The first time you see him is Day 1 of Sburbian Mythology 101.

The lecture starts in two minutes and the flow of students into the hall has slowed to a trickle, which is how you notice out of the corner of your eye a pale human in all red sauntering into the room, wearing a set of douchey shades in perplexing defiance of the torrential rainstorm that's been plaguing the city all week. In fact, you register, he seems to be the only one in the hall to not be drenched or at least somewhat wet, as if he's somehow managed to convince his clothes to ignore the godawful downpour outside.

You're about to turn back away when he stops and seizes up mid-stride, the abrupt tension in the human's posture visible even from a distance. He's looking in your direction, you realize, and though the sunglasses are in the way, you have an unshakable feeling that his eyes are staring straight at you.
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You avert your head on instinct, pretending to leaf through the handout for the course, but you keep an eye trained on the stranger. After a second he seems to snap from the trance and glance back at the entrance, almost as if about to book it—but from what?

Then the professor clears her throat and you're forced to put a pause on your ethological exploration of the human species, redirecting your attention towards the front of the room where the tall, spindly woman is standing.

"Welcome to what is probably, for most of you, your first class on Sburbian Mythology. And for quite an appreciable fraction, also probably your last. I've count about two hundred people in this room today, so just above a quarter more than we have listed on the register. That's fine: we get drop-ins every year. But by the end of the quarter, I don't expect more than a third of this room to still be around, and then we'll be moving the class into the smaller Physiology hall at Downing."

She falls silent to let the wave of confused muttering die down, hands clasped primly behind her back.

"Let me explain why. I assure you that whatever you came in thinking this course would be, you are most definitely wrong..."

As you jot notes on the rapid-fire spiel from the gesticulating lecturer, the strange boy in red slips from your mind.

Three days later, you notice the human for the second time in S. Archaeology, dressed in the same crimson getup and sunglasses. You wonder if he skipped class the last two days or if you just didn't see him—it's a large lecture theatre, after all, and he might not have been wearing the same clothes. He comes in just five seconds before the professor starts speaking and seats himself all the way at the backmost row of the hall.

"The Sburbian archaeological record is classically divided into two bodies. The primary record consists of original Sburbian structures and artifacts, the meteor sites and Skaian vaults being the most famous. The primary record is characterized by complex devices of unknown function and technology, and few or no deific or religious elements..."

You notice him glancing at you every now and then throughout the hour. Again, the glasses make
it difficult to tell, but the way he dodges your glare whenever you catch him in the act makes you increasingly certain that you're the subject of his scrutiny.

"...The secondary record, on the other hand, mainly consists of cultural and historical materials concerning the religious practice of Sburbism in past civilizations and early attempts at decoding the primary record. The classification of the Consort Ruins has been historically ambiguous and subject to no small amount of controversy..."

You try to pay attention to the lecture, but you know a lot about it already from your pre-reading, and the human's eyes boring into your back are distracting you.

"...all dating methods place the primary record as entirely predating the secondary, and in fact human civilization as a whole. In light of the Alternian records introduced since first contact in 2002, it's even thought by some that..."

At the end of the class, you shoot him an irate look on your way out.

He doesn't show up to the next lecture; you check.

It's another week before you see him for the third time.

You're one of the last few to leave Mythology, staying behind to get some clarification on the caliginous interpretation of classical patronage. As you exit into the hallway, you recognize the human leaning against a wall, immersed in the glowing screen of his human palmhusk.

At this distance you can see that his face is even paler than you thought, not the light pink that "white" humans have, but an almost total absence of coloration. His hair is the same shade, which you suppose could be a dye, but given the tone of his skin you suspect that it's natural. A mutation? On Alternia he would have been culled as a wiggler before taking one step out of the brooding caverns, but as you've learned in the month spent on Earth so far, humans don't tend to cull their own.

The male human licks his lips, and the juxtaposition of red against light skin draws your attention to his mouth. You notice his a sharp, defined jawline, and it strikes you that he's thin—or perhaps *wiry* would be a better descriptor, the tight-fitting red shirt tracing lean muscles that you suspect to be stronger than they look, though you're not sure what how you got that impression.

Then the guy looks up from his palmhusk, and you both freeze.

A long second ticks past.

"Why are you staring at me?" you blurt in English.

He raises an eyebrow. "You're the one staring at me."

You scowl. "Fuck off. You know what I meant, bulgelump. You've been eying me up like you haven't seen a troll in your life."

