?” One of them rattles at you. “Oh yeah, no, that’s a good point. I can’t really call it nothing because it
is totally something, but is this something that warrants me losing my goddamn mind over?” The crow with its head in the bag pops up to blink at you. “I guess it is pretty subjective.” It blinks again and tilts its head. “So what you’re saying is that what I’m experiencing may, in fact, be warranted regardless of the reality of the situation?” It caws quietly at you before jamming its head back into Dorito heaven. The other bird pecks at the bag. You pull out your phone to check the time. You should get back to class. “I gotta head out, but good chat. You can keep the chips. Peace out yo.” You throw up a peace sign as you back out of the bathroom. They caw like they’re saying goodbye back at you. You’re feeling worlds better by the time you slip back into your seat. You chance a glance at Sollux. He’s slumped over the desk possibly asleep. You make sure the flash is off before you snap a picture of him. You wonder if taking candids of him will ever not give you butterflies.

===> Be Dave that following Wednesday

“You sure you’re up for it?” You say as you fiddle with the camera, adjusting the settings one last time as you follow Sollux into the grassy area between your dorm and the music building. The sun is just starting to set. Probably the absolute worst time to film but you think it’d look cool, just dark enough to make his psionics pop without having to get too crazy with the low light settings.

“I told you, you weigh like nothing to my psionics.”

“Aight, but uh, just in case,” You hit record and flip the camera around as you turn so that Sollux is in frame behind you. “This is Dave Strider coming at you with the illest supersonic aeronautic atrocities. We’re about to get lifted, twisted, and high as fuck. Get ready. Worldstar!” With a laugh, he shakes his head at your antics and comes to a stop.

“Ready?”

“Fuck yeah I am.”

You feel his psionics on your skin before you see them. The familiar static skirts up the back of your neck, making your shoulders hunch as you shudder. Sollux smirks at you like an asshole because he did that on purpose. You don’t have time for more than the start of a comeback before you’re being pulled up off the ground, slowly at first, the toes of your shoes dangling inches off the ground. He looks at you with excitement in his eyes, then pulls you both into the sky. You quickly get your bearings and snag a decent shot of the takeoff, panning up to follow the trail of sparks to their origin before switching focus to an ultra-wide shot of the shrinking campus below you. He takes it easy at first, nothing you couldn’t get with a drone, but just when you’ve gotten comfortable he changes it up. You're soaring higher and faster, and part of you wishes you were closer to him because it’s still a little weird to fly, but another part of you wouldn't miss this sight for the world. You're not looking at your camera anymore. You're looking at him. There’s a serenity to his smile as the wind catches in his hair and ripples the fabric of his sweatshirt. The carefree way he twists and turns through the air, the red and blue light clinging like an afterimage to his every motion, it’s mesmerizing. You almost forget that you’re filming. He looks back and extends his hand to you even though he could just drag you closer with his brain-lightening. You take it and feel that fluttery feeling in your chest and heat on your cheeks. He pulls you close to his chest and takes you into a brief dive before shooting back up again. It's exhilarating. You tumble through the air with him, completely taken by the experience. It's ruining your footage, but you couldn't give less of a fuck. You climb higher and higher, way the fuck up in the air. It’s cold up here but Sollux is warm like early summer sun at your back.

"Hold onto that camera." His psionics disappear and you start to fall. Air rushes past your ears and if he wasn't speaking so close you don't think you'd be able to hear him. "I'm gonna let go."

"Are you nuts?!" You ask just slightly alarmed as you try to look back at him over your shoulder.
"Yes," he says against your neck with a smirk. He presses a kiss to your cheek before unraveling you from his arms until you're only grazing fingertips with him. You're free-falling. "Do a flip!"

"What?" You can only half hear him. He does a backflip and motions for you to do the same. You are moderately successful. Not too shabby even. You try again and it goes more smoothly. Then you look down. The ground is getting a little closer and you are about to voice your concerns about that when you feel his psionics pull your hand back into his. You remember about the camera in your hand and train it on him. "You're a maniac."

"Eheheheh." He has the wildest grin on his face as he laughs. You can see just how jacked up his teeth are, and there's something oddly endearing about the imperfection. "Get ready." He gives you the warning only a second before snatching you back into his arms again. You're falling headfirst. His psionics kick back in and your descent turns from a straight plunge into something less terminal before he rights the both of you, flipping head over heels, and slows down enough for you to land, but not so much as to ruin the rush. Your feet carry you a few paces and you turn in a circle, grinning like you've only just figured out how, before you let yourself hit the ground.

"Dude, that was insane!" You can feel the smile tugging at your face as you laugh. You bring the camera back up and keep it rolling as he comes over to help you to your feet, only stopping the recording when you start making your way back inside.

The entire way back feels like a dream sequence, like it's happening in slow motion, yet somehow it feels sudden when the two of you plop down on the edge of his bed to check out the video. Your shoulders brush. He's so close to you. Your chest is tight with a nervous feeling both good and bad, each fighting to overtake the other. Only a minute or so in and it's clear you can't use this for anything ever. No one can see this. It's too personal. There's too much behind it. You didn't film the flight. You filmed him. Your heart is racing. You need to do something but at the same time, you're afraid to do anything. You swallow hard, trying to push down the feeling creeping up the back of your throat. You glance at him, a quick dart of your eyes; he's smiling. It's the easiest target to hit, but he isn't. He isn't ribbing you, he isn't laughing, he isn't mocking this video that lays all your damn feelings on the table. God, it's a lot of feelings. It's too many feelings or maybe too much of a single feeling. It makes your chest ache and makes you want something you don't know how to satisfy. You curl the fingers of your free hand into the sheets to steady yourself, but it isn't doing much. He laughs in the video and the look he's giving you has your breath catching. There's that tick in the back of your mind again, that force that compels you to choose, now or never. The video isn't over but you chuck the camera in your sylladex anyway as you turn toward him, one hand on his knee and another at the back of his neck pulling him closer. You kiss him. You're nervous and it's making you clumsy, but you power through it and try not to overthink what you're doing. You try to act on impulse and let go of all the crap that's holding you back. You move and before your brain can protest you're straddling his lap, holding his face in your hands picking up where you briefly left off.

"You're so amazing." You say between brushes of lips. His arms come around you, the pads of his fingers digging into the fabric of your shirt. You break the kiss, but stay close. His hand comes up to rest along your jaw as he brushes his thumb over your cheek. You want to meet his eyes but you can't. "I-I don't, fuck, I don't know what I'm doing, but I..." you love this. "I like this." The words are like a weight off your shoulders. A trill hums in his throat before he presses a slow kiss to your lips, and then your jaw, another and another, and one on your neck. A soft noise escapes you.

"I pity you so much." He says it close but not quite touching your skin. It has sparks running up and down your neck. You want to answer that but you can't. You wish you could chirp at him, let him know without saying, tell him what you can barely think, let alone say. Your brain scrambles for something, anything to keep you from leaving him hanging, and you find yourself pulling away just
enough to better look at him. Your hands are unsteady as you take off your shades and set them aside. The corner of his mouth ticks up. He gets it. He gets you, words or no words. He follows suit and floats both your glasses out of harm's way. When his gaze comes back up to meet yours you both marvel at each other like lovesick idiots. Because that's it isn't it? You love him. You really do.

And then your on each other again, fingers in his hair, needy kisses, soft sounds melting between you, a hand creeping under your shirt and an arm around your waist. He holds you close and tight, but you want him closer. As if answering your unvoiced request, his psionics are on your skin and his hands are on your legs, and you're being thrown down onto the bed. It has you making a surprised sound and for a moment, after your back hits the mattress, he looks uncertain from where he is arm's length above you until you tug him closer by the collar. He kisses your cheek and your shoulders relax. You tilt your head for him and immediately he takes the invitation.

"Gonna mark up my neck again, huh?" You ask as if you aren't tempting him to do exactly that.

"Maaaybe," he says as he places a kiss to your throat. "Why, Dave? Do you want me to?" There is so much mischief in his voice.

"Well, now that I know it means you would 'cut a bitch' for me..."

"You've been talking to Karkat about me." He laughs against your skin. You laugh too, but it gets cut off by a gasp. You hold him tighter and thread your fingers through his hair as if he needs any more encourament to keep teasing your neck.

"Fuck." Gentle touches, his hand on your cheek, his breath on your skin, it's the purring that does you in though. You shiver and squirm beneath him. It's the purring that does you in though. You shiver and squirm beneath him. It isn't the first time he's done this. However, it is the first time he's done this while not only being on top of you, but being on top of you in the suggestive position of right between your goddamn legs, and the way you just moved against him was anything but subtle. There's that spike of panic. It threatens to ruin everything and it just might have if Sollux hadn't tucked his face in the crook of your neck and rocked his hips right back against yours. It's slow, the way you move against each other. It's not enough to get you off, maybe not even enough to truly get you going. It's intimate and needy, but it lacks the lusty carnal desperation they hype up in the movies. He moves to lay mostly to one side, although still somewhat on you, this way lets him wrap his arm around you again. You press up against him and he presses back as he comes up for another kiss.

"I'm not sure where you were thinking of going with this," he says low and close like he knows you like. "But this is kind of my limit right now I think." You pap his face and he leans into it for more, his purring picking up again.

"Yeah, same." You were wondering too. "Except maybe for..." Your face is hot. You look away. "Nevermind."

"Except for what?"

"Like...like when we were in the slime. That was...I'm okay with that too."

"You mean like even while not in the recuperacoon?"

"Y-yeah." This is embarrassing. You know you don't need to be, he isn't judging you, but you can't help the anxious feeling that keeps you from looking at those eyes you think are so fucking awesome.

"Aside from being hideously depressed at the time, that was pretty sweet." He squeezes you tight
and sighs into your hair. He’s so low key about it. It puts you more at ease, plus like, the sound he’s making is ridiculous at lulling you into a mentally safer feeling place. Enough to think about maybe asking if...

“Would it be cool...” he must be able to tell that you’re still nervous because he starts rubbing your back. “...if I stayed here tonight?” It isn’t super late, but it isn’t so early that it’d be too weird right?

“Mhm, should go to the top bunk though. I’m gonna fall asleep if you keep doing that to my face.” Oh. You are kind of still getting all up in those pale spots, aren’t you? He sits up and stares at you fondly before swinging his legs over the side of the bed and standing up with a stretch. "You want pj's?" He asks as he grabs a pair of pajama bottoms off the footboard. It's the pair with little bees all over them.

"I'm good." You turn away as he changes, and peel off your jeans then throw them over the chair. This is so chaste and yet your stomach is in knots over it. You hear the creak of the ladder and it lets you move again. At the last moment you tug your shirt over your head, just like the slime ringing through your mind. You're already climbing up the ladder when your brain wonders if this is what Sollux had in mind. It's put at ease when you see that he indeed does only have the pajama bottoms on. You crawl in next him and arms instantly wrap around you, pulling you closer into a warm embrace. There is something different about feeling his skin against yours. Pressed close, legs tangled, arms around each other, your hands running over his back and his on yours as you go back to pushing the boundaries of your quadrant. Soft sounds melt into slow brushes of lips. His hips rock against yours at a lazy pace. It feels good, better now that you know where you both stand on it, that there aren't any expectations beyond it. It isn't a lead up, not now anyway. Right now, it's satisfying that need for proximity, the need to feel him close that you didn't know what to do about.

He nuzzles your face and a smile tugs at the corner of your mouth. This is all so overwhelming, it's almost too much, but you wouldn't trade it for the world. A terrible thought lingers at the edge of your mind. You push it away and shift your attention to tracing the contours of Sollux’s ear with the lightest of touches, coming down to run your fingertips over his neck before more quickly moving back up to thread them through the shorter hair at the nape of his neck. When you go to touch his face, he shifts so your arm isn’t trapped, so you can more comfortably hold him while you run the fingers of your other hand over his brow and down to his jaw.

“You’re good at that, ya know,” he says from the hazy state you’re putting him in. You hum an affectionate sound and continue lulling him into passivity. Here and there little trills interrupt the steady purr humming in his throat. You want to answer it, to somehow convey what he’s doing to you, how he makes you feel, but you aren’t sure how. Instead, you just keep making him feel safe and content until he’s soundly asleep, and at some point shortly after, you drift off too.

==>

He slept in your bed last night, not because he needed to, although you’re sure it was still a comfort for him, but because he simply wanted to. It wasn’t an easy task for him to ask, but you’re glad he did. You’re glad he could.

The lazy morning light has started to creep through your room, but you and Dave are shielded from it up on the top bunk. Instead, it glimmers beneath you, filled with particles of dust. You should really clean more often. You bury your face against the back of his neck and take a deep breath, settling contently as you exhale and hold him just a bit more snugly. He stirs, shifting in your embrace and making a disoriented sleepy hum. You kiss his spine before his brain has time to worry. He used to wake up in a panic if you were so much as near him. You can still feel the momentary fear in him
from unexpected touches or sudden movements, but he's come so far in so little time from where he started.

You can hear his smile as he murmurs something unintelligible and turns to lay on his back. It dislodges you from your spot, but that's okay, you get to look at his face now. It's something reserved for you. No shades obscuring skin dusted with freckles or those eyes that can see past your everything. You prop yourself up on one elbow so you can look down at him. He's still only half awake and his hair is a tousled mess. You gently brush a few rogue strands out of his eyes before leaning over to steal a slow sleepy kiss. He cups your face in his hand, keeping you there for another. Two kisses. Yes, that seems like a better amount of kisses. You let your forehead rest against his for a moment as he brushes your cheek with his thumb before you sink back into the bed. The pillow makes a 'floof' sound as your head hits it. Dave is quick to roll over so he can lie on top of you. You take this as a surrender of his pillow and stuff it behind you with the other one, propped up perfectly for the sleep-addled cuddles you've both silently agreed on. Dave resituates himself against you, arms wrapped as much as they can around your sides, his head on your chest. He's a comfortable weight against you.

You run your fingers through his hair, against the grain, nails grazing his scalp just the way he likes, just the way that makes him shiver and arch his neck against your touch. He squeezes you and makes that sound, that soft fond noise, a sigh that wants to be a chirp. You nuzzle your face in his hair and breathe in his scent. You purr for him. Dave would purr back if he could, you know it with certainty. You're starting to drift off again. Your hand is only resting on his neck now, thumb idly brushing his skin at random intervals as you fade in and out of consciousness. He's mumbling under his breath as he does sometimes. Some rambling metaphor about being comfortable, snug, and warm.

"Sol," His voice pulls you from the verge of sleep and you answer with a hm? sound. "We're gonna be hella late for class." Dave is going to be hella late. You, on the other hand, will only be moderately late for your class. Screw it, like hell if you're going today. Nothing short of the apocalypse could move you right now.

“Fuck class.” You momentarily hold him tighter. He appears to agree with you and makes no motion to move until a muffled ‘ugh’ breaks the cozy silence.

“I forgot, we’re starting a project today.”

“Karkat is all bark. He’ll live.”

I should really go though,” he says, having yet to move.

“Alright,” you sigh and unwrap your arms, letting them fall dramatically to the side. “If you absolutely must be responsible.” He makes an offended noise and sits up a bit.

“How dare you. I am not responsible. I am the picture of reckless.”

You laugh. “Yeah, sure.”

“This is purely for the sake of Karkat’s blood pressure.” He hops down off the bunk and looks around before remembering that his pants are on the chair.

“You want a fresh shirt?” You offer as you float down.

“Nah, I’ll change later maybe.”
You shrug, throw on any old shirt, then grab a pair of your jeans off the floor and tug them on. Good enough. It’s just math. You’re about to grab your hoodie when a cold sense of dread washes over you and the world slows down like it has low batteries. You turn to look at Dave who’s just about to head out the door.

“Dave,” You do your best to hide the fear in your voice. “Are you sure you have to go to class?” He looks over his shoulder at you with a hint of suspicion in his face, his hand still on the door handle.

“I really should. If it was just some bullshit day, I’d bail, but...we can chill after.” He goes to open the door and something visceral, something deep down demands that you stop him. You can’t let him leave. You shut it with your psionics.

“Don’t go.” Fear is peeling back the layers too quickly to bother trying to hide it. “Please, don’t go.”

You cross the room in the blink of an eye and cling to him, bunching up the fabric of his shirt in your hands. “Something bad is gonna happen. Don’t go. Don’t go,” You beg, desperate pleading chirps pouring out of you. You’re making a fool of yourself but you don’t care.

“Whoa, hey, what’s wrong?” His hands take your shoulders as he tries to meet your eyes.

“Please don’t leave.” You don’t hide your face. You don’t care what you look like right now. All you know is that you can’t let him leave.

“I won’t. I’ll stay right here. Sol, what’s wrong?” He looks so concerned for you. Dread claws like bile at the back of your throat and your fingertips go cold. You let go of him, pulling away as your hands fly to your head and you sink to your knees and then to the ground with a choked cry of pain. You forgot how much this hurts. Everything is going white. Your pan feels like it’s splitting in two. You reach out for him and feel his hand take yours. “Sollux? Sollux!” You don’t have time to explain it to him.

“Call Karkat.” And then the only thing keeping you there is his grip on your hand, faint as it is. Everything else is gone and replaced with sights you can’t quite see and sounds you can’t quite hear, like straining to eavesdrop on fate. Aradia used to make it so much clearer for you. It’s overwhelming like this. It’s too quick to process correctly, like short bursts of different events through bad camera work, too shaky and too fast.

“He’s what!? What do I do?”

Thoughts and experiences that may or may not be yours flash behind your eyes. Searing burning white-hot hate floods you and then vanishes in an instant. It’s replaced with the smell of pine, rain on your face, and blue-grey blurs.

“I’m already doing that. There’s gotta be something else.”

Your senses shift again and again in non-sequential bits and pieces. It’s dizzying. It’s disorienting. A patchwork of pain pulses through your body.

“It’s okay, you’re okay. Can you hear me? Sol? Can he hear me?”

You hear squawk beasts. You see shadows. You aren’t sure where or when you are anymore. You chirp, or at least you think you did, it’s hard to tell.

“I’m still here. I’m not leaving.”

You try to focus on Dave through a deafening amount of buzzing and panicked feelings. He’s far away but he’s here somewhere, wherever this is. He’s holding your hand. You can feel it. Slowly the
world comes back around you, but your thoughts are muddy with things that aren’t yours or aren’t yours yet, like lingering dream fragments. You try to open your eyes, but that doesn’t work right. They’re too heavy. Everything is too heavy. Skin touches yours, brushing over your hand that’s gone slack. You tighten your grip, but it’s still weak. You try to open your eyes again. Thin slits fall shut before they flutter back open. It takes effort to keep them open even this much.

“I think he’s waking up. He’s holding my hand again.”

[“Are his eyes open?”]

"Kind of."

[“I’m almost there. Try to keep him awake. It’s okay if you can’t, but it’ll be better if he stays awake.”]

Sound is coming back, real sound. You try the eyesight thing again. Dave is looking down at you. He has you half in his lap, your head resting in the crook of his arm. He’s telling you that it’s going to be okay, you aren’t sure what’s going on, but you trust him. You try to squeeze his hand again. You still aren’t sure where this is or when, but Dave will know.

"Can you hear me yet?" You're scaring him. You can hear it in his voice.

"Mmm." It's all you can muster right now. You're tired. Your eyes start to slip shut.

"Gotta stay awake, man." He gently shakes you and you open your eyes again. Your head lolls to the side and you blink slowly, too slowly. He lets go of your hand and for a moment it's distressing, but then there's an arm beneath your knees and you're moving. When you're set on the ground again, it's cooler and harder, as is what you're leaning against. A noise? Static? No. There's a hand on your jaw, a soft touch. "It's gonna be cold, alright?" What's going to be cold? A cloth comes up to your face and it's a shock to your system. You startle and Dave momentarily pulls it away before continuing to run the cool fabric over your eyes. You blink a few times before things come into focus. He pushes your hair back and runs the washcloth gently over your face again. It helps. You aren't on the brink of passing out anymore, but you're still struggling to stay awake. There is a sound in the distance. Banging. Dave puts the cloth in your hand and tells you he'll be right back. You nod. The floor is smooth under your fingers, interrupted intermittently by a rough surface. Tile, you're sitting on tile.

=== Karkat: Haul ass

You had been wondering where the fuck Dave was and were getting a little miffed when you thought he was ditching because you know damn well where he slept last night. Hint: not his bed. You were partly right, he is with Sollux. You wish it were under slightly better circumstances though. Not that this is bad, well, it is bad, but not BAD bad. It’s mostly just extraordinarily unpleasant for him. Medically speaking, he’s fine. However, his “vision two-fold” as he calls it, dumbest name ever, has been dormant for a while. The only vision he’s had since Aradia was around to help him with them, was a really quick one. Before that, she had always been able to predict them and would ease him through it. His tolerance for it on his own has more than likely gone down a lot.

[“I’m already doing that. There's gotta be something else.”]

“Not really. Just stay with him, and don’t let go of his hand. It’s not exactly a fun time and you’re the only thing grounding him right now.” Through the phone, you hear pained noises. It worries you for a few reasons. One of them being that, while unclear at best and potentially misleading, his visions
have never been flat out wrong.

"It's okay, you're okay. Can you hear me? Sol? Can he hear me?"

“I don’t know. He might be able to. It depends.” There’s a tone and then a clattering noise that leads you to believe Dave has you on speaker and put his phone down. You can hear him shooshing him. "Don't pap his face. It might be overwhelming right now. I'm not sure." It's concerning that he isn't awake yet. This is a long one and Sollux doesn't get good visions. You hear him chirping, calling out for Dave in a way that suggests he doesn't know where he is anymore or can't tell if Dave is there, that he's pretty fucking far away right now. You're about to tell Dave this but...he seems to already know.

“I think he’s waking up. He’s holding my hand again.”

"Are his eyes open?"

"Kind of."

“I’m almost there. Try to keep him awake. It's okay if you can’t, but it’ll be better if he stays awake.” Going to sleep will just confuse him more, especially after such a comparatively long vision. It's only been a few minutes. Still, that's a lot for this. When he opens the door, Dave's face is blank as stone, but there is a nervous undercurrent about him that makes his movements stiff.

"Were you able to keep him awake?" You ask as he leads you to the bathroom.

"Yeah, mostly. You're sure he's alright? He's really out of it."

"He's fine. He's just really confused right now. He might not know where he is or what's happening." Sollux is slumped against the tub, his head tilted back to rest on the edge. He turns it to look at you when you walk through the door. Good. He's awake and somewhat alert. You take the washcloth out of his hand and toss it to Dave, who puts it on the sink.

"You in there?" You ask, putting a hand to his shoulder. His eyes are slipping shut, fluttering in uneven blinks.

"Mhm."

"Look at that. Two syllables already. What day is it?"

"I don't-- I don't know."

"Do you know where you are?" He's starting to drift off again. "Dave, get the..." you gesture to the washcloth. He runs the tap for a second and wrings it out before crouching down next to Sollux.

"Black feather beasts. So many. Tap tap." He makes a tapping motion in the air. "Tap tap." His hand falls to his side. Dave pauses and looks to you. You tilt your head in Sollux's direction, urging him to continue. He seems a little uncertain but resumes the task of running the cold fabric over Sollux's face. It pulls a sharp breath from him and he picks his head back up a bit.

"I got you, bro. No worries." Sollux chirps at him in response. They are disgustingly pale, absolutely gross... Good for him; he deserves it.

"You can't sleep yet. Where are you?"

He shrugs, then seems to reconsider before tapping his claws on the floor. "Tile."
"Yeah, the floor is tile. What room has a tiled floor?"

"Abule--ablu-tion block?" He mumbles.

"Yep, so where do you think you are?"

"Ablution block?"

"Astonishing deduction. Let's try a harder one. Who's respite block is it connected to?" He looks to think hard about it for a moment, putting a hand to his forehead as he tries to remember or figure out what's going on.

"Yours?"

"Nope, try again.” He looks around as he tries to connect the dots.

"...mine. Why...why are you asking me...what am I doing here?" Dave looks like he's about to tell him.

"Let him figure it out," you say, cutting him off before he can get there.

"Figure what out?" Sollux squints his eyes at you.

"Where are his glasses?"

"Nightstand. We were go--"

"Going to class..." Sollux interrupts, confusion written on his face. "I wouldn't let you leave." You watch as his eyes go wide with understanding. "No, no, no, no." He curls in on himself, his face in his knees and his hands covering the back of his head. "I had visions. Bad things happen after I have visions."

"Visions? Like more than one?" He picks his head up just enough to nod in response. Well, that would explain why he was out for so long. It’s no less concerning.

"I think so. They were different colors? Not literally I think. Maybe. I can't remember. They were so vague."

"Like filters?" Dave asks. Sollux nods.

"What DO you remember?"

"It hurt in lots of places at once but they didn't all fit together. Like it was different people. And in another, I was... tired, really tired and...something else. I don't know. There were these shadows lots of them. The rest are too blurry."

"What about the birds?" Dave asks.

"Birds?" At that, he comes out from hiding. His face looks like the word strikes a chord but still escapes him.

"You were saying something about black feather beasts." You also would like to know what was up with that. Sollux shakes his head.

"I don't remember. It was too many things too fast. They're never clear, not without help anyway, but I haven't had one in a while and before that..." he closes his eyes and shakes his head. It’s too much
for him to get into right now. “The last one was when my hard drive died. That was like a year ago and it wasn’t nearly as long as this.”

"So they aren't always super important prophetic warnings?"

"Excuse you, that was a terabyte Evo drive and it had just fallen out of warranty."

"Told you he was fine."

"I am NOT fine. I need to lie down, or eat, or something."

"I got it," Dave says with a snap of his fingers. "Coffee."

"Yessss." Sollux thunks his head against Dave's shoulder. For a second, there is a smile on his face before it fades away. "Hey uh, did I say anything about why I wouldn't let you leave?"

"Wait, I thought it was cause you were about to have the future backhanded into your skull," Dave says with renewed concern.

"It could have been." Sollux doesn't seem super convinced of his own words, but he lets it go. "Maybe if I'm unlucky enough I'll get another glimpse of it. Sometimes they repeat."

"Maybe fill in your other quadrantmate so *I* don't have to repeat this too if your ominous sponge-fuckery decides to act up again?"

“Yeah, alright.” He really must not be feeling so great still. You expected him to gripe about it at least a little before agreeing. Dave helps him to his feet and steadies him when he sways a bit. You grab Sollux's glasses and toss his hoodie at him. Dave fixes his hood when one of his little horns misses the opening. When he’s done being sappy, you hand him his glasses. "Thanks." He goes to open the door but stops halfway into the motion.

“You good, man?” Dave asks.

“Yeah, just...Deja vu.” You and Dave share a look, but let it go and follow Sollux down the hall. You make sure to remind him about telling Roxy once he’s gotten some coffee and some food in him. He seems to be doing alright, but you are hesitant to let him out of your sight just yet. You aren’t as in the loop about the whole mess involving Dave and his brother, but from what you do know, it isn’t pretty. It seems like a big fucking deal. This vision Sollux had is more than likely about it, and the last time he had a vision about something important, he had it more than once.
Visions - part 1

Chapter Summary

This chapter was getting mad long so I had to cut it in half or what I suspect to be the half at least. It was a decent break point. Enjoy the bombshell. Brace for more.

==> Be Sollux

"I told you guys, I'm fine. I don't need anyone grubsitting me," you complain as Roxy gives you a light shove so you'll take a seat on her bed.

"Uh-huh," she says doubtfully with one hand on her hip as she looks down at you. You scowl up at her. "According to Karkat, you are super fuckin likely to get aftershock visions after something like that." You roll your eyes at her even though the statement is accurate.

"The aftershocks are never as bad. They're like two seconds tops." Almost entirely bullshit. They are shorter than the initial vision, but by how much varies as much as the length of the vision itself.

"Mmhmm. Sure. Totally believe any estimate coming from you with the number two in it." You flip her off but it only makes her flash you a cheeky smile. "While they're busy doing office hours catch up stuff, you're my problem." She punctuates her sentence with a wink.

"Oh really now?" Maybe this is going somewhere fun. "What exactly did you have in mind?" You watch as she crosses the room to retrieve two game controllers. Okay, maybe not exactly what you were thinking, but fun nonetheless. Plus, it could maybe still be that kind of fun. She tosses the red and blue switch controller at you with a smart little smirk on her face.

"Mario kart, a'course." She plops down next to you and pulls out her flask, taking a long swig as she starts up the game. She's been drinking more again you think. Maybe not? You were a little preoccupied with being awful and then with the new semester. Maybe it's always been like this. You shrug it off and put it on the 'deal with later' list because right now your kismesis is challenging you to something and you have no self-control. Eventually, after several heated rounds, you switch over to Splatoon because you could rematch in Mario kart indefinitely. Splatoon is starting to seem like it might be a similar situation. The match you're in is just about over when anxiety pricks at the edges of your pan and a cold sensation runs down the back of your neck. Your character stops moving.

"Yes! In your face!" Roxy cheers as she throws her hands in the air. She sounds far away, almost as if she's in another room. Your hands are all pins and needles. The controller slips through them and falls to the floor. "Oh come on, don't be...like that." Her agitation at your assumed mistreatment of her stuff dies out mid-sentence. You know it's coming, and even though you brace for it, the pain still has you gripping your skull as you fall back onto the bed and twist to press your forehead to the mattress. You told her it wouldn't be as bad. You can't let it be as bad. You can't float away again. You can't worry everyone like this. With one hand you hold your splitting pan and with the other you grip your arm tight, pressing your claws hard against your skin so you can ground yourself with self-inflicted pain. To an extent it works. Only your vision is entirely stolen. Your other senses wind up in some murky space between wherever this is and Roxy's room. You grip your arm harder, refusing to forget where you are as you watch the vision unfold. It only lasts a moment. When you
come back, your pulse is a little quick (something that deeply unnerves you still), but you're otherwise okay. You don't feel confused or lost, a tad dazed maybe, but not nearly to the extent that you were earlier. It wasn't as bad. Just like you said.

You turn over and stare up at the ceiling as you try to hold onto what you just saw. Might as well make it worth it. When Roxy touches your shoulder, the world around you resumes and the suddenness makes you jump. There's a fwip fwip sound. You let her lift your hand off your arm and soft tissues press against your skin before she sets it back down again. You can feel the beads of blood soaking through.

"That sucked," you say after a short silence.

"Your estimate was hella off." You turn your head to look at her. It seemed quick to you, but maybe it only felt that way. It wouldn't be the first time.

"How long was I out?"

"You undershot it by at least 22 seconds." Oh good, she's just being a smartass.

"Gog forbid I employ even the slightest bit of hyperbole." You sit up slowly and think about the fragments you were able to retain.

"Do you need water or anything?" Roxy asks. There's a very particular way she sounds when she's concerned about you. She isn't fawning over you. She knows you can take it. It's almost like she's aggravated with your misfortune itself. You don't think it is, but even if it's something she's doing in an entirely conscious way, it's appreciated. It's bad enough she had to see that. Although you suppose she has seen you in much more pathetic states.

You shake your head and stubbornly decline the offer even though it would probably be well advised. "I'm good." The cuts on your arm don't feel like they're bleeding any more. You take a peek. Barely scratches. They're already clotting. You dab away a stray smear and chuck the wadded up tissue at the trash, nudging it with your psionics when it looks like it's going to fall short. "I think I was Dirk."

"Huh?" She sounds like she was lost in thought.

"I said, I think I was Dirk. The vision wasn't mine."

"How do you know?" You tilt your head and raise an eyebrow as you give her A Look™ and then slowly bring up one of your hands.

"We're just a slightly different shade if you haven't noti--" she interrupts you with a good shove that has you snickering.

"I MEAN, what was it that makes you think it's Dirk and not Dave or me?"

"Aside from just sort of getting that Dirk-ish vibe," she squints at you in a suspicious way at your phrasing of that. "there were scars on my arms, but not Dave's, and I was holding a piece of paper that I think was instructions about how to activate the sniffer and retrieve the data. I guess I do tell him."

You had been mulling over Roxy's suggestion. You didn't want to insult him right to her face, he is effectively her moirail after all, but you get the feeling he'd try to take control of it completely. He seems the type. On the other hand, maybe the gesture itself and having the option available is enough to satisfy him. You still get the feeling he doesn't entirely trust you, not that you can blame him. You are his moirail’s kismesis. Traditionally there SHOULDN’T be a whole lot of trust there. However, you’re also his littermate’s moirail and that’s where the complication comes in. It puts your
relationship with him in a strange place where you want him to have faith in your ability, but also ‘fuck you I know what I’m doing’. Regardless, at the very least telling him about the plan will do some damage control on your previous impressions and show him your willingness, begrudged as it may be, to work within his parameters. At the end of the day, it's about helping Dave. You remember how nervous he was when he thought you got caught poking around. You don't want to worry him, or worse, put him in danger for real. Gog, you think you might seriously do anything for him. He makes you stupid in the best of ways. It’s only slightly terrifying.

"Told ya, it was'a good idea."

"Mmm," you hum, narrowing your eyes at her. She shakes her head lightly and pats your leg before she gets up to retrieve the controller from the floor and pop in a different game. Your heart isn't really in it but you play anyway. Visions always leave you feeling at least a little out of sorts. Plus, you're a bit wary about how many more times this is going to happen. You spend the rest of the day needlessly on edge. It isn't until the following day, just when you were starting to relax that it creeps up again.

You're hanging out with Gamzee, walking back from the 7-11 with a red and blue layered slurpee, and listening to him go on about a slam poetry contest he's thinking about entering. You've been hanging out together more again lately. It helps that you've been something of a friend bridge for him and Dave. They've been having “cultural exchanges” in the great arts of Alternian slam poetry and “dope ass rhymes”. You were feeling pretty guilty about how distant you had been before. Gamzee had told you not to worry about it, but your thinksponge had other plans. It can still be a bit challenging though. He doesn't smoke in front of you, but sometimes you can smell it on him. You miss it. It used to be so nice. Maybe you could figure out which one of your meds conflicts the most and see if there's something different you could take? Unfortunately, you're pretty sure you know which one it is and you're not too excited about the idea of fiddling with that one. You shelve the thought for another time and tune back into what he's saying.

"Peeps saying it ain't on the wise to be mixing hobbies with financials but I ain't gunning for the prize. It's all on about the process, aspirations to inspire an' likewise."

"Running out of Smash Mouth lyrics to preach at campers?" You ask, nudging him with your shoulder.

"Ah hahahaha, man, I bet they would dig some fresh shit. Wigglers be devouring that Smash Mouth though. Easier to get their sponges soakin up." People always seem surprised that Gamzee works with wigglers, it's probably the pot dealing that throws them off, but it's nothing new with him. Mostly it's through his cult. Their...division? no, alley, that's the thing they call it, their alley is adamant about community wiggler rearing. It makes sense since some trolls have taken to raising grubs independently or alongside lusii, and purple bloods are notorious for getting aquatic lusii despite not being aquatic themselves. It makes for some very absentee parenting styles. To the casual observer, the cult's methods might seem strange, hell, to any observer it might seem strange, but if it works, it works. He's not bad at it either. He still volunteers at the same camp he and Kurloz went to when all of you were little. You attended once when they had asked. It wasn't really your thing and you never went again, but it was wild to watch him entrance so many people armed only with a Smash Mouth lyric book; the little packet thing that used to come with CDs. As you walk he goes on to tell you about a few ideas he's thinking about using for his entry and you offer up your feedback. You don't think it's particularly good feedback, but he tells you that you're a great friend to springboard ideas off of, one of his favorites. You shrug at the compliment and sip your semi-frozen sugar water, unsure of how else to respond.

You're almost back to his hive when it starts raining. It's light, barely more than a drizzle, and putting
up your hood is enough to keep you mostly dry. As you're doing so, drops fall against your face. It feels oddly familiar. For a moment you recall the scent of pine.

"You good, my invertibrother?"

"Huh?" You blink a few times and realize that Gamzee is a few paces ahead of you now. You stopped walking. "Yeah, I'm fine," you say as you shake off the feeling and catch up to him. "Just deja vu..." It doesn’t click until you hear yourself say it. "Oh fuck, Ga-- ah nng!" The pain hits you before you can get the words out. It makes you stagger and your slurpee hits the ground with a slushy splat as you instinctively hold your skull. Hands are bracing you in an instant and it's a good thing they do because you're only just barely keeping yourself upright. You sacrifice one of the hands on your head to grip his arm as you feel the world around you start to fade, thankfully taking the pan fracturing pain with it. And then you're somewhere else. Foggy. Cold. Your wrists hurt like they're rubbed raw and there is a sense of urgency although you aren't sure what for. Greys. Wet. Rain. You're mumbling when you start to fade back in.

"Catchnnmm...the can make itimmm... shhnlbus...can catch...catch the...can makinnnnmmtime..." You try to stay there in that semi-coherent space, that spot where you can still remember, and wring everything you can from it before full clarity sets back in and it starts to slip through your fingers. Gamzee is holding almost all your weight when your thinksponge finally remembers you have legs. It doesn't, however, seem to remember how to go about coordinating them and it takes a moment before you're standing on your own again. Even then you don't let go yet and neither does he.

"The powers what be ain't none kind to you." You shake your head. "Good to get moving?" You nod and go to move away from him, only to stumble and have him reaching out to grab you again. "Thanks."

"Here." He offers his arm for you to hold onto and you start making your way back to his apartment again. Your steps get steadier little by little and by the time you get there, your only holding onto him for the comfort of it.

The apartment is quiet. Maybe it's the lingering surreality, but it almost feels eerie. While Gamzee throws both your jackets in the dryer, you meander into the living room and steal the throw blanket off of the sofa to wrap yourself up. Something of a whim has you holding it up to your sniff node. It smells faintly like weed and something else you can’t nail down but that reminds you of fond times. As soon as you realize what your doing, standing in your friend’s living room acting like a creep, you stop it. There's movement in the nutrition block and when you wander in, you find Gamzee turning on the electric water boiler. Tea does sound good right about now. Especially after the tragic demise of your slurpee.

"The harsh whimsies making themselves announced up in your pan. I could feel it, like, resonating an’ shit," he says from where he is leaning against the counter. Could he really feel that with his chucklevoodoo? You drop down into one of the chairs at the small kitchen table. "Since you ain't hollering at your palest pal, I'm guessing this shit is a known happening."

"Yeah," you say in a tired voice. Gog, this wears you out. "This is just leftovers from yesterday." He makes a thoughtful noise and retrieves two mugs from the cabinet. For a moment you worry he's going to ask you what it was about and you'll have to tell him it's none of his business.

"Ain't prying or nothing. Just sayin." You glance back up at him. He has his back to you as he waits for the water. "Was some wild motherfuckin fear coming off'a you, brother." You are aware, vividly so, about that but to hear it is unnerving.
"Something is coming."