He blinks.

"Who said it was you? Not to say you're not easy on the eyes, but maybe I was just staring into space? Contemplating the meaning of life, you know. Communing with the gods of the Furthest Ring. You know how clingy eldritch abominations from beyond reality are—I keep telling them not to take the hentai tentacle beast thing too literally, but *nooo* they're pushing their yandere act
like cosplayers at anime con trying to win most in-character space monster."

Your mouth flops open. For a moment, you wonder if your auricular lobes have been abruptly struck by rapid-onset auditory agnosia, but you recover in time to scowl and retort, "What the actual writhing fuck just came out of your mouth?"

The human's face barely changes, but you get the sense that he's amused. You cross your arms irritably.

"Yeah, fine, I was staring at you," he admits. He holds out his hand, which you eye skeptically. "I'm Dave."

Is he expecting you to shake his hand?

"I've got better things to do than listen to your inane ramblings. You rank just below drowning myself in the communal ablation trap on productive uses of my time, so maybe you could just go away and stop stalking me?"

You snarl and slap his hand away, half-expecting him to smirk or say something pan-rottingly stupid again, but instead he just stands there vacantly, apparently stunned silent by this development. Stepping back, you wait to see if he'll start shrieking about invisible people and fur troll conspiracies in a less-than-shocking revelation of the true depths of his intellectual disability, but he just lowers his arm and presses his lips into a thin line.

No luck parsing what that's supposed to mean. Taking another hesitant step away, you turn and walk in the other direction, perhaps slightly faster than is strictly necessary. When you look back as you turn the corner to see if he's following you, he's already vanished like he never existed.

<Why were you talking to Th'rider?>

You snap your head around from your husktop screen, mid-sentence in your essay.

<Who?>

Sollux doesn't stop typing as he answers, <Dave Th'rider. Carl thaid you were talking to him after Mythology thhithe morning.>

You frown. Who the fuck is Carl? Probably one of Sollux's classmates. You have no idea how he's managed to make friends while you're still floundering around with a grand total of zero after escaping to Earth, but he did it. The goldblood's just as antisocial as you, and even worse with the unattractive self-loathing and mood swings, but you guess he's in his element with all the other computer nerds in his subject.

On the other hand, Sburbology students you've found tend to be sickeningly bubbly and enthusiastic, which doesn't precisely mesh well with your general abrasiveness. Everyone's learned to avoid the short grouchy troll, and these days the only reason anyone ever talks to you is to grill you on what little you know about old Alternian myths and then run away when you inevitably start insulting them, their quadrants and their ancestors' lusii.

Which is why you're mildly surprised at not noticing that you've been apparently talking to someone called "Th'rider", until you remember the aborted pseudo-conversation you had with the stalker in the hallway.

<None of your fucking business,> you mutter. You don't feel like explaining yourself, and if he's
taken the hint, you'll never see the guy again anyway.

<Come on, Karkat,> Sollux needles, eyes still trained on his screen. <How do you know him?>

<He's my creepy stalker,> you finally cave. You amend after a second, <Kind of. I see him staring at me in lectures, so this morning I told him to fuck off, that's all.>

<Really? Are you thure you're not juth imagining it through your len'th of cripling thocial anxiety?> he snickers.

<Eat a baabeast spleen,> you growl, flipping him off over your shoulder. He can't see it, but isn't it the sentiment that counts? <If you're going to ignore my answer you could have saved your watered-down mustard saliva and shut the fuck up.>

Sollux snorts. <Not that I don't trusth your impeccable obthervational thkillth, it jutht doethn't theem like him.>

<Why?> You don't know anything the guy—as far as you were concerned he's just a random creep getting up in your business—but by the goldblood's tone there's more to this than you thought. <Do you know him?>

<Know him? I don't think anyone does. He doethn't talk at all, keepthe to himhelf all the time. According to hith roommate, he'the doethn't even thleep in their rethpiteblock. No one knowth anything about where he came from and what hith deal ithe, and he'th definitely not sharing. You're probably the firth't perthon to get more than three thentences out of him.>

<Sounds like typical stalker behavior to me,> you point out, but gears are turning in your head. So he has an enigmatic reputation for secrecy. Sounds like another kid trying too hard to be edgy, but you're a troll, so you're not really one judge. What does that have to do with you, though?