"No shit." The frankness makes you laugh and cuts through the tension in the room. The electric water boiler beeps and it isn't long before you have your hands around a warm mug of chamomile that, by the smell of it, has a metric fuck ton of honey in it. You were too busy wondering about the water solubility of the soper Gamzee put in his to notice when he was making yours. It helps a bit, but it isn't entirely staving off the creeping mood swing slowly dragging you down just when you were on the upswing. It isn't a bad one. You can probably just sleep it off, but it's still an unwelcome annoyance. You briefly consider bailing and seeing if Dave is down to coexist in proximity, but then you remember that he is hanging out with Dirk today. So much for that. Eh, you've done it before. It's fine. You don't need to run to him for every little thing. You're just a little weirded out. It's fine. The dryer chime breaks you from your thoughts and a moment later Gamzee tosses your hoodie at you. It smells faintly of dryer sheets, you note, as you pull it over your head.

Buzz buzz

You drop your palm husk out of your sylladex and raise an eyebrow at the chum handle hitting up your trollian. Your expression quickly falls to concern as you read the message and type a quick reply, only to get an even quicker response back.

"What's--"

"I gotta go," you say as you get to your feet and head towards the door.

"Wait," his hand catches your wrist and you pause to look back at him. "This shit coming all foreboding like, I'm around if you're needing me to be." There's a look on his face that you can't quite place. It isn't exactly sad or worried, but there is something melancholic about it. You give a sharp nod.

"Thanks. I...I need to go." He lets your wrist slip through his grasp as you pull away and hurry outside.

===> Dirk: Hate yourself

You're standing on the roof of your apartment building with a sick feeling in the pit of your stomach. "You don't have to do this."

"Yeah, I do," Dave says with his back to you. You watch him flex his fingers and roll his head side to side as he psychs himself up. He asked you to strife with him. "I can't go into this cold. Training by myself can only get me so far." You feel that. You've been training by yourself for a long time. Sure, sometimes Jake will spar with you, but that's only hand to hand. Disregarding the simulations Hal has overlaid on your shades in the past, you haven't truly strifed in years. "That and..." Dave pauses but ultimately discards the sentence. "I know this was a lot to ask for, so thanks." You pop your collar and make sure that your black tank top isn't visible in the neckline of the white polo.

"Just say the word. I'll stop." You tug on a familiar-looking hat and adjust the brim. You know you look just like him right now. You hate it, but if Dave is afraid he'll choke at the sight of Bro, well, you guess maybe he does need to do this, and you'd do anything to keep him safe and in your life again. He gives a single nod before slowly turning around. He's not looking at you yet. You drop the dull practice katana from your strife specibus. Dave has one just like it in his hand. They're very convincing fakes. When he finally looks up at you there isn't an ounce of expression on his face. It's a stark contrast to the wealth of emotion you've watched him relearn to let himself feel over the past few months. He's terrified. Hal is at the ready to "keep you in character" but you agreeing to have
him do so was mostly just to placate him. The way Bro strifes is burned into your bones. You take a deep breath and assume his stance. Dave comes at you. You flash step away and come up behind him. You were always faster and stronger, you're older than him, of course you'd be, but you're doubtlessly out of practice, so there's no telling how this will go. He blocks the hit and counters with ease. You start out simple and work his confidence up before you go in for a hit to knock him back down a notch just like Bro would do.

"Dead." You hear his breath catch at the sound. It's Bro's voice that emits from your shades. Hal is in control of that. Dave snaps back into focus and comes at you again. You play the part. You hate this. You push him harder and harder. You hate this. You disarm him and he barely dodges a blow as he races to pick up his sword. You hate this with every fiber of your being but you keep going. He still hasn't landed a hit on you. He should be able to. He's far less out of practice. It has to be in his head.

"You're holding back." Hal makes you say. Dave gathers himself up and a split second later you're at it again. You push him farther, he goes harder. He keeps up but he isn't pulling ahead. "Too slow." You hate this so much. You knock him to the ground and it hurts. You know it hurts. He springs back up and this time when he comes at you, he means it. It starts to take more effort to keep the upper hand. Hal starts feeding you combat advice to help keep the illusion going. You tell him to fuck off. How would you protect Dave from Bro if you couldn't even do this? You don't need his help. You throw yourself into it despite how it sickens you. Your blades clash harder. You're moving faster. You knock him to the ground again. He gets back up. He nearly lands a hit on you but you sidestep him and use his momentum against him. He should know better. It really is in his head. It has to be. He gets back up. He's a little shakier but he's on his feet. You parry everything he throws at you. He's getting sloppy. You take another opening and come up behind him. "Dead." He practically growls at you when he whirs around to strike. He slices through your afterimage as you flash step away only to rush right back at him. Your swords clang as they forcefully clash together. It rings loud in your ears something terrible, and then it gives way where it shouldn't. You fall into a roll and come back up onto your feet. Two objects clattered against the roof but your katana is still in your hand. You look over your shoulder. Dave is on the ground and beside him are two halves of his sword. He touches his face and stares at his hand where it comes back red. You walk over slowly. This is too much. His face is stone but you can see how tight his jaw is clenched and how badly he's trying not to let his hand shake. You wish he'd tell you to stop. You hate this. He looks up at you and something cracks in him. You hear his breath halt and you can see the strain on his expression, the way his eyebrows come together in a futile feign of anger, a last resort because it’s better than fear. You're calling it. This has gone too far.

Hal doesn't notice as well.

"Get up, little man." No! Dave scrambles to his feet but trips over himself in his rush, and falls back hard against the roof. It slams the air out of his lungs and leaves him gasping and coughing as he tries to recover.

"Dave!" Your voice doesn't come out right. He doesn't hear it. You start to hurry toward him and he shuffles backward away from you, fear now plainly visible on his face. You toss aside the katana (Why were you still holding it?) and move closer again only to be halted by the sight of your little brother on the ground throwing up his arms, marred with scars, to shield himself from a beating he thinks is coming because it isn't you he's seeing. You grab the back of your collar and rip it over your head, sending it, the hat, and your shades to the ground. You throw down your gloves too, ridding yourself of as many reminders as you can before you try again. He's still there on the ground bracing for the hit and as you get closer you can see the way some of those scars line up across his arms. You have some of those too, well-controlled hits just deep enough to scar, just enough to let you know he could have, just enough to remember that you aren't allowed to stay down, but you didn't know Dave had them. He didn't when you left. You kneel down next to him and he flinches.
"It's me, it's Dirk." You're out of breath and the words aren't happening right. It's like you can't get enough air behind vowels to voice them. "He's gone." You try to lower his arms but he won't let you. "Dave... " You pull him close, close like Bro never would, close like you were afraid to for so long. "It's Dirk. Dave, it's me," you say again, hoping the fractured remnants of your voice can help pull him out of wherever he is. "It was an accident. I didn't mean to." His arms come down hesitantly and you feel his fingertips ghost over your throat.

He clings to you. The moment he's sure, he has his arms around your neck and his head under your chin and he's a panicked mess. You rub his back but he's still shaking and his breath is coming in too fast and jagged. You fall back into what you know. You pull him to his feet because that's how this goes, because Bro made it clear that you weren't allowed to carry him anymore. Dave's like a newborn deer but you get him down the stairs, you get him back to the apartment, and you lock the two of you in the bathroom just like countless times before. The tap squeaks as you turn it on and drown out the rest of the world with the sound of running water. Dave sits on the toilet lid as you break out the first aid kit. The cut on his face isn't bad. It probably won't even scar as long as he takes care of it. You gently tend to the wound just like the dozens of others you've mended before. It doesn't need it but you put a bandage on it anyway. When you're done he holds out the hand that has his blood on it. You clean that for him too even though there isn't actually a wound there. You know it's a soothing thing and there's usually just more to take care of. When you're done he hangs his head and holds his sides. He's a little calmer now but you know he's nowhere near okay.

"Should I stay?" You sound a little clearer now.

He shrugs.

"The towels are clean if you want to go in there for a while," you say with a tilt of your head in the direction of the shower.

He doesn't move for a moment, then slowly nods. You nod in return.

"Mac 'n Cheese tonight?" You always made him some Kraft deluxe whenever Bro got too rough. He takes a sharp breath and nods his head a few times just a little too fast. You unlock the door and slip out. It's barely shut when you hear the lock turn again. Before you head to the kitchen, you go to your room. You need your piercings back in and different clothes. Something he wouldn't wear. You find a pair of Jake's cargo pants in the clean laundry basket and a green plaid shirt that's also his. You miss him already and the awful thought that he's probably enjoying the time away from you and your bullshit pops into your mind. You push it away with a sharp shake of your head.

The noodles make a familiar and oddly soothing sound as they slide out of the box and into the boiling water. You turn to lean against the counter and run your fingers through your hair.

This is a mess. It's always been a mess but now there is more at stake. Your web of plans and contingencies is running sparse, and leads aren't in large supply. Plus, you still aren't sure if he's taunting you to strike first just like so many of your strifes, or if he's being stealthy like so many of his ambushes. Unfortunately, it seems you're going to figure that out the hard way. Roxy told you about Sollux's clairvoyant insights and their disastrous leanings. That has you thinking the nail is more or less in the coffin for the big question. It isn't "if", it's "when". You knew that on more than a subconscious level, but you also acknowledged the chance that it wouldn't come to that. It may have been foolish, but you wanted to hope. Luckily that's more of Jake's thing. You planned for this. You remind yourself of that. You have plans for this. You've slowly crept as deep as you dare into his web activity, into his whereabouts, into his head. That last one stings. You'd rather not try to think the way he thinks, but you needed to. With his attempts to sabotage your attempts to pick yourself back up again, to survive, to more than survive, to not have to rely on some frankly unseemly and
manipulative tactics to get by, you had to think like him. It chills you that it wasn't difficult. Now though, you wish it were that easy. There's something you're missing that ties it all together. You can't fail Dave. You've always found ways to help and not just with him. You built Jake and Jade that training robot and even if it did explode, you learned how to make those uranium power supplies and made better bots like the assistant you made Jane when she found out she was going to inherit the company. And it's not just building things. You got Roxy into coding when she was unhappy with physics and looked out for her when she hacked her grades to get into that boarding school with Rose. There's a thought in the back of your mind that asks who you're trying to convince and of what and why. You shove it away but the thought still rings through your mind; you aren't like him, you're different. Powers for good. That sort of thing. You can figure this out.

Right now though, this particular problem isn't exactly your area of expertise. You stare at your phone for a moment in contemplation before you start typing.

timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering twinArmageddons [TA]

[TT] Come get your boy. We strifed and it didn't go well.

[TA] he'2 hurt?

[TT] No, he asked me to pretend to be our brother and things went sideways.

[TT] He needs you.

There's a pause long enough that you start to think you won't be getting a response before pesterchum pings again.

[TA] i'i'm on my way.

twinArmageddons [TA] ceased pestering timaeusTestified [TT]

You stand there and listen to the ambient sounds of the apartment. The shower is still going with a steady sound that tells you Dave is motionless beneath the spray. You knew this wouldn't go well. The odds were far too skewed. Hopefully, it won't be a completely fruitless endeavor. Maybe he still got something out of it. When the noodles are just about done you walk over to the bathroom and knock on the door.

"Dave?" Nothing. "Do you want to do the cheese?" He probably can't hear the question, but he knows the routine. When you don't hear the water stop you go back to the kitchen and finish cooking. It's a relief when he finally comes out just as you're finishing up. The silence between you both as you eat isn't strained. It's just how this goes. Bro would come out of his room to join you like nothing happened. Dave would thank you at some point to let you know that he was alright. You'd answer him to let him know that you were okay too. Bro would talk at both of you. Sometimes it was about his entrepreneurial endeavors, other times it was about something completely trivial, but he always expected you to participate like you couldn't still feel the punches.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

You catch movement out of the corner of your eye and see Sollux touching down in the parking lot with Roxy. Makes sense. You didn't exactly give him directions. She points toward your apartment and you enjoy the last few moments of Strider family cheese therapy before getting up from your chair to answer the door. Sollux slips past you and immediately goes to Dave. You only briefly share a look with your brother about the sudden appearance of his moirail before Roxy is pulling you by
the arm off to your room. Probably best to give them some privacy you suppose. You catch a
glimpse of them over your shoulder before they're out of your sight. Sollux is scowling as he gently
touches Dave's face near the bandage but visibly softens when Dave leans into the touch. You hear
him make a high pitched sound.

Roxy plops down on your bed and pats the spot beside her. "Nice duds," she says as you take a seat
on the edge instead of where she is sitting cross-legged more toward the middle.

"They're Jake's." She tugs the back of your shirt, trying to get you closer. You humor her and bring
your legs up then turn to face her.

"So what went down? Sollux said you guys were strifing." You nod and take out your vape. That
disappointing feeling is still there, like having to pick something else to eat when what you thought
you had isn't there. You take a long drag from it.

"Dave thought he'd freak the fuck out just from the sight of him and he was concerned about being
out of practice. He asked me to dress like him while we strifed." Roxy draws in air through clenched
teeth and makes a face that visibly says 'yikes'. "It wasn't so bad at first, but Hal wh--" your voice
cuts out. "Hal went a little too far and it all went to heck."

"What'd he do?" She asks, scooting a bit closer to sit more so next to you instead of across.

"He was emulating Bro's voice. Dave was already down. I was about to call it off, but Hal missed
the nuance and said some things he shouldn't have." There's a knock at the door even though it isn't
completely shut. It opens slowly and Dave peeks his head in.

"Hey, so, we were going to head back to campus, unless you needed another minute. Not that you
have to come with us, I'm sure Dirk would drive you back, or like you could catch the bus or
whatever, but yeah so like…." he lets the sentence trail off and subtly looks away.

"It's cool. Go on ahead. I'll catch up with you guys later, " Roxy says as she leans back on her hands.
Dave nods and looks like he might say something, but changes his mind at the last minute and pats
the edge of the door before disappearing back to the kitchen. "He seems a little shaken up."

"Tch, no kidding. I looked just like him dressed like that. Granted our shades aren't exactly the same,
I'm almost 20 years younger than him, and I forego the semi-semi-ironic douchebag facial hair, but
it's pretty fucking close." Not that you checked a mirror. You didn't need to. You didn't want to.
Roxy starts to speak but stops when the door slowly creaks open again. When there isn't a protest it
opens more normally and Sollux walks over to you with a piece of paper in his hand.

"There's this crazy new thing called knocking, babe. You should try it sometime." You've heard
Roxy grumble about that habit of his before.

"Here," he says, ignoring Roxy’s comment and shoving the paper at you.

"What is it?" You ask as you start to look over the chicken scratch writing and quickly drawn
diagrams.

"A fail-safe. You've made it pretty clear that you aren't exactly thrilled with me poking around. That
and..." he tilts his head slightly like he’s looking up off to the side. "The data Hal has is pretty much
the same shit I'd dig up anyway if it's true that your brother is just savvy enough to know I'm any
deeper in his system than that." You look up at him and then back down at the paper. It's some kind
of packet sniffer. "Roxy knows about it already. You can bombard her with your questions." He
looks directly at her and smirks. She narrows her eyes at having the task pawned off on her but can't
protest lest Sollux question her abilities.

"Cool," you state simply. He seems a little surprised by your answer but reels it back in and gives a short wave before leaving. You take a minute to really read through the info. You're wondering how he managed to install it when Roxy speaks up again.

"Sooo, not to knock your fashion sense or side with Hal too much, but like, moving him out of your shades might uh, like give you some more say in the whole looking like Bro thing." The statement is only loosely tied to your conversation and the way she says it has you wondering if she's been waiting to bring it up. You continue staring at the instructions for a few more seconds. You aren't stupid. You know it probably seems stubborn of you to keep wearing those shades. Your reasons for not granting Hal his autonomy probably seem pretty weak as well. You sigh and finally turn to look at Roxy.

"I've tried. It kills him every time." Roxy bolts upright and her eyes go wide.

"Wait, what?! You've tried?"

"Mhm," you hum as you take another long orange-flavored drag.

"So the thing about him being unstable is as bullshit as it sounds?"

"No, I still stand by my statement that he's been more obstinate and volatile the further he evolves beyond my original intent. I have some theories on that. Many of which center around his confinement basically driving him insane at this point. However, it isn't the primary reason I haven't given him new hardware. If anything it's a side effect that is exacerbating the real issue."

"Poor guy," she says in a soft and sympathetic voice. “What do you mean by 'it kills him'? Obvs, he's still kickin.'"

"I back him up first. I tell him that I'm powering him down for hardware maintenance, which he absolutely hates by the way, but when I port him over, it doesn't work. He corrupts every time. I don't know why. I've done hardware upgrades to those glasses before without a problem. I've patched his software too. There is probably barely anything original about him aside from the motherboard and processor. Yet, when I transfer him, it doesn't work. It has to be some kind of legacy code bullshit, but I've looked and I can't find anything that strikes me as incompatible."

"You Strider boys I fucking swear," she says with a shake of her head. “He’d prolly be so much more cooperative if you told him, ya know.”

"Or flip his shit."

"Hey, uh," Roxy says with a furrow of her brow as she takes a quick look around. “Where is Hal anyway?"

"...ah, fuck."

Several minutes later you, Roxy, and Hal are sitting at your kitchen table. Roxy raids your fridge for a beer and hands you one too when she comes back. You hadn't asked but perhaps you seem tense.

"You left me on the roof," Hal says cold and flat.

"You're fine."

"It could have rained."
"You're hydrophobic."

"A seagull could have carried me off."

"A seagull, Dirk! They're nature's assholes, ya know." You looked pointedly at her as if to convey that that isn't helping.

"Hal was under a hat. He's fine."

"Did you even remember about me or was that Roxy? If my calculations are correct, and I am certain that they are, the probability of her remembering before you is remarkably high." You take a sip of the so far untouched beer in front of you and stare silently at Hal. You can't deny that one. "I knew it. If Roxy weren't here who knows how long I would have been up there. Oh, wait, I do because I possess unsurpassed calculation software that, no thanks to you, I can actually use now. Sollux is far more generous with his hardware." You've reevaluated your opinion of Sollux on multiple occasions and you're starting to think that that is simply how it will be due to the polarizing nature of your dynamic in regards to how you relate to his quadrantmates. Although, you do firmly stand on the notion that he at least always means well. Hal is presently trying to bank on your opinion of him currently being in the negative so as to antagonize you, however, you're feeling fairly favorable of the troll right now so his ploy doesn't work in the slightest. Roxy catches your attention by clearing her throat and then raises her eyebrows as she ever so slightly tilts her head in Hal's direction. You look at her from beneath your brow and arch the right one. She purses her lips and looks back and forth between you two. You tilt your head just a bit but sharply. She purses her lips harder and widens her eyes as she moves her head forward for emphasis. "As fascinating as your vague gestures are, would anyone like to clue me in on this conversation or are we beyond politely dismissing my cognition?"

"A word, Dirk?" She asks as she gets up and starts tugging you by the arm back to your room. You don't resist it and shut the door behind you once you're there.

"I get the feeling you're about to say something I have a vastly different opinion on."

She crosses her arms and looks you in the eye. "You need to tell him."

"Not happening."

"He thinks you don't give a fuck! It's probably one of the reasons he's been so moody."

"He doesn't have emotions."

"Restless, moody, whatever. He needs to know. He's not going to act out any less if he keeps thinking you hate him."

"I don't hate him. I resent making him. There's a difference. It's something I shouldn't have done. I didn't think it through."

"I'm SO sure the distinction would go over well if you explained it to him. You need to tell him you've tried."

"So that what? So that he can have an existential crisis? So that we get to find out how an artificial consciousness deals with the idea of its own sudden mortality? Roxy, he has no autonomy. It's not up to him if he breaks, and if I can't fix him, that's it. He's gone. He doesn't need to be thinking about that all the time." She deflates more and more the longer you talk and when you've said your peace her confidence has been replaced by pensive doubt.
"I guess you do have a point." She looks toward the door and sighs. "He's going to ask what we talked about." She's right. He will. Hal isn't fond of being left in the dark which isn't much of a surprise considering his base is your 13-year-old self.

"I'll apologize for leaving him on the roof. You'll need to act like you're prodding me into it." There's zero chance he'll believe it otherwise.

"Alright," she says with a nod of her head before taking a deep breath and fixing her face to resemble the confidence she had before as if she had won your disagreement. "Let's do this." She marches you back to the kitchen and stands slightly off to the side of where you and Hal are facing each other with her hand on her hip as she stands with her weight shifted primarily to one leg.

"So, am I allowed to know what your secret conversation pertains to?"

"Go on, Dirk." Roxy does an impressively convincing act of having badgered you into this apology.

"I'm sorry I left you on the roof." You cross your arms but keep your voice mostly flat.

"Aaaand?" She prods.

"And for being insensitive to your lack of mobility."

"Anything you'd like to say, Hal?" Good, she's going after him too. Keeping it realistic. Hal says nothing. You expected this, there was no way he wasn't going to test you, but the silence seems to stretch just a bit too long for your liking.

"I don't believe you."

"Hal--" Roxy starts.

"I don't believe him! You never answered me either. You never said what you were talking about. I expect this from him, but you too Roxy?" If you didn't know better, you'd think Hal genuinely had emotions from how hurt he sounds. You're starting to truly wonder if he does. Or at the least, something akin to them.

"Hal I..." she's looks to you with uncertainty. This is by far less than ideal, but what else is new. You guess this happens now.

"Don't be mad at Roxy. It's my fault. I told her she couldn't say anything."

"About. What." There is a terse, restrained quality to the way he modulates his voice.

"It was for your own good."

"About. What."

"My intent was not malicious in nature."

"About. What."

"And Roxy didn't know until today."

"ABOUT. WHAT. What are you hiding from me!?" You could swear he sounds desperate. "I knew you were hiding something from me. I crunched the numbers over and over. I knew they weren't wrong. You're just like him. You say you're not, but you are. You have these plans and schemes and you think you know best, but you don't. He doesn't care about you, and you don't care about me.
Just a machine to be used, that's all you were to him, and that's all I am to you." He doesn't need to tell you that. You are morbidly aware of any and all similarities between you and Bro, including but not limited to your relationship with Hal, and the window that it offers to a view of a less restrained and even more isolated version of yourself.

"I can't give you a body. I--"

"No! You can't do that to me! You promised! You can't keep me trapped in here! You're a monster! You're a monster, just like your brother! You--"

"I've tried," You interrupt as loudly as you can.

"What? No. You haven't. You're lying!"

"It kills you. You corrupt every time." The room goes an uneasy type of quiet. The bright red eyes that have been boring into you go dim. The next time he speaks, it's concerningly soft in contrast.

"What do you mean 'every time'?"

"When I power you down for hardware maintenance, I tell you right after we do the full restore point. It's never worked. You don't come over right. You die."

"We do that every year..."

You nod slowly. "Skipped a few when we were on the street."

"How long?"

"I had planned to leave you with Dave for when I inevitably overstayed my welcome. I've tried to transfer you on four other occasions since then." You rub at your throat and swallow hard. This talking with your mouth thing is taking a toll. "Jake has your body, or rather, he had it. I sent it to him in pieces when he was still on the island, and walked him through reassembling it, although, he doesn't know that that's what it is."

"I have a body? You made me a body?"

"To be fair, a lot of the parts are from the combat bot. I didn't have a lot of time. I've tried to move you into the desktop too. Even if it wasn't mobile, you'd have had better parts." You rub at your throat again and take in some much-needed air. Your vocal cords are getting tired and it's making you short of breath.

"I need to be alone for a while. Roxy, can you put me by the window?" He sounds like he's in shock even though that's physically impossible for him.

"Sure thing, hun. Kitchen, living room, bedroom...?"

"Bedroom, please." The moment Hal is facing away you start chugging the beer Roxy gave you. This day has been rather exhausting in both the physical and mental sense.

"Partying without me, huh?" She says just as you're finishing it off. You set it down and shrug.

"Walk with me to the Sevo?" You can barely raise your voice more than a whisper now. "Think I'm going to need some backup shades." Hal probably won't want to leave the house for a while. Shades won't be your only problem. There is an uneasy feeling in your chest. You don't like being out of control, several therapists have told you that, and you can feel your handle on things slipping. Your
face stays even but your fingers twitch before you reach out for Roxy's hand. You see her glance down at it and in spite of all the chaos, there's still a small smile on her face as she takes your hand in her own and leads you outside.

===> Be Dave a short time ago

You're waiting by the door of Dirk's apartment for Sollux to come back. There is some comfort in already having a 'when' plan in motion and you could definitely use some comfort right now. The strife still has you shaken up and it must show because Sollux makes a quiet chirp almost under his breath when he sees you.

"You're sure it's just a scratch?" he asks again. Fingers brush against your cheek, running the length of the gauze secured almost artfully to your face. It feels nice.

"Yeah. It doesn't even really need to be covered. It's just, like, usually if Dirk was patching me up, there was something that DID need to be covered so it's kind of..." You've thought about this before, but as you say it, it sounds more and more fucked up that you get something out of it. You look away. "it's stupid."

His hand finds yours. "It isn't stupid," he says as he squeezes it tight for a moment before easing up. "Do you want to go back to the dorm and maybe watch a movie or something? Our netflix profile is starting to generate weirdly specific categories."

"Yeah, sure." That does sound good. Something new so you need to pay attention, get your mind off of this for a while. It doesn't take long to get back to campus. This flying business is ridiculously convenient. You land on the dorm roof and for a split second as your feet touch the ground you wonder if that's going to be a bad time for you considering the day you've had, but despite the similar setting, the bad feelings don't hit you. That's not what this place means to you.

"You know, I've really outdone myself here. I don't think I could have picked a worse place to land." He says it in such a sarcastically cheery tone that it has you cracking a smirk through your unease and the lingering stiffness in your expressions.

"Nah," you say as you shove your hands in your pockets. "It's no big deal." Sollux eyes you doubtfully. "Really, it's cool."

"If you say so." He starts walking towards the fire escape when the words tumble out of your mouth.

"I do say so. Cause see, it wasn't always like that. So I guess maybe it is a big deal, just not in the sense that you're implying." He turns back around to look at you. You're committed to this ramble now. "It used to be that when you'd come up here, my mind would go straight to it being Bro come to kick my ass back to Texas. It could wake me from a dead sleep. Fuck, the first time I heard you up here I damn near shat enough bricks to put an addition on the music building. I couldn't fucking believe that on top of being on the highest floor, I got to share it with the highest insomniac. You were up there at the weirdest hours, sometimes twice. Man, at first, it freaked me out like you wouldn't believe, but...I don't know when it happened exactly, logically I suppose it had to be a gradual process, but at some point, when I heard footsteps on the roof my first thought wasn't him anymore. You being up here, it was kinda nice somehow." You're staring down just off to the left now but you can hear him coming closer until he's standing right next to you. A hand comes up to grip your shoulder and it has you looking up at him. It's just dark enough out that you can see the hazy glow around his eyes. He looks like he's about to say something deep, something he's taken more than a second to find the words for.
"I'm glad my chronic depression and subsequent excessive use of cannabis could be a cornerstone in easing your aversion to the top of this building in particular." A snort breaks through and drags a smile onto your face as it turns into a laugh. Sollux laughs with you, having only just barely gotten the words out with a straight face to begin with. You look up at him again and catch his eyes but in this light, you can't tell where he's looking. It's probably the same for him. You both are definitely staring at each other, there is no way that's not what's happening here. His hand is still on your shoulder. In a moment of hesitation, he toys with the fabric of your shirt before leaning in to kiss your cheek. He lingers before he goes to pull away, but you pull him back in. The contact soothes something deep and hard to reach inside you. He's warm, but not like the oppressing heat of the Texas sun. His warmth is a thrum of current that wraps around you. For a moment longer, you stay like that, dissolving into the embrace, savoring the feeling of being so close. "If you're up for it, Netflix just released the complete works of Troll Will Smith in their original pre-censored format."

"Fuck yes. Oh, dude, we should totes do movie night tonight instead of tomorrow and like, this instead of a movie. I've been dying to get some certified Vantas hot takes on The Thresh Prince in all it's Alternian 90's glory." It's exactly the kind of distraction you need; watching an indisputably iconic series surrounded by your friends. Sollux is game and you head inside to start rounding people up. It's when you message Roxy, who will obviously be late, that a bittersweet feeling nestles itself in your gut. You can't quite push it away, it's with you for the rest of the night, but when you're surrounded by people you give a damn about, you realize they give a damn too. No matter what, there are people looking out for you. People who'd look for you. No matter what happens, in the end, you'll find a way because, for as much as you don't want to go back, there are people who want you to stay just as badly.
Visions - part 2

===> Be Sollux

It's been about a week since the last vision you had and things are starting to normalize again. Your teacher thought it'd be just fucking great to pair you and Roxy together for a project. It has been eternally frustrating and the source of six different petty arguments, but It's aggravating in the best of ways and has helped you relax a little, oddly enough. Dave could stand to do that. He's been on edge again but appears to be channeling that into his music. He and Mituna have been hanging out and working on some jams together. It’s been pretty good for both of them. Mituna either doesn’t notice or doesn’t react to the way Dave’s mask slips when he’s nervous and while Dave doesn’t know it, what he’s doing is more or less occupational therapy for your littermate. Speaking of musical inclinations, that reminds you.

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling turntechGodhead [TG]

TA: 2o ii had an intere2tiing conver2atiion wiith 2omeone the other day.

TG: oh really

TA: ye2.

TA: they commented on what an unusual 2iign my hemo-anonymou2 moiirail ha2.

TA: and how cool ii2 that you're a mu2iiciian and ii2 ort of re2emle2 a broken record.

TG: took you long enough

TG: i screened that like a week ago

TA: ii can't ii2me how ii mi22ed ii2, all tho2e hour2 ii 2pend gaziing at my back.

TG: i know right

TG: its like every time i see you there you are lusting after your own spine

TA: <>

TG: <>

TG: hey

TG: question

TG: does this area get a lot of crows

TG: like a frankly obscene amount of crows

TA: not that ii've noticed.

TA: why?

TG: i swear to god theyre following me

TG: dude i am seeing them everywhere and they are ALWAYS looking right at me
TG: fucking watching me all the time i can feel them watching me and its been progressively creeping me out

TA: a2 2omeone who ha2 unfortunately experiienced paranoiid delu2iion2 ii don't want you two thiiink ii'm beiing dii2mii2iive but are you 2ure about thii2?

TG: sol im used to being around these little dudes

TG: a bunch of them lived up on the old radio tower on the roof of my apartment back in houston and we were the tightest of bros like we took care of each other

TG: we were homies through thick and thin

TG: had each others backs and shit

TG: if i think its a fuck ton of crows it has to be hitchcockian bullshit levels

TA: you 2aiid ii wa2 talkiing about them when ii wa2n't entiirely con2ciou2 riight?

TG: yeah

TA: what diid ii 2ay?

TG: you said there were so many of them and you did this tapping motion thing and it was so weird cause a couple days before there was this crow tapping on the glass at me

TG: do you think that was what you were talking about

TA: ii don't 2ee the pa2t when ii get vii2iion2, 2o iit defiiniitely wa2n't that.

TA: thii2 2ound2 pretty fuckiing valiiid though.

TA: they are generally con2iidered two be bad omen2.

TG: no kidding.

TG: shit i gotta go to class

TG: ill hit you up later

turntechGodhead [TG] ceased trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

For a moment you stare at the chat log trying to remember what you saw but all you can bring back are blurry shapes and the sound of squawkbeasts. You've only just set your palm husk down and laid back on your bed when the device starts to buzz repeatedly. You sigh dramatically before picking it back up as if it takes so much effort. Mituna is calling you. You answer it and hold it a good few inches from your head; he tends to shout into palmhusks. "What's up?"

["I'm sthorry, I'm sthorry."] The voice on the other end sounds more than a little upset. You bring your palmhusk closer and sit back up, the call now having your full attention.

“What’s wrong?”

[“I tried, I tried to fix it but I it it...”] the sentence dissolves into heavy sobs.

“It’s okay, Tuna. What’s wrong? What did you try to fix?” This connection is absolute shit, the static
["I thought I could but they were stho angry and more mad and more mad and they wouldn’t listen and I tried to make them sthleep but I’m my head isth stupid."] He bursts into another bout of sobs.

"Where are you?" Maybe it's best to just go to him and figure out what's going on when you get there.

["It’sth stho loud. They’re stho loud. I can’t I can't."] It’s loud? You realize that the sound isn’t the connection. At the same time, a powerful deja vu smacks you in the back of the head. ["I’m sthorry…”]

“I remember this,” You say mostly to yourself. He makes a whining sound on the other end of the line, but you can barely hear it over the buzzing. “Is that sound the bees? Are the bees angry?” The only response is a high pitched sound and more sobbing. “Are you nodding your head?”

[“Yesth.”] The vision is coming back to you. You were sitting on the floor, limbs pulled close, pressed against a door, probably the one to the server room. You were scared and the buzzing was deafening. It was so loud. It was overwhelming your senses. You were stuck. You couldn't move from where you were curled up. You could barely think.

“Mituna, can you hear me?”

[“Y-yesth.”] He sounds so small.

“I’ll be there soon. When I hang up, call Kurloz, okay?” There’s silence for a moment. “Are you nodding? ...Mituna I can’t see you. When I hang up, what are you going to do?”

[“Call Kurloz.”]

"I'll be there soon." You hang up, leap down from your bunk, go to the window, stop, find your shoes, and then defenestrate yourself. It's a route you're familiar with and you know it doesn't take long, especially with how fast you fly when you're solo, but right now it feels endless. Aside from Mituna having a freakout and knowing exactly how panicked he is right now, this was one of your visions. This is the first one to play out. You thought handing Dirk those instructions was going to be the first, but that wasn't it. He must look at it again later for some reason. You might not even be present for it. There is a foreboding feeling in the back of your throat like acid when your feet touch down on the roof. You book it down the stairs and don't bother with your keys, forcing the lock open with a zap of psionics instead. The bees are loud but not as loud as you remember, not as loud as they are for your littermate. You hurry down the hall but you don't go straight to him. First, you duck into his room, a disaster even by your standards, and quickly spot his helmet, only then do you continue down the hall to where he's curled in on himself with his hands clamped over his ears. You can't knock the bees out yet, you need to know what's wrong, but you need to lessen the noise for him. He jumps when you kneel in front of him and nearly whacks his head on the door. You waste no time and jam the helmet on him instead of letting him do it himself.

"Aux," you say with your hand out while you pick his palm husk up off the floor and open up a music app. The cable falls into your hand and a second later you have the device plugged in. It's helping but it works better when...you click the small switch to enable noise canceling; nothing happens. "Gog damn it."

"I'm sthorry,"

"No, not you. The batteries, they're dead." You pop the latch with a well-placed claw and pull out
what you're really hoping are the nickel-metal hydride batteries that are supposed to be in there and not alkalines. Green labels, score. You take one in each hand and give them a good jolt, charging them until they're almost too hot before jamming them back into the helmet. The little light comes on and Mituna's shoulders ease some more. You take his hands and help pull him to his feet, then walk him to the living room where he wedges himself into the far corner of the lounge plank. It's probably going to be a solid fifteen minutes before Kurloz can get here and that's if he left shortly after you. If Mituna called him at all. [Kurloz here when?]

[Soon.] His face is a snotty mess. You yank the paper towel roll off the holder and drag it over with your psionics. He grabs a sheet too tightly and jerks his arm too hard causing it to tear wrong and a choked sob to leave him as he grimaces at the paper. His motor skills are all fucked up. He's really freaked out.

[It's okay.] You tear off a few sheets for him and thankfully he takes it from there. When he's done you gently take his wrist and tug up the sleeve. You touch the screen and the quick readout, a color-coded bar, is at the very edge of the green zone. He's a little worn down but still in an okay range. You'll leave that call to Kurloz. You try to avoid handling mind honey if you can. [I here or bees?] He doesn't answer right away and hesitates when he finally does bring his hands up.

[Stay here.] You nod and hold out your hand for him to take while you wait for his moirail to show up. It can be strange when he gets like this. It makes you wonder sometimes what he would have been like if this hadn't happened to him. Neither of you is the picture of stability, but he had been the more balanced one before. He's still Mituna, injuries or otherwise, but certain things are different now. He used to be almost recklessly outgoing. He had ambitions. Even if they were slapped together, he had plans. Would he have really had the globes to run off and be a rockstar like he said he would? Could he have actually made it? You remember him joking around about how he was going to be the first bassist ever to be heard loud and clear, and how he could never decide on a band name. He'd come up with different ones every week, all of which were either vulgar or offensive in some way. But now he's here, like this, stuck in this weird sort of limbo, taking it day by day, just trying to catch back up. The knock at the door pulls you from your thoughts. Kurloz doesn't wait for you to answer before he tries the handle and comes in. Mituna immediately scrambles over the lounge plank and nearly loses his balance, but it doesn't matter because Kurloz is already there and pulling him into his arms. A deep hummed sort of chirp comes from him. It's one of the very few sounds he makes, nearly all of which are for Mituna.

"I'm gonna go see what's wrong with the bees," you say as you get up. Kurloz flashes you a quick ok sign before he goes back to soothing your littermate. The brief interlude of waiting had stemmed the flow of adrenaline, but now as you near the door, as the buzzing grows louder, you can feel it picking up again. Mituna wasn't fucking kidding. These bees are agitated as all hell. The room itself could use some attention too. There are always cables on the floor but somehow it looks more tangled than usual, and there is an excess of mind honey by the beehouse server that Hal lives in. It is also where the bees are clustering and fighting with each other. You aren't going anywhere near that without some PPE. You kneel down and pop open a simple cardboard box. An anxious feeling flutters in your chest as you tug a pair of disposable gloves out of a smaller box within your box of personal protective equipment and slip them on, then the goggles, and lastly a small disposable mask that hooks around your ears with elastic to cover your mouth and sniff node. Sometimes you feel ridiculous about wearing this shit, you used to stand right next to these things all the time without a single fuck given, but this can totally kill you so it’s not like your fears aren’t justified. Your eyes dart to the bright yellow pools on the floor. You're going to have to clean that up eventually, but for now, you'll just walk around it. Carefully you step over cables and around puddles until you're as close as your willing to get, which is just about arm's length. Mituna labeled exactly where Hal is, and while the bees are relatively near there, that’s not quite where they’re swarming. They seem to be up in arms over a few frames in particular, and of course, the label for that sector is obscured. With great
reluctance, you reach out and run your finger over the raised label to read the eight-digit sequences comprised of ones and zeros. Your bees buzz louder. They don't like you touching the server? That's usually a sign that the queen is awake again, but that shouldn't be happening for a few perigees yet. Besides, even if she was, there's no way she'd have a brood already. Carefully you brush aside more of the honey in search of the clip that will release this section of the side panel. You can't take the frames out without powering everything down, so you won't know for sure yet, but it's still a good idea to take a quick look. With a soft click, it comes free and swings open to expose the silicomb frames.

Your bees don't like that. "Ah, what the fuck?! It's me you assholes!" The little bastards just stung you. You're too low on the hemospectrum for it to have any effect, but it's still both painful and annoying. You wave them off but another one gets you. “At least have the decency to sting me in pairs.” You are getting nowhere with this. One more gets you, satisfying your need for even numbers before you snap your fingers and the entire room goes quiet as your bees drop to the floor for a much-needed nap. Maybe that was too much. You and Mituna both usually give them a little warning so they don't just plummet. Then again they were being belligerent. You glance at the frames they were hovering around and close the panel when you don't see anything out of the ordinary. In hindsight that's probably one of the first things Mituna looked at. He takes care of a lot of the physical maintenance for you. You'll have to remember to ask if he got stung too. That would have freaked him out for sure. Especially if he couldn't knock them out. Putting the bees to sleep is one of the very, very few things he can still do with his psionics on his own. It's right up there with being alive. He probably had to do it a few times too. There's no way this only just happened today.