<...yeah, you're right. But what would he want with you?> your blockmate wonders out loud, echoing your thoughts. He finally pauses his typing and swivels on his chair to give you a frown. <Are you thure he was th'taring at you?>

<He admitted he was looking at me,> you recall. <And unless I catastrophically failed my perception check there, he was trying to make friends. Can't imagine why.>

<Huh,>

Another thought occurs to you. <You said he doesn't talk? He seemed pretty talkative for the five seconds we talked, I don't think I could get him to shut up his seed flap if I wanted to.>

Sollux crosses his arms, agitated red and blue sparks crackling from behind his glasses. <Th'ee, that makethe no thenthe. I'm not thure we're even talking about the thame perthon. Dave Th'trider doethn't talk, it'eth not hith thing. What did he thay?>

You grimace, struggling to recall details from the monologue you've already mostly forgotten. <Some garbage about the meaning of life and tentacle monsters. Maybe he's a cultist: that would be just my fucking luck. There was something about the gods of the Furthest Ring. I wasn't exactly paying attention to the rancid word slurry spilling from his mouth.>

<He wants to thacrifithe you to his crazy Earth gods!> the psionic says far too gleefully as you grimace in annoyance. Is Sburbism still a real religion on Earth? It wasn't listed in the orientation pamphlets, but maybe there are smaller, more obscure cults? Alternia's chock-full of all sorts of niche troll sects, so you wouldn't put it past the humans to have their own bizarre religions.
<Technically they're Alternian as well,> you deflect. *Fuck* no, you're not getting ritually murdered for shits and giggles. You had enough of that from the clowns back home; you're not putting up with this.

<Eh?>

The horrorterrors of the Furthest Ring are a Sburbian myth, fuckwit. They're in Alternian records and probably got worshipped at some point in history, who knows. Maybe if you paid more attention in your junior schoolfeeds you'd be less of a disgrace to troll culture.>

Sollux snorts. <Well, e'the a thburbology thudent, tho that makethe perfect thenthe. Have fun being thacrifithed, KK.>

You groan. This *really* isn't helping.

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You were mostly sure that this "Strider" human (you got Sollux to clarify that pronunciation through his lisp) had been joking about his communion with the horrorterrors, but your blockmate's conspiracy theories put you enough on edge that almost you breathe an small internal sigh of relief when the next time you see your stalker is during normal class, instead of, say, in the shadows of a dark unfamiliar room as you wake up lashed to a sacrificial stone slab.

What's less relieving is that he decides to sit next to you for some inexplicable reason.

"Psst," he says as you do your best to erase him from physical existence through sheer force of will. You're past the normal age to first manifest psionic powers, but you can always hope. From the corner of your eye you see that he's wearing the same dumb shades and red clothes with a gear motif.

"Look, we got off on the wrong foot. I swear to god, wasn't trying to creep on you or anything, we just don't see a lot of trolls around here."

"There's five other trolls in this class," you bite before you can stop yourself from responding. Silently cursing your impulsive shout sphincter, you barrel on: nothing to lose at this point. "If you're so eager for troll tentadick go and join Alterniasoc. Do you see me giving a singular flapping fuck? There's an ocean of poor unsuspecting schlubs out there, entire glittering horizons of potential victims for you to pester. Leave me alone."

"Come on. Most of the trolls around here either look like they want to tear my throat out, or look like they expect *me* to tear their throat out, not to mention half of them can't even put together half a sentence in English. You'd think alien visitors would put some effort into building bridges, but we seem to be suffering a perilous shortage of civil engineers. Infrastructure projects frozen in perpetual bureaucratic limbo. Lanes of traffic piling up for miles and miles as protests flood the streets. It's up to you now, dude. Lead our people forwards to new frontiers of interspecies understanding. You're our only hope."

You grimace. You barely understood half of what he said, but okay, cull-happy highbloods checking out the newest Imperial stomping grounds and twitchy refugees that barely speak his language might not be the best conversation partners, but what makes you look any better?

"How would you know how well I speak your shitty Earth language just by looking at me?" you point out, grappling for excuses to get him off your back. So he thinks you're harmless? Well, yeah, you're tiny compared to other trolls and have no muscles to speak of, but you can be intimidating, look: "And where did you get the impression that I'm *not* going to tear out your flimsy human
windpipe?"