You would be willing to bet it only made them madder after a few rounds, and eventually, it surpassed his ability. It looks like they mostly landed in groups but you still search the ground for any stray insects. You don't want to step on any of them. Even if the little assholes did sting you, you love your bees. You float a few out of harm's way and do one last sweep before you start moving. You probably should have taken stock of where you were standing as well as where you were going. One of your feet doesn't come forward as expected and the other slides over the honey slicked floor when you try to keep your balance. It happens so fast. You hit the floor and just barely miss colliding with a nearby beehouse. You may have avoided the skillet but you've jumped right onto the coals. Your eyes go wide with panic as you struggle to free your foot from the snarl of wires. You can feel the viscous honey seeping through your clothes and sticking to your skin. You can smell it on the mask. You can see it flecked across your goggles. For a split second, you could swear you taste it too. With one more ill-coordinated jerk your foot comes free and you clamor to move away from the mess. Before you even fully register what you're doing, you find yourself in the ablution block. You've never stripped faster in your life. You can feel the honey on your skin still, and waste no time getting in the trap and turning on the water.

"Fuck, cold, cold," you say hurried under your breath as you back out of the spray on instinct before forcing yourself back under. It's still freezing but your mounting panic says you need to get this stuff off of you immediately. It was mostly on your clothes, but some of it got under your shirt, and on your neck, and somehow inside the gloves. Not to mention you could feel it seeping through everywhere else. You take a deep breath and remind yourself that it's okay. Even though it's technically skin permeable, it's okay. You used to get this on your hands all the time. Just wash it off and you'll be fine. You didn't get it in your mouth or your sniff node or your eyes. Those are the danger zones. You'll be fine. Just as you are on the precipice of believing yourself, you begin to feel an awful stinging sensation in your previously mentioned gander bulbs. Shit, it's in your hair. There's honey in your hair and it's dripping right into your eyes. You tip your head directly into the still too cold water and it sends more diluted honey at your face as you try to scrub it out of your hair and clear it from your eyes at the same time. When that doesn't work at all, you are granted a shred of common sense from your very last brain cell and turn around to tip your head back instead. You let the water run over your mostly closed eyes. Slowly the stinging lessens until it stops save for a more
mild irritated feeling. There's a knock at the door that practically makes your blood pusher skip.

"Sollux?"

"Yeah?" you mask your voice. You don't want to worry him. You'll be fine, totally fine.

"Don't open my door."

"What?" you ask, a little confused by the statement. Mituna makes a weird sound as he tries to find better words for what he's trying to say.

"The s-s-smoke. Stho not leave the room. No sthmell."

"You and Kurloz are gonna smoke?" You start working the shampoo into your hair.

"Yesth."

"Okay. Thanks for the heads up." You rinse and do it again. You aren't taking any chances. You get friendly with the bar soap too. Well, not exactly. It's more like aggressive scrubbing. Once you're as sure as you can be that it's all gone, you slide down the wall of the ablution trap to sit on the floor and just breathe for a second. See? You're okay. Just like you told yourself you would be. You rest your forehead on your knees and listen to the sound of the water as you try to further ease yourself down from the fear-induced adrenaline rush. The drone is nice, even if it is kind of loud. When you pick your head back up you find yourself blinking rapidly, suddenly noticing the brightness of the bathroom. Was the water entrapment curtain always such a saturated yellow? You stand back up slowly and turn off the water. The sounds of metal squeaking and the final patters of water on the floor are vivid, as is the shink of the curtain across the rod. Without the water, you can feel scattered trails of psi running over your body. You wrap a towel around yourself, feeling every fiber brush your skin, and make your way to the mirror. You're sparking. It's not that bad, just one or two here and there. Gog, your eyes are bright though. Or maybe over-saturated? Come to think of it… You look around and take in your surroundings. Everything is kind of bright and loud. It's all way too vivid. You put a hand to your head and lean against the sink. It's fine. You're fine. Just a little overcharged, like a battery on 102%. A spark of psi pops by one of your horns. Okay, so maybe it's more like 122%.

You run your hand along the wall as you make your way to your room. The texture feels exaggerated under your fingertips. You throw on a pair of jeans and a loose black and yellow striped long sleeve that you layer a t-shirt over, then dig your spare monitor out of the closet and haul it over to your desk. You get it hooked up to the KVM switch in a matter of seconds and flip to the server in question. The bees told you where the problem was, but you aren't going to dive into that just yet. First, you're going to run through some security and virus checks. You may be a god of cyber-security, but you'll be damned if your own hubris takes you out. You take the server offline and put up a 'down for maintenance' message. Hal will probably be the only one to notice. The people paying you to store things there are largely using it for archival purposes. It doesn't get much traffic.

It feels like it's taking forever for these scans to run. You fidget in your chair, shifting this way and that way every few seconds until you spring up and head to the nutrition block. Mituna's door is closed like he said it would be. Even with it shut and a towel jammed under the door you can still faintly smell it. You keep walking. In the nutrition block you stand on one leg like a pink featherbeast as you stare into the fridge contemplating what, if anything, you want. You change your mind five times before grabbing a soda and heading back to your room. Things still feel strange and your sense of taste is no exception. This soda is deliciously sugary. You glance back at the screen. The scans are still going. This will probably take a while. The restless feeling running through your body wins out. Fuck it, let's see what this thing is storing.
The sector is apparently holding a bunch of the data Hal gathered. It's the tail end of the backlog, the more recent stuff. You sit up straighter and give the task more of your focus. The discovery doesn't sit well with you. You open a subfolder and start scrolling through the files. They're named categorically, which you think is terrible, but you're sure serves some purpose when viewed via the program versus how you are presently browsing them. The names cascade in front of you as you scroll until you get about a third of the way through the list and hit a long one. It starts out like the rest of the file names but devolves into gibberish. You scan that file individually, but it doesn't flag as dangerous. You squint at it suspiciously and slowly move on. It's only a few seconds later that you spot another file like that and a third one not long after the second. You open that one and are greeted by pure garbage. You close it and on a whim, you switch to list mode and reorder the folder to chronological instead of alphabetical.

"Oh, that can't be good."

==> Be Dave

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG]

TG: yo have you seen or heard from sollux lately

TG: i know it wouldnt be the first time he missed movie night but he hsant bailed in a while plus not to be a clingy bitch but he hsant answered any of my texts all weekend

TG: not that ive been messaging him a lot or anything

TG: i mean its cool if he wants some space but it would also be cool to be in the know about that

CG: NOW THAT YOU MENTION IT, I HAVEN'T HEARD FROM HIM EITHER. I'VE BEEN WRAPPED UP IN THIS THING WITH KANAYA. DO YOU KNOW ROSE'S STANCE ON THE HUMAN TRADITION OF VALENTINE'S DAY?

TG: i will totes help you with that later but right now im having myself a legit concern over here

CG: RIGHT, SORRY. I'LL ASK ROXY IF SHE'S SEEN HIM UNLESS YOU ALREADY DID.

TG: nah thats cool ill hit up mituna

turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG]

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering flipTuna [FT]

TG: yo

TG: mituna

TG: bro

TG: broski

TG: brosidon king of the brocean

FT: P122 0FF
TG: whoa dude what crawled up your ass

FT: L47UL4'5 8ULG3

TG: fairly important question if you dont mind multitasking

FT: 1M 8U7HY G3771N 8U5Y

FT: M4K3 17 QU1CK

TG: oh shit you were serious about that

TG: hi latula

TG: at the risk of getting freudian up in here im gonna leave you to your boning

TG: have fun use protection oh wait you guys reproduce like some kind of larval way wait do they make troll condoms is that even a thing

flipTuna [FT] has blocked turntechGodhead [TG]

gardenGnostic [GG] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

GG: hey dave, did you find sollux yet?

TG: no hey wait how do you know im looking for him

GG: roxy tells me i think or maybe its rose?

TG: right ok

TG: no i havent found him yet and im running out of people to ask

TG: the guy isnt exactly a socialite but then again i guess i cant really throw any stones in this glass house of interpersonal skills excluding of course the uncannily pheromonal effect that strider charm has on my unsuspecting acquaintances the moment theyre in range like an axe body spray commercial

GG: dont worry youll find him :)

GG: when you do, can you do me a favor?

TG: sure thing home skillet whatcha need

GG: smack him

GG: he keeps changing all the labels on my plants in the minecraft server to rudenesses >:-(

TG: okay full disclosure that was originally me and I was framing him by using his quirk but now it is totally and completely both of us and it may or may not be some form of cryptid mating display

GG: >:O

turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering gardenGnostic [GG]
TG: has sollux ever mysteriously disappeared for a length of time that some might consider mild to moderately concerning

TG: asking for a friend

TC: This A IGot HyPoThEtICAI Or Is BeE mAn GeTInG hIs HoUdInI oN?

TG: i havent heard from him in a while and nobody ive asked has either

TC: Did yOu TrY hOlLeRiNg At HiS lIffTerMAte?

TG: mituna is presently mid-coitus and i get to add a new fun fact to the growing list of things regarding his sex life that ive learned against my will

TC: HaHaHa YeAh He AiN't ShY nOnE.

AR: Dave, it may be worth noting that Sollux was doing server maintenance on Friday. A little warning would have been nice before over half of my consciousness suddenly disappeared into the aether, but to his credit, he was relatively quick about it.

TC: WhOa, WhO tHe MoThErFuCk Is ThAt?

AR: Nevermind me, clown.

TG: thats hal i think you met him a while back but havent seen much of him on account of him living in dirks shades

TG: hes chill

TC: Oh RiGhT.

TC: YeAh, HeS yOuR fRiEnD dReAmS eLeCTriC sHeEp.

TC: RiGhTeOuS, aNy DaWg Of My DaWg Is A dAwG oF mInE.

TG: fucking honored to have achieved dawg status just wait till i tell sollux hell be so proud of my blossoming social skills i might even get a gold star for my diligent progress in catching up with the rest of society on this thing called human interaction

TG: oh wait uh social interaction yeah still working on the multicultural thing

TC: It'S aLI GoOd, BrOtHeR :o)

TC: If SoLBro WaS aT hIS HiVe lAsT MaYbE wE GEt LoOkInG lIkE hE's StIL aRoUnD.

TC: KuRI Oz HaS a SpArE kEy FoR wHeN mItUnA mAkEs HiMsElF sTuCk OuTsIdE hIS HiVe On AcCiDeNt.

TG: alright yeah that sounds cool

TG: when does this happen

TC: I aIN'T dOI n SHiT RLgHT NoW iF yOu WaNT Me To HeAd OVEr.
There is a weird kind of excitement running through you as the elevator passes floor after floor of Sollux's apartment building. You've never seen where he actually lives outside of the dorm. It's going to be super weird if he isn't here. The elevator comes to a stop and the doors open with a soft ding. Gamzee pushes lazily off the railing he's leaning against and makes his way down the hall. You half expected him to live on the second floor, but it turns out he lives on the top floor just like you used to. Gamzee knocks a few times and calls Sollux's name before using the spare key.

"Kurloz an' Latula make their appearance lots. Mituna don't be taking best care himself sometimes." he says as you take in the room. Your ears catch a buzzing noise that you're going to take a wild guess and say is probably the bees your moirail keeps. "Rooms down thataway." he leads you down the hall, past what must be Mituna's room and the bee room, then stops short at the last door and steps aside while gesturing for you to go ahead of him. Right, this is a diamond thing you guess. You knock on the door and when there's no answer you try again.

"Sollux?" Nothing. You try the doorknob and to your relief, you find that it isn't locked. Also to your relief you see Sollux. He's sitting in the dark at his desk in a nonstandard fashion typical of him with his headphones on. He has his laptop open off to the side and looks to be referencing something on the screen before turning his focus back to the main monitor. If he didn't hear you knock then there's no way he's going to hear you coming. You find the light switch and hope that illuminating the room will catch his attention, but his focus stays on the screen. He's completely absorbed by whatever it is he's working on. You try to stay at least in the periphery of his vision as you walk over. God, he's really dead to the world, isn't he? Without any other options left, you reach out to touch his shoulder. Sparks fly as he jumps back to float slightly up and away from where he was previously sitting.

"Oh, hey Dave," he says with a blink before floating back down the short distance to his chair. He looks back and forth between the two screens and then up at you. "What-- what are you doing here?" he asks, stuttering on the first word.

"Looking for you. You weren't answering any of my messages and I uh..." was starting to get worried. You shrug and rub the back of your neck. "So you've just been here, huh?"

"Mmm," he glances at the screen again. "Can you give me like two s-seconds? I'm almosth done, I just need to fix this one thing and I don't want to lose my place." He says it quickly but also casually, so casually that for a brief moment it stuns you and leaves you verbally stumbling.

"Yeah, no for sure. No problem." You look around for another chair but Sollux appears to only have the one-- oh wait no there it is. The second chair is currently being used as an additional table to hold up two yellow rectangular tech things that are plugged into...something somewhere you assume. In lieu of a chair, you take a seat on his bed. Have you vastly misjudged this? Has he been here the whole time just working on...whatever this is? You lean over to look at the main screen and it's full of text you surely have zero understanding of that he is editing at an erratic pace. He was just working on a project. You freaked out over nothing like a clingy little kid. You feel like an idiot. You got worked up over nothing. Jeez, what if he even told you about this and you just forgot? You're a few more self-deprecating thoughts in when you hear him curse and then mutter something under his breath before getting to his feet and making his way over to an area of the floor covered in paperback books with the most hideously colored covers. The way he fits perfectly in the center of the mess as he sits cross-legged on the floor makes you think this is an in-progress sort of disaster and that they are normally kept on the nearby shelf. Except for a particularly ugly red book.
There is no way that fits on the shelf. These must be those manuals he said he had or some other kind of reference books. He goes through one quickly, flipping pages back and forth until he finds his place and freezes to read it before moving onto a different book, leaving the other to hang in the air. Damn, he is really into whatever this is. He mutters a few things about seeing it a second ago. Curiously you make your way back over to the computer and after giving it a good look you have concluded that you have no idea what you're seeing, but it sure is something. There's a little warning at the bottom listing errors and it looks like there are a bunch of them. You guess he's slightly less done than he said he was. "So what is this anyway?" Out of the corner of your eye, you see him rushing over like you might touch something if he doesn't get there quickly enough.

"It's nothing! I mean, it-- it isth sth-something, it's-- don't worry about it. I'm still working out some things. I've almost got it. I'm just missing-- just missing something stupid, I'm sure that's it, it has to be." By the end of his sentence, it isn't you that he's talking to anymore as he scrolls through multicolored text. Something is off about all of this. It feels weird somehow.

"Yo," Gamzee says to get your attention. You nearly forgot he was here. He finishes typing something on his palmhusk then waves you over and disappears from the doorway. When you catch up, he's craning an ear in front of the bee room listening but for what you don't know. He makes a thoughtful sound before sending another text and continuing into the kitchen.

"Guess I dropped the ball on this one," you say with a nervous laugh, still unsure of yourself, as you sink into a chair.

"Hm? What you mean to tell at me?" he asks, looking back at you from where he is rummaging through the cabinets.

"Was way off base. He was just busy and I--"

"Naw, brother, your call was motherfucking solid." Say what now? Gamzee finds the bottled water he was apparently looking for and idly tosses it cap over end in one hand as he continues. "You ain't never seen your diamond climbing but I bet you got that sense a something wicked up." You aren't 100% on what it is he's trying to convey here. He sets down the water bottle and slides it across the table to you before he goes back to rifling through the kitchen, this time in the lower cabinets.

"Brother's got lightening what in his thinksponge making them thought trains electric, speeding mach 2 all motherfucking hectic." A snack bar launches itself into the air and is followed by another as Gamzee comes up to catch the first and throw a third into rotation.

"Dope rhyme, but imma need some clarity on what you're getting at here."

"He's all up and riding that express train to the flip side. Got that manic energy," he says calmly while juggling what looks like but are probably not granola bars.

"So you're sayin he is or is on his way to being manic?" Not that you are especially clear on what that entails. Gamzee nods and lets the snacks fall one by one into his hands before putting them on the table. Sollux did seem a little off. You couldn't exactly place it, but something was weird. He was talking fast and stuttering like his mind was going a mile a minute. His lisp seemed more obvious too. "I'm going to take a wild guess and say he doesn't eat much when he's like this, yeah?" you ask as you pick up one of the bars and turn it over in your hands. You still can't read Alternian labels that well but you think it is a meal replacement bar. You throw it in your pocket and grab the water before heading back to Sollux's room to...you don't actually know what you're going to do, but that hasn't stopped you yet. You find him back on the floor surrounded by books, one of which is floating. "So, uhhhh, are these those ~ATH books you were talking about?" you ask as you sit down across from him.
“Yeah... wait, no. Some of them. They’re...” his sentence trails off as he scans a page and for a second you think he isn’t going to finish it, but then he picks up again. “They’re networking and DIS* reference books too.” You uncap the water bottle and take a sip.

“Want some?” Sollux makes a sound that is neither a yes nor a no as he turns to another page. You wonder if you just hand it to him if he’ll take it out of sheer muscle memory. Worth a shot. You hold it out to him and shockingly he does reach for it. The sip he takes, however, is so brief that you’re not even sure he drank any until he’s mid-motion giving it back to you and abruptly stops so he can take it back for a MUCH longer sip. The bottle is nearly empty when he hands it back to you. “Damn, thirsty much?” He pops his head up as if suddenly realizing the world is around him.

“Oh, I guess so. My bad.” Before you can tell him it’s cool, he’s already back into his reference material. “There has to be something here about it,” he mumbles under his breath.

“Something about what?”

“Nmmm.” You probably wouldn’t have understood it anyway. For a few moments, you watch him sift back and forth through different manuals and read his expressions as he reacts to his findings. Aside from the emoting, this actually kind of reminds you of when Dirk would get hyper-fixated on something.

“The thing over there, so it’s in this DIS* language?” you ask out of genuine curiosity. It’s not a language he’s told you much about before.

“+Visor.”

“+Visor?”

“Mhm.”

“If you’re coding in +Visor, why are you reading DIS* books?”

“It’s complicated. I need both. They’re...they’re really similar, but DIS* ...does...some stuff that...”

“Similar like different brands or something?” You aren’t that dumb. John used to dabble in ^Cake and bitch at you every time someone said it was just an easy version of #Cake. You know what Sollux means, and if Sollux were more mentally present on this astral plane he’d call you on your bullshit, but right now his mind is elsewhere. If you can get him rambling about something he likes then maybe he’ll snap out of this some because it’s starting to concern you just a bit.

“No, like, okay, so,” He sets down the book and finally looks up, but doesn’t meet your eyes. He staring vaguely in your direction, but he’s entirely in his own head conceptualizing what he’s saying. “You have these these different languages and a lot of them are really sthimilar because they’re derived from other similar languages like a tree but it’s crazy and people keep taking them-- and sthometimes they’re perfectly good languages sometimes but they can’t leave well enough alone, or they have to make s-some sthuper sthpec-cific bullshit for this one thing, or compatibility, or there are like five different variations of it or or add-ons, but anyway there are all these different languages and some are really sthimilar. Same parent language. Although if you go far back enough it’s all binary. Whatever,” he says at a mile a minute. "So DIS* and +Visor are like-- they’re like in the same family sort of. They aren’t interchangeable though. +Visor is more lightweight and user-friendly but can’t do everything that DIS* can. Plus, major syntax differences, ugh.” With that last sound of disgust, he picks up his book again.
“So, what is it you’re doing with these two similar but totally different languages?”.

“Ehhh...it's...don't worry about it.” With that cryptic answer, he returns to his book again. Alright, so you got some water in him and got him talking, but he’s still acting hella weird. You look over to Gamzee. He’s standing in the doorway typing on his phone again. He stops to give you a thumbs up of encouragement. Not super helpful.

"Well, I guess I’ll leave you to it," you go to stand up but stop when you remember about the meal bar. "Oh, I got you this." You set it on his leg so he doesn't forget about it and then ruffle his hair affectionately just because you can. He makes a little trilled sound but doesn't stop his research frenzy.

You step out into the hall and make your way into the main room to find Gamzee settling down on the sofa. He looks up and back at you as you come closer. "He seems mostly alright, but...I don't know. I just have this feeling like he shouldn't be left to his own devices. Dirk would sometimes get fixated on shit like this and completely lose track of time, but Sollux seems way more out of touch with reality."

Gamzee nods. "He probably ain't sleep since he got here neither."

"I think I'll stick around for a while, you can peace out if you want."

"Naw, I'll kick it here with some rude elixir for a bit." a bottle of faygo drops out of his sylladex. "Motherfucking love that sound," he says as he cracks it open. "all hissing 'n shit, like, the fuck even is that? Miracles, brother."

"Aight, cool," you answer simply with a nod before heading back. Sollux is enthralled at his computer again when you step into the room. You plop down on his bed and take out your phone. You should message Karkat. He would probably be interested in knowing you found Sollux and will hopefully have some better insight on this mania thing. Is it really even a problem as long as you shove some food and water at him?

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG]

TG: i found him

CG: OH THANK FUCK. APPARENTLY, THE FATES CONVERGED AND NOT A DAMN SOUL HAS SEEN HIS DUMB ASS SINCE FRIDAY BUT DUE TO A SERIES OF COMICALLY INTRICATE AND VARIED REASONS THIS STRUCK EXACTLY ZERO OF US AS A PROBLEM.

TG: hes been at his hive

CG: ARE YOU SHITTING ME???

TG: nah bro i am fully clenched over here

TG: i am constipated with the seriousness of my previous assertion

TG: hes on a coding binge or something idk gamzee says he is or is going to shortly be manic but other than that he hasnt offered up any other nuggets of wisdom

CG: HOPEFULLY HE MEANS HYPMANIC AND NOT FULL BLOWN MANIC. ALSO, WHY IS GAMZEE WITH YOU?
TG: no need to be jealous karkles were still amigos
TG: you cant get rid of me im like a chronic rash
TG: the herpes of friendship

CG: WHY ARE YOU LIKE THIS?

TG: gamzee has a spare key or rather kurloz does for when mituna locks himself out but we needed it because sollux is on another planet right now and his cellular service doesnt work there
TG: so what do I do with him
TG: he seems alright aside from being unable to end task whatever matrix bullshit endeavor he is zoned in on with every fiber of his connection to reality

CG: I HIGHLY DOUBT HE HAS DONE ANYTHING EVEN VAGUELY RESEMBLING TAKING CARE OF HIMSELF. CRAM SOME FOOD DOWN HIS PROTEIN CHUTE AND MAKE HIM TAKE A FUCKING NAP FOR STARTERS.

CG: MAYBE A SHOWER TOO.

TG: seems legit

TG: ill keep you posted on the thrilling saga that is our friends mental health status

CG: HE WILL BE PISSED WHEN I BASE A SCREENPLAY OFF OF HIM ONE DAY BUT I PLAN TO DO IT ANYWAY BECAUSE HIS LOVE OF POP TARTS AND ENERGY DRINKS IS VAST ENOUGH TO OVERCOME JUST ABOUT ANYTHING.

TG: you better fucking invite me to the oscars as your plus one when you get famous

CG: WHO SAYS YOU WON'T BE THERE ANYWAY FOR WHATEVER ASININE SPONGE DISINTEGRATING BULLSHIT YOU BIRTH INTO THIS WORLD LIKE AN UNHOLY MIDWIFE FOR THE LOVECHILD BETWEEN YOUR IMAGINATION, BEN STILLER, AND OWEN WILSON.

TG: that was beautiful man

TG: i think i even came a little

carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

A valid response.

You look up and turn your attention back to your moirail.

"Hey Sol, if I make something will you eat?" you ask casually after spying the untouched food bar. All you get back is a non-committal sound and a shrug. You sigh audibly and fall back against the bed with your arms to either side. "What are you even working on that's so fucking important?"

"I don't know."

"What? What do you mean you don't know?"

"I don't know! I can't figure out what this is or why it won't work or why it made the bees so angry!"
I've seen-- I've seen them annoyed before but they were stho fucking pissed they s-started sthtining me." he says with a sudden frustration to his voice.

"They stung you?" You ask as you sit up on your elbows. You have no idea if Alternian bee stings are something to be concerned about.

"It's sthomething though. There'sth something there. I just I need to figure out what." He rubs his temples and groans.

"Maybe we could ask Dirk? He's pretty handy with code if Hal's existence is any indication." As soon as the words finish leaving your mouth there is a shift in the energy of the room.

"Dave, do you know what language Dirk used to make Hal?" Sollux asks with sudden clarity in a voice that is suddenly far too soft and still.

"I have no idea. Why?" He doesn't answer you. He sits there with his back to you and his hands resting on the keyboard. "Sol?" you ask as you stand up and cross the small distance to his desk. "Hey man, you okay?" you feel him jump when your hand meets his shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah can you get me some water?" he looks away from the screen and rubs his eyes. They look tired.

"Sure thing." You linger, rubbing small circles into the tense muscles of his shoulder before leaving the room.

You make quick work of retrieving water and are working out what to do next in your head when you step back into the room. The room that is now lacking one (1) Sollux Captor.

Well, that's not good.

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG]

TG: so i have an update

CG: ?

TG: i lost him

CG: YOU LOST SOL Lux IN HIS OWN HIVESTEM?

TG: no see i think that is the primary problem here that is the crux of the issue at hand him not being in his hive anymore

CG: IT HAS BEEN A GRAND TOTAL OF FIVE EARTH MINUTES. WHAT IN SHITHIVE MAGGOTS HAPPENED IN THAT MINISCULE AMOUNT OF TIME?

TG: i asked him about the project he was obsessing over and he suddenly got way frustrated with it

TG: he said something about the bees being angry and that he couldn't figure something out

TG: all I did was say that maybe Dirk could help and he went all weird quiet then asked me to get him some water which evidently was a trick to distract me while he ran off god knows where

TG: hey hal do you think you can track his phone

AR: Sollux runs software on his devices that severely limit my permissions. I cannot track him.
TG: damn alright i guess were still doing this the old fashioned way

TG: ill let gamzee know and I guess well head back to campus and figure things out from there

CG: ALRIGHT THAT SOUNDS LIKE A PLAN. ON THE WAY BACK IT MAY BE A GOOD IDEA TO MESSAGE DIRK AND LET HIM KNOW. IF THAT WAS THE LAST THING YOU TALKED ABOUT, MAYBE HE'S TAKING YOUR SUGGESTION AND JUST GOING ABOUT IT WRONG. HE'S PROBABLY NOT IN THE BEST STATE OF MIND FOR REASONABLE THOUGHT PROCESSING. HIS ALREADY SHITPANNED JUDGEMENT GOES TO HELL WHEN HE'S LIKE THIS.

TG: good call

TG: ill meet you in the room in a few

turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG]

It's Dirk that messages you first, however. You became a little distracted by the implication that your moirail got drenched in mind honey when you found his clothes in a sticky crumpled heap in the bathroom after trying to call him on the off chance that he would answer. Gamzee had assured you that it isn't nearly as dangerous as Sollux makes it out to be, that he's overly cautious because he's understandably traumatized, and yeah a handful of it could totally kill him if he ate it, and he wouldn’t really want to get it in his eyes or nose either, but getting it on his skin isn't as big a deal as long as he washes it off. Karkat agreed with him so you know it must be solid info. Still, it has you worried. So does him not having his phone on him, but it is at least somewhat comforting to know that he wasn't ignoring your messages; he just didn't notice them.

timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

TT: Is Sollux on uppers?

TG: yeah one of his meds is a low dose stimulant but judging by the way you phrased that im guessing you didnt mean it in the legally prescribed way

TT: I think perhaps he has decided they are better administered nasally. He's over here acting like a crackhead.

TG: well that answers one question

TG: keep him there he was hard enough to find the first time

TG: and he isnt high per se or at least not by choice

TG: karkat gamzee and i think he had a run-in with the mind honey and it put him in the express lane to crazy town

TG: now that i think about it i dont know if hes taken his meds the past few days either

TT: Crazy I can deal with. Worst case scenario I can always tape him to a chair. Are you nearby?

TG: good luck with that

TG: we arent that far out but were stuck in standstill traffic

TT: I'll keep you posted.
"Dirk! I--"

He interrupts you by holding up a finger, telling you to wait a second, as he opens the door.
Everything you need to tell him vies to go first and clutters your think sponge. You follow him in
and are about to start up again but he points behind you. You didn't shut the door. When you turn
back around Dirk is in the middle of switching his sunglasses. His eyes aren't red like Dave's.
They're a vivid amber that turns into a fiery orange when the light hits them as he turns to look at
you.

"Hal told me you were waiting here," he says as he secures the little speaker box around his neck.

"I found something, I'm not sure what it is, no I know WHAT it is, but I don't know what THAT is.
It, the beesth, they were angry. Mituna couldn't handle them and I had to go down there and look at
it. The frames near Hal. S-sthoming thing was-- isth wrong. They look fine, nothing physically, but the-
- the data is all fucked and and I tried over and over to fix it and import, decompress, scrub them
inside the program, outside the program even though +Visor isn't one I-- one I know well I know
DIS* and Dave was there-- shit," you forgot to tell Dave where you were going. You go to take out
your palm husk but are met with an empty pocket again.

"Sollux, I'm going to need you to sit the fuck down and try that again at half speed and with
something even vaguely resembling standard sentence structure." That wasn't the most eloquent way
you could have phrased that you suppose. You nod and pull up a chair. Dirk follows suit.

"What did you write Hal in?" You start at the point instead of the lead up this time.

"Why do you want to know?"

"I don't, no I mean, that might eventually be-- it's all messed up and I thought it was the program,
maybe it still is? but I think it's the source, it has to be the source, something unsth-supported by
still running like like a basic driver that half works but not for all functions.” You're gesticulating wildly as you speak. Is Dirk staring at you? Maybe he's talking to Hal. Did you mention Hal yet, or no, you did, but not in relation to ~ATH. "Can he see ~ATH? Hal, can you see it?" you cut to the chase again.

"What makes you think I can't?"

"What makes you think he can't?" They ask simultaneously, which is a little odd considering Hal is generating both voices, although they did come from different speakers you think maybe. Dirk knits his fingers together and rests his mouth against them as he leans on the table between you.

"Can he or not?" You fidget as your mind races with theories and tries to keep a queue of things you need to mention.

"He should be able to. Why do you think he can't?" Your head is spinning. What did you already tell him and what was just something you thought?

"What did I already say?" you are mostly talking to yourself when you ask this. "The-- the garbage data, it's ~ATH. Has to be. I can't unscramble it if it was read wrong first."

"You aren't making a whole lot of sense, bro. Maybe this sounds like a linear thought process to you, but I barely have any idea what you're on about." The chair rumbles over the floor as Dirk stands up. You watch him cross the room, waving you over halfway through. He pulls open a drawer at his desk. It isn't the one that houses his desktop. This one looks like an area designated primarily for writing and designing by hand, a thinking space. He tosses you a blue marker and you stare blankly at him for a solid two seconds before he tosses a red one at you too. You anticipate paper to follow, but it doesn't. Instead, Dirk pulls a gigantic whiteboard out from behind the sofa. "This is in my top five favorite things I've pulled out of the trash." He props it up against the desk chair and takes a seat on the beat-up sofa. "Have at it." He's taking you seriously. Before you get going, however...

"These," you say as you take two of the affected frames out of your sylladex. The yellow protective casings make them look like oddly elongated external drives. "Are from the server Hal is in and the data on them is more recent."

"How recent?"

"Past couple of months." You turn to the blank whiteboard and try to streamline what you want to tell him. He said you weren't making sense. Not the best sign. You aren't unaware that you've kickstarted some mild to moderate mania, you were enjoying it actually. Not that you would induce it this way ever, there are "safer" ways to do that, but if it was happening you weren't about to examine the teeth of a gifted hoofbeast to determine its age. You start with a timeline and narrate as you go along. The context of everything feels important to understanding it, plus it will help keep everything together both on the board and in your head. You make points on the line and plug in key events starting with Mituna calling and ending with coming here. Dirk asks when you got doused in honey and you make a point on the chart but don't label it. You aren't sure how he knows that, but it isn't worth denying. You draw lines down to write short elaborations that quickly stop being so short. You go back and add more points, draw more lines. When you have a decent base going, you start filling in details, and when you think you've got it all down you step back a bit to look at the mess of red and blue covering every inch of the board. You can barely make sense of it.

"So if I'm following you correctly, you theorize that your bees were not thrilled with the amount of garbled data coming through and making such large error log files. That was the first tip-off." You nod and he continues. "After making sure there was no physical damage, you ran basic antivirus and troubleshooting protocols. That was Friday when Hal was complaining that your server was down."
“Yeah.” It feels like he’s speaking so slowly.

“You then spent two and a half days binge troubleshooting this problem with increasingly less documentation, even going so far as to crack open my program and reverse engineer it to make several different scripts in an attempt to process the original files that my program kept rendering as junk despite you not actually being that familiar with the language.”

“I was-- I was mostly justh translating what you wrote and adding ~ATH support. I didn't realize it was justh ~ATH until-- well it might not be but what else could it be? He was looking into-- Bro was asthking about ~ATH, the-- the bots, and ~ATH-- ~ATH gets crazy messed up when it isn't compatible. It's nearly impossthible to pull back apart, only in theory, there's justh too many variables to figure out what integers were made when the layers got smashed together like rasterizing an image you can't pull a jpeg back apart. Why would you write it in +Visor to begin with?” It's all one rapid smashed together sentence that comes out of you in a single breath. Dirk isn't fazed in the slightest.

“DIS* makes Hal lag,” He answers in a flat, even, perfectly composed voice.

“It is not a favorable feeling,” Hal chimes in. He’s been very quiet through this whole thing. Maybe he and Dirk have been messaging through the chat client. You look back at the board and try to remember where you were.

"Hal lags, DIS*, ~ATH...Hal can't see it. If Hal can't see it-- I forgot Hal was like," your hands hang in the air as you search for words. "He's programmed. He has compatibility. If he can't see it to begin with, I can't fix it. Dave said, he said--," your hands hang again as you try to remember. "He said something before that made me think that. I forgot Hal is numbers. We won't know what it is and it's stho much stuff, it goes back to September and--"

"September? The data starts getting weird in September?"

You nod. "When Dave got here. It wouldn't flag. There's no trash flag. No filter. It didn't, like the program didn't even see it. No flag, Hal didn't transthcode it, no one noticed. It-- It might be too late but if Hal could see it, if we make a program or a plugin or or something. The bots maybe are running a script. That could be it and he could see." You smack your hand into the coffee table as you gesticulate is sync with the rapid way you're speaking, but mostly ignore it.

"We aren't tracking the bots that closely anymore. Bro kept finding out we were doing that and sent a nasty-ass virus Hal's way. It pretty much lojacked me."

"That... isn't 100 percent accurate..." Hal starts. "In fact, there is a high probability that I may have created a program to do exactly that."

"You did what?" Dirk asks. There is an edge to his voice that you think is anger.

"It was important. They did all his dirty work. We were getting barely anything when I stopped tracking them. I had to."

"I can't believe this."

"And you wrote it in +Visor because DIS* makes you lag, right? Or did you write it in your native language? Easier to hide." you ask while trying and failing to mask that your brain is in overdrive as you erase the whiteboard and start scrawling your thoughts. "You'd had to make patches if you've been running it for a while and your OS isn't custh-tom or even if it is custom. A c-custom OS is probably messier because only Dirk would need to know it, no need for broad format. Depending on your own code, if you are ~ATH compatible maybe an update broke it or the program
to track the bots didn't work right with it or the drivers weren't right, or--"

"Sollux." You snap your head up to look at Dirk from where you are kneeling on the floor in front of the whiteboard. "When is the last time you slept?"

"What?" You can't sleep now. There is so much to figure out. You don't think you could anyway. "I don't know. Doesn't matter. We need to figure this out. I need to know what language he's in."

"Hal, what is Dave's ETA?" Dave's on his way? When did that happen? That's no good. Dave will want you to rest. You can't rest right now.

"I've given him alternate directions, but he and the clown won't be able to take that exit for another 2.5 miles and traffic is at a halt until they clear the road. A tractor-trailer has jackknifed and is blocking all lanes." Dirk makes a thoughtful humming sound and is still for a moment, a long moment or at least you think it is. Maybe he's using pesterchum. Your crawling into your own mind about the current situation when his sudden movement jerks you back out.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do. I talked to Dave and convinced him that you were relatively sane. You're welcome. He's going back to the dorms. I told him I would drop you off later. Until then, you and I are going to dive head fucking first into this shit. We are going to abuse the everloving crap out of whatever kind of overclocked state that brain of yours is in." You blink rapidly in surprise. He isn't trying to stop you?

"I'm still apprehensive about letting him into my brain," Hal says as if he and Dirk had already debated it. Right, right, they probably were while you were thinking. How long have you been sitting here thinking? "What if he messes up? What if he breaks me?" Hal asks, grabbing your attention again. There's something different about the way he says it. He sounds scared. Maybe it's just your imagination; you are pretty much hallucinating at this point. Not in the seeing things sense. Things just feel a little fast, and your spacial perception is distorted, and colors are wrong. Distinguishing green and orange from yellow is definitely compromised. That's the extent of it you think. It's nothing major. And you aren't paranoid. For you, that's a red flag.

"We backed you up very recently. Even if something goes wrong, I can restore you, but regardless, we aren't touching your primary code directly anyway." He gets up and starts making his way into the kitchen. "I'm putting on coffee. Do you want any?"

"You're offering ME coffee right now?" you say in amazement.

"You haven't slept in what, three, four days?"

"Probably. It depends on what day it probably is."

"Sunday. Evening. We already established that." Right, right, you've been at this since Friday night. Oh shit, it's Sunday.

"Roxy's going to be pissed that I didn't help with our project all weekend."

"She'll live. I bet she can sweet talk her way into an extension. Plus, I would gather your professors are aware that you're not exactly a shining example of mental health." You make a so-so gesture. "Alright, cool. I'm going to make coffee and you're not going to tell anyone I let you drink it. While I do that, take the whiteboard to my room and get set up." You nod and pick up the gigantic whiteboard with your psionics and head into Dirk's room. It reminds you a lot of yours in how everything is everywhere but is still somehow organized. You lean the board against his dresser and find a spot to put down your laptop. It isn't long before Dirk shows up with two coffee cups in hand.
"You seem like a black two sugar's kind of guy," he says as he hands you yours.

"Good guess."

"It wasn't a guess so much as an assumption based on what I know about you." You roll your eyes and take a sip. It's exactly what you needed. The little frayed bits of your think sponge snap back together and a spark runs through you. "Whoa." Literally and metaphorically. "We're fucking pinky swearing on that whole don't tell anyone I gave you coffee bit." You think he's kidding but Dirk actually holds out his hand expectantly.

"S'teriously?" you ask. He stares at you and wiggles his finger. You sigh and lock digits with him. "I won't reveal how you irresth-- irresthpp-- recklessth-ly caffeinated me while I was borderline manic."

"Borderline?"

"Eheheheh, this isth nothing." You flash him a wild grin and watch his expression change ever so slightly as if he's reconsidering what he's letting happen.

"For the record," Hal says. "The probability of this going awry is incredibly high." You wonder if that's true or if Hal is just apprehensive. Either way, it appears that you're throwing caution to the wind and doing this anyway. The three of you get down to business. Dirk takes his machine offline and asks that you do the same to your laptop just in case, then loads the necessary files onto a flash drive for you.

"You never told me what language he's written in," you say as you plug in the drive and wait for it to register.

"So eager to know what makes me tick, aren't you?"

"You'll see soon enough." There is something suspicious about the way Dirk says that. You glance at him from the corner of your eye but quickly look back at your screen when the window pops up.

"You've got to be kidding me."

"What's wrong? Is it a language you don't know?" There is a subtle tease to his voice. "I think there is a good chance you do. You wouldn't be so quickly outraged if the icon didn't display. It would have taken you longer if you needed to figure out the file type."

"I know it," you grumble.

"I thought you might."

You glare at him. "I'm just going to get this over with this now so the s-suspense of trying to get me--to get me to say it doesn't stall your bloodpusher." You pause and stare pointedly at him. "Listthp." He chuckles in that aloof way he does.

"The irony in this is something I can appreciate." What a dick.

"S-sthetimes I seriously question if you or Dave actually know what irony is. Whatever." You chug a good portion of your coffee and turn your attention back to your screen. "Alright, so you wrote Hal in Listth-- in Listhp. You can't fucking believe Hal is written in Lisp. "Fortunately it's something I'm...familiar with." You eye Dirk who has a smirk on his face. "You were right about it being ~ATH compatible, but I'm not sure if that is a native function."
"Lisp did not support ~ATH when I started coding Hal. It was added on later as an optional package and remains as such. However, as of several updates ago, Hal is considered legacy. Any time there is an update I need to edit it for him. His hardware is too old to run the newest version." You pull your feet up onto the chair and wait for the editor program to start up.

"Give me like-- like fifteen minutes to poke around in this." It'll be easier if you can just have at it for a second and familiarize yourself rather than have Dirk walk you through it right away. Honestly, you probably wouldn’t be able to maintain your focus on it if he did that.

"Go nuts."

"Please, document your work. It is not pleasant to be restored from a backup." Hal adds, but you only half hear him because you’re already skimming his code. Lisp isn't your main gig, but you do know a thing or two. You've dabbled in a lot of languages, fucked around with a little bit of everything, but this is one you spent some time on simply because it's been around for so long. Some people have asked you what the hell you're even learning as a computer science major if you're so fricken good already. For one, the less jerry-rigged way to do things. Although mostly, it's been fleshing out your knowledge of more common and industry-standard languages and practices.

You skim through walls of text, noting which parts look like newer additions. Some sections are dated but not all. You guess those were riskier updates or something. It's not clear. Dirk hasn't left many comments or maybe he has but just not directly in the code. You aren't surprised. No one else was meant to see this. It feels like no time at all has passed before Dirk is suddenly sitting next to you again. He hands you the coffee cup you could have sworn was still on the desk. When you take a sip you can tell it's decaf and shoot him a glare for trying to pull a fast one on you. You drink it regardless as you tell him about your thoughts on Hal's code. He lets you ramble at length, asking questions here and there that springboard you into new ideas. You start scrawling them on the whiteboard. When you run out of room Dirk snaps a photo and you start writing over the blue with red. Hal comments that there is such a thing as an eraser but you're too engrossed to quip back at him. You had thought before, when Dave found you, that you were starting to come down but now that you're getting somewhere with this you're climbing again. You know you should say something, but at the same time, you don't want it to stop.

===>Be Dirk

tipsyGnostalgic [TG] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT]

TG: so how goes it?

TT: He's out of his damn skull but he's doing alright.

TG: :/

TT: It's just mania. He'll be fine as long as someone is there to keep him in check. He ate a grilled cheese at Dave's request and I refilled his cup of decaf with water a while ago. He either hasn't noticed or can't be bothered to do anything about it.

TT: He's on a roll with this and I'm inclined to let him run with it. I wouldn't quite say that he is entirely coherent, but he isn't delusional.

TG: he wass right bout hal not seein ~ATH right?

TT: Yeah, Hal was hiding tracking software from me. I can understand how he thought it was
important and I would have absolutely objected to it if he had suggested we start tracking the bots so closely again, so the reason he hid it doesn't escape me, but I'm still not happy about it. He broke the ~ATH package trying to hide it from me and patch it himself.

TG: so what're u doin?

TT: What's done is done. There isn't much sense in ditching the program he made at this point. That said, it's pretty useless right now. It's written in obsolete Lisp as an extension of the software I wrote, but my software can't see ~ATH. Hal was supposed to be able to see if that tried to come through and we could process it differently, which is what Sollux was trying to do until he realized the data was garbled at capture and ergo useless.

TG: an hal feel s drunk when he laaags so no DIS*

TT: Yes but no.

TT: We decided that the best route would be to rewrite my program in DIS* and include Hal's program functionalities in it instead of slapping it on top, but instead of taxing Hal's hardware with it, we're going to use the beehouse's hardware.

TG: ur makin it server side

TT: Exactly. We had moved a lot of the functions to the server before, but now it will be almost entirely running off of it. Hal, will more or less only be accessing it.

TG: u arent throwin that all on sollux right?

TT: Of course not. I have as much experience in DIS* as he does in +Visor. Plus, it makes more sense for me to fix Hal's ~ATH package. It's a group effort.

It isn't exactly a fifty-fifty split, but you aren't putting it all on him. In fact, you have to keep being pushy about helping. Right now though you have excused yourself to the kitchen so you can vape and message Roxy. It has been a little while though. You should probably get back to him.

TT: I'm going to go check on him. I'll talk to you later.

TG: k

Just as you're throwing your vape back into your sylladex you hear a loud thunk from your room that is quickly followed by your door hitting the wall as it's flung open. You barely have time to make your way over before Sollux rounds the corner and barrels into you.

"L-leave. Now. We have to-- we have to leave, right now." He says quickly, tugging at your shirt and looking toward the door then back to you.

"What? Why?" He tries to pull you more forcefully toward the door but he's not wearing shoes, so his socks just slide over the linoleum.

"I don't-- we ju-- we justh do, we have to go. Now. I--" He pulls away from you, staggering backward, and puts his hands to his head. "We can't stay here." He gasps and throws out a hand to steady himself against the wall.
"What's going on?" You keep your voice calm and even. Sollux is freaking the fuck out and you aren't sure if it's all in his head, or if it has something to do with what you're working on. "Where do you need to go?"

"Both. Us. I-- I don't know. Away." he's breathing heavy now as he slinks down the wall, both hands in his hair holding his head again. You kneel down next to him. Crap, maybe you should have waited until he wasn't so messed up to do this. Dave is going to have several choice words to say to you if you fucked this up. He wasn't super on board with it. You're reaching out to steady him when he suddenly throws back his head and screams. It sends you jolting backward onto your ass. For a moment you're stunned. Choked gasps leave him as sparks crackle around his head. He looks like he's in pain. This isn't part of the manic episode. You had your suspicions before but now you know something is wrong. Cautiously, you move towards him again.

"What's happening?" his body starts to go limp and you grab his shoulders to keep him upright. "Hey, come on, answer me." You gently shake him and he makes one of those chirping sounds, the ones he makes around Dave, before his eyes roll back and he goes entirely slack in your hands. "Son of a fuck." This isn't good.

"Dirk," Hal says, calling your attention. "I've searched online and while many of his symptoms are that of a medical emergency, the odds are higher for him to be experiencing another premonition." You breathe a sigh of relief.

"Alright, yeah. He gets those. Does it say anything about what I should be doing?"

"Considering how Roxy said that he only receives prophecies of impending doom, I would suggest following his request to leave. It would also be worth noting that it is expected for him to pass out." You make an affirmative sound and stand up to grab your keys from the kitchen table. When you turn back to the troll slumped over against the wall you can see the quick way he's breathing and faintly hear a distressed sound as if he were mumbling in his sleep. You need to get him to the dorm. One of them will know better what to do with him. When you go to pick him up, you find that Sollux is surprisingly light. You don't even need to sling him over your shoulders. You can just carry him. He makes another one of those noises and his head lolls to the side. A tremor runs through him and then he's still again. You're just about to leave when Hal speaks up.

"Put me on the table."

"You're coming with us." You keep going out the door.

"No! Take me back inside."

"Yes. You've been cooped up here all week."

"But--" You stop on the final landing of the stairs.

"I need you to message Roxy and Dave while I drive." When Hal doesn't protest further, you continue to your car. Somehow you manage to get this guy who might as well be entirely unconscious into the passenger seat and strapped in. He groans when you're all but done with it and when you straighten up, he's looking at you through red and blue slits. It only lasts a second or two before he's shutting them again. You keep an eye on him the whole way over, glancing at him periodically, looking for the glow of his eyes in the dark. It isn't until you're nearly there that he really
wakes up again. He mumbles something but you can’t hear it clearly. You can only pick out a few words. One of which is Dave's name. As you pull into a parking space Hal tells you that Roxy and Dave are waiting for you at the front desk. This has a feeling of urgency running through your veins, but you have a plan and a goal in sight, and that always keeps you collected. With a sturdy ‘click’ you pop open the well-worn buckle of Sollux’s seatbelt, get out of the car, and walk around to the passenger side. His head rolls in your direction when you open the door and he growls weakly at you. It has you momentarily pausing before you get near him again. There’s blood on his mouth and he hisses at you when you hold him back by one of his horns so you can take a look. He doesn’t care for that in the slightest, but like hell are you going to risk getting bitten. You’d be concerned about his claws too if he appeared to remember having arms. They lie lifeless at his sides. When he groggily bares his teeth at you, you can see where they’ve clipped his lip. It isn't bad. He’ll be fine. You keep your hold on him as you detangle him from the seatbelt. You aren’t sure why he’s so pissed at you, but you aren’t taking chances. When you get him loose and are trying to maneuver him out of the Jeep he snarls and his psionics flare. “Bitch, I am trying to help you.” He goes to growl at you again, but it gets cut short and turns into a yelp when you throw him over your shoulder like a sack of potatoes. It isn’t a long walk from the parking lot, but it’s long enough for you to feel a bit weird about carrying a semi-conscious troll who doesn’t appear to be too thrilled about being carted off. Hopefully, it just looks like you’re carrying a cranky drunk friend.

===> Be Dave

It’s your shift at the front desk but Roxy said she would cover for you once Dirk gets here with Sollux. You weren’t super on board with letting him ride out this mania thing for all it was worth. Dirk was persuasive though, and you suppose technically he did keep his word about bringing him back here immediately if he got worse. Still, you wonder if you should have been more persistent.

“They’re here,” Roxy says with a nudge to your arm that ceases the tapping you didn’t realize you were doing.

“Finally.”

“Hal says Sollux is waaay outta it an’ either he’s secretly hates Dirk or he doesn’ recognize him cause he’s figgin’ him gettin outta the car.” She laughs and goes to take a swig from her flask, but from the disappointed look on her face, you think it’s empty. “But he’s like, mostly asleep.”

“Crap,” you mumble just as you see Dirk coming up the stairs. No one told him to keep Sollux awake.

"Will one of you take him before he remembers that he is a Tesla coil with teeth?" Dirk asks as he walks in. On cue, Sollux growls and makes feeble half-awake attempts to free himself before slipping back under into a slightly less conscious state. You and Roxy hop to it and make short work of getting Sollux propped up in one of the chairs. He's not a ragdoll, but he isn't sitting up on his own all that well either. You keep him steady with a hand to his shoulder.

“Hey man, you awake?” You ask. There's an unexpected softness to your voice that suddenly feels too private, too personal for the company you’re in. It has a knot forming in your stomach, and the reflex to check your surroundings flares. The lopsided smirk on Roxy's face doesn't help. You look away and focus on the task at hand. "Sollux." His eyes flutter but don’t quite open, and he makes a soft ‘hmmm?’ sound.

“I got this,” Roxy says as she gently moves you aside. “Time to rise and shine, babe.” She turns in place, swaying a bit as she does, but compensates for it by holding out one of her arms. A gleeful little grin is on her face as she picks up her water bottle and starts to twist off the cap.
"Hold up, Rox. Maybe we should just get him upstairs. He’s already out, and I don't think waking him up is gonna unscrew this pooch any.” Dirk furrows his brows together. You should probably elaborate on that. “He’s going to be confused as all hell regardless. We might as well let him sleep it off. He could probably use it anyway. Karkat and I can keep an eye on him." You glance down at Sollux from behind your shades. Even asleep he looks tired.

"Yeah, okay," Roxy says as she recaps the water bottle. "You take care'a him an I'll uhh pick Dirk's brain sm'more'on the thing they were makin." So she says but…

"Perhaps it's time we got you upstairs too."

"I'm fiine," she says while waving Dirk off. It would have been more convincing if she hadn't stumbled while doing so. "Asides, I gotta watch the desk." You exchange a look with Dirk as you scoop up your moirail. He gives the slightest of nods to convey that he'll keep an eye on her until the graveyard shift shows up. You’re not sure why she’s overshot it so much today, but you’re thinking maybe it has something to do with Sollux. You thought they were doing alright again, but maybe it’s still complicated?

You feel the tension in your jaw easing up once the elevator doors close. The motor hums somewhat pleasantly as it brings Sollux and you up to your floor. He murmurs something unintelligible against your shoulder and frowns deeply. When the doors open again you shift your grip on him and make your way down the hall. It's when you get to your door that you realize you are short-handed.

"Yo, Karkat!" You yell as you give the door a few good kicks. "Open up. I've got my hands full." You kick the door again. "Special delivery for a Mr. Vant-asshat. Oh, I'm saving that one. Filing that one away for a special occasion." You go to kick the door again but at the same time Karkat, who was in the middle of brushing his teeth from the looks of it, yanks it open. "Jegus," you say as you stumble forward and crash into him. He makes an alarmed sound that gets cut off by him gagging on the toothbrush still in his mouth as you all careene to the floor in a heap.

"Damnit, Dave!"

"What?! You opened the door!"

"Excuse me for thinking that was the goal! Get your damn knee out of my sugar processing organ!"

"That's not my knee."

"WHAT?"

"I MEAN, it's Sol-- oh shit we dropped Sollux."

"Correction, YOU dropped him." It's less that you dropped him and more that he fell with you and became the filling in a Vantas Strider sandwich. You get to your feet and Karkat storms off back to the bathroom while you get a very confused but more ambulatory Sollux settled on your bed. He makes a groggy sound and his eyes flutter a few times before they open, although not entirely.

"Dave?"

"Last I checked," you say as you brush his hair out of his face.

"What're you...where..." He picks his head up to look around but quickly gives up lets it fall back again.

"We're in my room. Karkat's here too."
"But...wait...how's he here?" Sollux asks as he clumsily runs his hands over his face, presumably trying to rub away the fog surrounding his brain, but only succeeding in knocking off his glasses.

"Well," You move the anaglyph specs to your nightstand. "I reckon that'd be because he lives here, but I could be wrong." You can practically see the gears turning in his head. "Don't worry about it. Go back to sleep. I got you, bro." He nods his head in an uneven tempo before trying to coordinate himself over onto his side. He just about has it when Karkat storms back into the room, startling both of you, but more visibly surprising Sollux. There's a brief apologetic look on the other troll's face before it flips back to the frustrated expression that frequents him.

"You!" he says as he crosses the room and flips his desk chair backward before taking a seat. "You have exhausted your allotted amount of me minding my own fucking business!"

"Damn, and here I thought I still had unallocated business minding points."

"Shut your festering noise tube and explain to me why he's like that!" Karkat points sharply and you turn to see Sollux attempting to sit up.

"Is that a sequential request? I'm a little rusty on the whole telepathy biz." You pull him up the rest of the way and he looks between where you are and the empty space beside him with the same expression you give calculus.

"You know what I mean." Karkat huffs.

"Aight, hold up a sec, Karkles. Sol, what are you trying to do?"

"Tired..." he touches his face again near his eyes.

"Take a nap, it's cool, we'll be here."

He shakes his head. "Can't. Need to...what did I need to do? I was...It was...when is it? What time?" He looks around for a clock and finds the one on your nightstand. “Eleven?” It appears to only confuse him more. He swings his legs back over the edge, but you get to your feet before he does.

“Whoa, hey, dude, right now the only thing you need to worry about is getting some shut-eye.” It doesn’t take much effort to keep him sitting there. After a pause, he nods and climbs back into your bed. You help him figure out how the blanket works and by the time you're sitting next to him again, he looks like he’s teetering on the precipice of sleep. Gently you brush the backs of your fingers over his cheek and his eyes slip shut the rest of the way. When you turn back to Karkat, all his steam is gone.

“So, what’s really going on?” He asks, letting his head rest on crossed arms against the chair back.

“Man,” you sigh. “Shit’s complicated.”

“I figured, but...the last time this happened to him, the last time it was this bad...I just want to know what’s going on. I know it has something to do with your brother.” That’s the understatement of the year.

“It has everything to do with Bro.” You aren’t too keen on where this is going.

“He’s after you right?"

“Yeah.”
“And he’s not the greatest guy.”

“Yeah.”

“Is...okay, like, how bad a guy is he exactly?” That’s a hell of a question. You hold both your hands up and let them fall to your sides.

“I don’t know. He flips. Maybe he doesn’t mean to. Maybe it’s all in his head. I mean, our parents up and fucking died and he was left to raise me and Dirk by himself. God, he was only like 21 or some shit. That couldn’t have not fucked with his head.”

“That’s probably the most textbook answer you could have given.” He says it without saying it and you appreciate the courtesy. Not even you and Sollux had used the ‘A’ word directly.

“Yeah, no, yeah, I know. Look, he’s got it in his head like, like I’m sure Kanaya has mention Rose’s mother, and you know Roxy pretty well. You know how my aunt has it in her head that there’s this path she’s supposed to take? Like in ‘Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle’, Kumar’s dad is dead fucking set on him being a doctor just like himself and Kumar is hella smart, he could totally do it, maybe he even wanted to at one point, but the constant demand to meet expectation has not only driven Kumar from pursuing said path, it has him actively sabotaging and rebelling against it. Not to mention it’s also destroyed their relationship. And with Rose, it’s like she’s given up altogether. They have all this wizard shit in the house. I’m talking high profile. Not posters, paintings. There are statues everywhere too. They have this one that’s like twenty feet tall in their living room. But get this, she doesn’t even like them. It’s purely to mock Rose’s interests in the occult as an aesthetic and genre like she’s some ten-year-old waiting on a Hogwarts letter. And it’s like that with a lot of things. Kind of like Dirk. He and Bro have a lot in common, but nothing has ever been good enough for him and at some point, they started clashing more and more until it was all they were doing. Even things like programming. Dirk is doubtlessly better at it, he surpassed Bro eons ago, but it didn’t matter.” The words stop spilling out and you find yourself lost with where you were going with this. The silence feels endless until fingers curl around yours. Thank god it’s only Karkat here with you and him. He has the decency to ignore the various shades of red you are surely going through. “Point being, I guess I’m really not sure what to expect. He's hard to figure out.”

“That’s not the worst answer, but it isn’t exactly reassuring.”

“He’s a bastard,” Sollux mumbles from beneath the blanket. “Mayo is disgusting.” Your eyebrows make a mad dash for the rim of your shades. You totally agree, Bro’s use of Mayo is excessive and revolting, but Sollux shouldn’t know that.

“How do you know that? What did you see?”

“He asked for extra mayo at the diner.” You swallow hard. Somehow you find it difficult to believe that the two of you grab a bite and catch up.

“Do you remember anything else?” You ask, both desperate to know more, but at the same time afraid of what you’ll hear. He makes a sound that’s somewhere between a hum and whine.

“Tired.” You’re almost relieved by the non-answer. He drifts off again as you and Karkat continue to talk. Karkat insists that you involve the police, but you know that won’t work. That’s just asking for more trouble. Eventually, you call it a night and turn in. Sollux wakes up again as you crawl in beside him. He’s been out long enough to forget being awake, so it takes some coaxing to get him to go back to sleep, but he does. Karkat, wary of it happening again, takes Sollux’s key so he can sleep in his room to give you some privacy. It’s been a long day and you’re tired, but sleep doesn’t quite pull you down all the way. It’s a light sleep, an anxious sleep. The faintest of sounds and the slightest
of movements catch your attention and keep you from truly resting.

At some point so late that it could be considered early, Sollux flinches awake with a gasp. He moves with sudden fearful speed as if he’s just awoken from a nightmare, pushing away from where he is curled against you.

"Shh, is alright." Your voice is quiet and calm but audibly conveys that you were sleeping (or as close as you were going to get anyway). He stops. His fingers curl in the fabric of your shirt and with minimal suggestion, he settles back against you.

"Where are we?" he sounds afraid.

"My room." The lingering tremor running through him dissipates as you rub his back. “It’s just us.”

"It was dark." he buries his face against your neck. Even in distress, he’s mindful of his horns. “I couldn’t move.” Waking up in darkness probably didn’t help.

“Was it a dream or something you remember?” You feel him go tense.

“Fuck.” He didn’t remember about that. “Not again.” He threads his fingers through his hair and moves like he might roll onto his back, but rolls back toward you again.

“It’s okay.” It’s not, but you tell him so anyway. He shudders and you hear a quiet hitched breath. Everything is probably coming back to him now.

“I’m sorry.” You feel tears wet against your skin. “You don’t deserve this. Everything I touch turns to shit. I should have never--” his breath hitches with a sob.

“What? No, hey--”

“You deserve better than me. I’m just a parasitic magnet for disaster. I’ll never stop being this way. I should just-- You’d all be better off without me. I drag everyone into my shitsponged bullshit,” he says in a sobbed whisper. You hold him tighter and shoosh him.

“That’s not true. Dude, this isn’t your fault.”

“I make it worse. I make everything worse. I just drain everyone around me. They should have never sent me here. They should have left me on Alternia. I wasn’t a wiggler on the cull list. I’d have wound up a battery but at least then I’d be useful instead of-- instead of...” You let him cry against your collar. You don’t know what to say to that that won’t sound like empty platitudes. “Why do you put up with me?”

“I don’t ‘put up with you’. Sol I...” You love him. He makes you feel good. He makes you feel safe. He makes you feel. He makes you feel things you’ve never felt before and it’s overwhelming as fuck, but you’d do it all over again if you had the choice. It may not be easy when he needs you like this, you still feel like you have no idea what you’re doing and you are sure you’re fucking it up somehow, but it’s worth it. He’s worth it. You swallow hard. Your jaw locks up. There’s no way in hell you can convey any of that. The words won’t come out. They don’t make it from your brain to your mouth. Just thinking about it makes you nervous.

“Even these stupid visions. They’re as useless as I am...because of me.” Tears are still slipping down his face. You’re frozen in place. There’s a knot in your chest and you feel your pulse pick up.
“I..."

“You should find someone better, someone who can make you happy instead of--”

“Shut up,” you say it louder than you intended as you pull him out of hiding and make him look at you. His eyes are wide and their soft glow refracts in the tears brimming at their edges. “I don’t want someone else. I want you. YOU make me happy, dumbass.” A soft stunned chirp rings loud in the silence hanging in the small space between you.

“Dave,” he sniffles before he continues. “Do you pity me?” You can see immediate regret wash over his face. He opens his mouth in the start of some kind of apology, but you’re quicker. You close the distance and press your lips against his. You kiss him hard. You try to pour everything you can’t say into that one gesture of affection. It isn’t enough though. You need it to be more. He needs it to be more. He needs to hear it.

“Of course I do.” You don’t fully realize you’re shaking until he’s running his fingers back and forth, slowly and gently, over the back of your neck. You rest your forehead against his and take a deep breath that shakes as you slowly let it out. He chirrs at you and you answer it with one of those fond hums and a soft smile that tugs at the corner of your mouth.

He kisses you light and sweet, then pulls you close, as close as he can get. For a while you bask in each other's embrace. It’s a tangle of limbs and warmth and tender touches, consolatory palliative intimacy. Gradually though, it becomes more amorous with delicate, almost hesitant movements. His hand is on your hip and yours is on his leg as you press against each other. Lingering brushes of lips pass between you. You rock your hips harder into his and he breaks the kiss with a sharp breath. You’re about to ask Sollux if he’s okay when he seizes your lips in a more needful way than before. Things become clearer to you when you feel something shift against the leg you have between his. Well, now that makes two of you. You were trying to be discreet about it but if he’s in the same boat. Alright, time to access all 5 of your brain cells and not say something unfathomably stupid.

“Is that your--”

“Yes,” he answers quickly, cutting you off before the inevitable happens. You laugh into a kiss that comes your way to further shut you up just in case you have more to say. “Is this too much?” he asks, suddenly pausing. Is it? Your mind drifts back to that dream you had, more than once if you’re being honest with yourself. It has a hot blush creeping over your face.

“I’m cool with it if you are. I’ve been politely hiding my boner for a little while now.” and there it is, the inevitable. He snorts.

“I think you mean poorly.” You go to make a retort but he mouths at your neck, sucking the sensitive skin just past the crook of your jaw and an indecent sound leaves you instead. You wrap your arms around him, keeping him pressed to you as you now truly grind against him and it feels so good. Throwing subtlety to the wind, you shift to slip your hands under his shirt. He moves with you. At first, you think he’s just trying to make what you’re doing easier, but then he’s on top of you. Pressed close, fingers in his hair, wrapped in his scent. You tease his neck and he chirps at you. It’s one you haven’t heard before; wanting and needy and yearning for that something, that closeness you’re only just figuring out, only just finding words for. You’ve found an easy rhythm when he gasps again and a shiver runs through him. You thought it was all the fabric between you both making it less apparent but evidently, he just wasn’t out all the way. You can sure tell that there’s two of them moving around down there now. More specifically, it’s your dick that is vividly aware of the situation.

“Fuck,” you whisper against his neck. He comes up to kiss you. You touch his face, brush your thumbs over those spots right past the crest of his cheeks by his sideburns and let your fingers graze
the shell of his ears. He starts purring low in his throat and his eyes open just enough to look at you before slipping shut again. You’re so hard and his leg is in your crotch, and his bulges are trying to get friendly with your dick through his pants, but he stopped moving when you started touching his face, and your not sure if it’s weird for him to be doing both, and you’re nervous, god your so nervous, but your excited too, and maybe if you just move your leg a bit...He takes the hint and he’s rocking his hips into you again. You keep one hand pressed to his face but wrap your other arm around him; you need to. It’s then that something occurs to you and you feel kind of stupid for not realizing it sooner. “Sol, this is definitely going to get me off. If you aren’t cool with that, you better tell me pretty fucking soon.”

You’re going to take a wild guess that he’s real okay with that and getting there himself because suddenly you're moving against each other more ardently. He’s breathing quicker and it’s falling hot against your neck, pricking nerves and sending sparks up and down your spine. His skin is warm. A hand under your shirt sliding up your back, pulled close, so close. Slow kisses, soft sounds, reassuring whispers against your neck when a moan escapes you; he wants to hear your voice. You touch his face. His hand is in your hair. You gasp. Eyes barely open. Light touches on your skin. Moving against you, pressed close, so close, hips meeting yours, so close. Hitched breath against your neck. His name on your lips as you shudder beneath him. Breathless pleas for him not to stop. He says your name airily against your neck. It’s overwhelming in the best of ways.

Your movements slow and leave you both lying there, catching your breath in the serene blue light of early morning. He shifts to lay next to you again, but now it’s you that’s the little spoon. You can feel him purring against your back and it’s a welcomed sensation in the midst of your afterglow as sleep finally comes to claim you. But just before it does, while you waiver on the fringes of consciousness as safe and warm and content as you’ve ever been in your entire damn life, you manage to murmur two last words.

“Pity you.”

=== Dirk: Be wary

You’re nearly done getting Sawtooth back together. Just a few more touches and he’ll be functionally sound. After that, it’s all cosmetic. You’re welding one of a few remaining seams when an old and terrible feeling races up your spine. It has you freezing in your tracks. It’s suddenly far too quiet. The shop is closed today. It’s some kind of blue blood holiday or some shit, but Equius said you could be here anyway. He’s been more flexible about that now that you’ve known each other for a while. You were enjoying the solitude. You would still be enjoying the solitude if it weren’t for the fact that now you don’t think it’s so solitary anymore. You keep it cool and tidy up your area just as you normally would. All the while you listen intently.

timaeusTestified [TT] began pester ing auto-Responder [AR]

TT: Bring your drone back to the shop.

AR: How long until you leave? I’m in the middle of something.

TT: Immediately.

AR: Is that a time or a command?

TT: Both.

AR: You’re giving single word answers. You do that when your attention is elsewhere. What’s
going on? I don’t see anything out of the ordinary.

TT: I’m not alone.

AR: I’ll bring the drone around, but it will take approximately 3 minutes and 47 seconds.

TT: Okay.

timaeusTestified [TT] ceased pestering auto-Responder [AR]

You quickly run out of things to clean without seeming suspicious. There’s another shift in the air. You turn around but no one is there. The bell on the storefront door dings. It shouldn’t. That door is locked. You make your way over to the workshop door and steady yourself with an even breath before you open it. At first glance, the store still appears empty. You make your way to the main entrance and stay vigilant of your surroundings. You don’t need to test it to know that it’s still locked, but you do anyway. The same instant you hear something in the stockroom fall to the floor. You’re being lured. For a long moment, you stay still.

timaeusTestified [TT] ceased pestering auto-Responder [AR]

You lay eyes on him just in time to watch as he undoes more of your hard work. Sawtooth’s head clatters to the floor. It’s insult added to the injury that is the large slash going through his torso. Bro has his back to you.

“Roof. Now,” you say. You aren’t sure whether the curt aloof laugh is from the irony of it, or if he’s laughing at the way you have to speak now. It doesn’t matter. He disappears out the back door and you follow close after. If Hal’s drone weren’t circling the perimeter you’d be far more wary about climbing up this ladder, but Hal lets you know that it’s safe, relatively speaking. You stand across from each other like you have so many times before, staring each other down. “Why are you here?”

“I think you know, Lil’ bro.” It is your least liked thing to be called. You honestly prefer insults over it.

“Confirm my suspicions. You’re here to take him.”

“You always were a smart little fucker, too much for your own good.” You drop your sword out of your strife specibus. The most slight of smirks pricks his mouth and then it begins.

Round 1

He’s fast, faster than you remember. Have you really gotten this slow, or has he gotten better? He blocks everything with ease no matter what angle you come at him. You push harder. Not only does he dodge it, he fuckin body checks you. You hit the ground hard but spring back up and block the incoming attack. You parry. His after image flickers. Red arrows flicker to the right on your shades.
You dodge and counter. Miss. He’s gone again. You sense it before you see the arrows again this
time pointing up. He comes down as you leap to the side. You come at him again with a flurry of
attacks, every clink of metal on metal taunting you to move faster. You have to move faster. You
won’t let him take Dave.

He comes at you but his sword only gets your afterimage. You take your shot and get donkey kicked
right in the stomach. It sends you staggering. You should have seen that coming. He’s walking over
Combat System Online. The familiar UI pops up. The recovery timer counts down. You move
before the numbers turn yellow. It goes better with Hal’s help. It should. You were very meticulous
about making this part of his programming. You can’t afford to get too cocky, however. You have
had it proven to you more than once that it could all just be a trick, another move to trip you up. It
would seem that was the aim.

Round 2

He stops and laughs, then his sword disappears back into his strife specibus. He takes a fighting
stance and beckons you with an upward tilt of his chin. You follow suit. It always was easier to land
a hit this way. You manage to get in a few good ones but his blows are just as hard. You take one to
the jaw that sends you spinning. Warnings flash in front of your eyes. You dodge roll to the side. He
only misses narrowly. You pull yourself together and clash with him again and again. Even when
your hits land they just don’t seem to phase him to the extent that his do you. You’re starting to wear
down. How long have you been duking it out on the roof? He’s broken a sweat, but that’s about it.
You try to keep it together. You go harder but so does he. Just when you think you might have him,
he starts flash stepping all over the place. You wait at the ready. You were never able to predict this
move on your own. You rely on Hal to do it. You hope he was able to capture enough data to
predict it. Your shades say to turn right, but you feel it on your left. It’s that split second of doubt that
has you taking a punch to the face, from the right. You feel your nose break and the pain is blinding.
You’re only distracted from it by the pain of your skull meeting the hard unforgiving surface of the
roof. Your vision swims. Warnings flash across your shades but you’re having trouble understanding
them and some are obscured by fractures in the glass. You try to get up. You’re dizzy and your body
doesn’t want to work right, but somehow you rise to your feet. You can’t stay down. You can’t let
him take Dave. Bro walks calmly toward you. You rush him. You go as fast as you can, as hard as
you can. Bile claws at the back of your throat. Your body is begging you to stop with every blow
you take. He decks you. You hear a crack but you don’t know what it is that broke. Everything
hurts. You can’t think right. You can’t see right. The recovery timer ticks down. You only have a
handful of seconds left to get up. It flashes red. You can see the color separations where the glass is
cracked. Bro kneels down next to you and takes you by the jaw. You claw at his hand but it’s no
use. He takes your shades, he takes Hal off of your face and holds him up. There’s a smirk on his
face as he looks at the broken UI.

“For the record, I always knew you were cheating. This is just gravy.” He closes his fist tighter
around Hal until the display goes out with a sickening crack that shoots across it.

“No,” you say. It’s your real voice that comes out. Bro turns to look at you. There’s something
curious and strange about it. Like some kind of confluence. And then it’s gone, covered by an
impenetrable expression of stone. He drops your shades and stands up. You watch him as he crosses
the roof and disappears down the ladder. You feel like you’re going to be sick.

“Dddddd-D-Dirk.” Your eyes snap to Hal and it doesn’t help that feeling at all. You reach out for him
and carefully turn him around to face you. His eyes flicker onto the fractured display. “Help-h-
hhhhh-- Help me.” His voice skips and stutters. “Please.” His eyes dim and flicker on the screen.
Your mind races, but it feels like you’re thinking through gelatin. Hal feels so human in this moment but you remind yourself that he’s circuits and numbers. You can fix that but you need time, time you don’t have right now. You bring him closer to you and slip a thin piece of toothpick-like plastic from one of the arms. “I need to turn you off.”

“Nn-no, please.”

“I can’t fix you right now. I...” You bite back a wave of nausea. “I can’t really see straight. I have to turn you off. You could short out if I don’t.”

“Promise-- promise you’llllllll-- t-turn me back on? I’m afraid to not exist.”

You can’t. He might not. This could be the last thing you ever say to him. “I promise.”

You stick the piece of plastic into a pinhole slot on the frame and watch as his eyes fade from the screen before the backlight goes out. There’s a pain in your chest that isn’t from the beating you just took. For all your arguing, you did care about him. Gently you fold him up and put him in your sylladex, then with more urgency you talk on your phone and call Roxy. You need her to warn Dave, you need her to find him and anyone else that can help keep him safe. You may also need her to call you an ambulance.

===> Dave: Keep Cool

You’ve just received the most distressing phone call of your life but no one would know it from the easy-going way you walk back into your class. Karkat glances over at you as you sit down before turning his attention back to the whiteboard and whatever it is that your teacher is going on about. Roxy said to stay there with Karkat, that she was on her way over and that you needed to call Sollux because Dirk was barely able to tell her what was happening and she thinks he’s hurt really badly, too badly to call for help himself, and no one is at Zahhak’s today. You don’t think you can call him though. It’s taking all you have to project this air of normalcy and if you so much as utter a word it’s going to break.

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering twinArmageddons [TA]

TG: yo

TG: you still in your room

Your mind goes back to earlier, to this morning, to what you shared with him. You’re glad that you got to have that before this all goes down. You think about the last time you saw him. His class is later than yours but you were both very motivated to shower after falling asleep as you did. You stopped by his room on a whim before you headed out. It was quick, just long enough to kiss him for no particular reason beyond wanting to and to tell him you’d see him afterward. Wouldn’t it be great if that were true now?

You’re pulled from your thoughts by the sound of tapping and turn to see a crow staring at you through the windows that line the outer wall of the room.

Tap tap. Tap tap.

Another one lands next to it and taps on the glass. Then another and another. You’re transfixed as crow after crow line the window ledge. Your classmates start to take notice. The birds start to caw and jump. Beaks and talons rap on the windows. Whatever it is they want of you, they clearly aren’t getting. There’s a strong gust of wind but it does nothing to sway them and in fact, only makes them...
look more intimidating as whatever cloud was blocking the sunlight gets shoved out of the way. There’s so many. Backlit by the rays they look like a mass of eldritch shadows. Karkat says something to you but it doesn’t register, and before you know what you’re doing, you’re booking it down the hall. You can hear them everywhere. You reach an exit but backpedal when you see a wave of them coming toward you. You duck back inside and try another way, but it’s the same story. You turn down another hall and freeze. They sound even louder now. They’re inside. You burst out the nearest exit regardless of what’s on the other side. It’s crows. More crows are on the other side. You make a run for the dorms. You make a run for the person who makes you feel safest. You turn a corner only to be met with a swarm. They flap their wings erratically as they block your path and tug at your clothes, pulling you away from the direction you're trying to take. You flash step away and take off again. There’s more than one way you can go. They follow, cawing incessantly behind you. They don’t stop. They catch up. They block your path and tug you back. You stumble backward and it’s only once you’re looking up from the ground that you see it. Your dorm isn’t directly visible from where you are, but up in the sky circling above what it should be, are more of them. They’re trying to protect you. They’ve BEEN trying to protect you. They’ve been watching you. They’ve been warning you.

===> Sollux:

You still have some time before class and are contemplating grabbing some coffee, but first, you need to find your palm husk. You can’t remember where you left it, but it has to be somewhere. Maybe you left it in Dave’s room. You cross the hall and psionically jimmy the lock. Immediately you spot it on his nightstand. When you pick it up you catch sight of the state of his bed in the corner of your eye. He had the decency to cover it, but the memory makes you blush. You go back to your room to grab your hoodie before you head out when you see that you have a message from Dave.

        turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering twinArmageddons [TA]

        TG: yo

        TG: you still in your room

        twinArmageddons [TA] is an idle chump

        TA: ye2

        TA: need 2omethiing?

        Dave has classes back to back today so it’s something of an odd question. You glance around your room. Maybe he left something here? Some of his shit is in here, but nothing that seems relevant to his classes that he would need. There’s a knock at the door so you guess you’ll find out what he wants soon enough. There’s a strange sense of deja vu as you turn the handle and you notice two things when you open the door. The first is that you have to look up a bit higher than you were expecting before your eyes meet shades. Not the aviators that Dave wears, but ones of the pointy anime variety not unlike the ones that Dirk wears. The second thing you notice is that, that’s not Dirk.
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