You bare your rows of sharp teeth at him and summon that guttural rasp from your larynx that humans hate, even as you lean forwards into his space, making sure to give him a close-up of your pointed canines. Oh god, this is a terrible idea. You're already regretting this. If you get reported you'll be kicked out in no time, a troll can't just threaten someone in public, you're going to get your idiot ass culled-

But Strider isn't even fazed, to your mixed frustration and relief.

"Nah," he snorts nonchalantly, running a hand through his white hair. "I bet you're secretly a teddy bear under all that grumpy. We could make a killing making troll plushes modeled after you, dude. When you squeeze them they shout insults at you. PG insults, of course, wouldn't want to miss out on that sweet little girl money. Shouty trolls are all the rage these days."

*What the fuck?* You can't tell if he's mocking or flirting you—maybe both?—but either way you fail to suppress the angry blush creeping up your face. Your expression is frozen on your face, unsure if aggressing this crazy person more would do anything but egg him on.

You settle on scooting back on yourself, grumbling under your breath, "Strider, every imbecilic word that spews from that wiggler mouth of yours slays another of my few remaining brain cells."

He points an accusing finger at you. "Hey. I never told you my last name. Did you look me up? I'm flattered." Oh, look. That dumb lip-corner twitch is back. "Also, did you call my mouth a wiggler? Isn't that, like, a baby troll? What does a baby mouth mean? Are you complimenting my succulent and juicy lips? Wait, don't you eat your babies? If you had a hankering for my mouth you could have just said so. Only in a strictly metaphorical way, though, vore's not really my thing."

You bury your face in your palms.

"Did I make it weird again? Damn, I think I made it weird again."

Your brain is breaking down out of sheer second-hand embarrassment, and after seconds of grappling around it decides to fixate on possibly the most irrelevant part of the stream of words. Through the gaps between your fingers, you shoot elemental beams of pure platonic hatred at the human teenager as you power up your lexical rage cannons.

"Trolls don't eat our wigglers, you bulgewithering dumbfuck. 'Grub' products come from livestock larvae, not our own fucking species. I didn't think you could disappoint me even more with your sheer fucking ignorance and ineptitude, but leave it to humans to find new heights of Mount Stupid to break. How many times am I going to have to correct you idiots on what ought to be insultingly obvious to any sentient slug with two neurons to rub together?"

Breathe.

"Systemized cannibalism would be a groundbreaking low even for the literal worst species on this side of the galactic cluster, if only because it would be such an outstandingly ineffectual source of nutrition. If it weren't nookchafingly evident that it's one more symptom of your species' collective brain damage rather than any real malice I would be insulted, but as it stands I'm just just stuck marveling how your distant ancestors managed to crawl out of the mud they hatched from with this impressive level of crippled intellect."

You're breathing heavily by the time you're done. You half-expected Strider to have run off already at this point, but he just nods slowly, absorbing your furious tirade with the same impassive
expression. Is he not going to say something?

"Cool," he states as you stare at him. Nothing more seems forthcoming.

Blessed silence ticks on, and you're not even mad that your tirade glanced off him like water, because he's finally shut up and maybe, just maybe, it'll stick this time. You turn back to face the front of the hall where your lecturer's assembling his slides and pray that that's it.

It only takes half a minute for him to for your hopes and dreams to get stamped into dust.

"So. What's your name, nubs?"

You groan and plant into the writing ledge in front of you, arms sagging over the edge into the space in front as your head dangles.

"Come on, let's be friends. You look like you could use one."

Oh, no he didn't. You catch the implication. "I have friends," you snap back. Even if all but one of them are galaxies away and you won't ever talk to them again, it still counts, damn it. The comment bothers you a lot more than you'd like, but you refuse to let the sting of the reminder show.

"You could use more," Strider corrects himself, a strain in his voice. Maybe he's finally realized he's unwanted, wouldn't that be great? "There are no quotas on friendship! Let the sweet nectar of platonic amity flow through you. Embrace the light. Accept the magic of friendship."

"Friendship is a oozing pustule on the sweaty crotch of collective society," you grind out. When no sarcastic remark bounces back, you turn your head. Strider's oddly silent, his hands are gripping the edge of the bench with too much force, fingers draining white under the pressure. You straighten up. Something's changed, but you don't know what.

"Look," he says, which tilts you off balance, because is that a defeated tone you hear? Eying again his tight digits pressed against the worn wood of the table, you can't help but swallow, because the first emotion you've seen leak through his impassive mask so far, and it's not laughter or anger or mocking derision, but distress.

"Look," he repeats quietly. "Maybe you're all friended up to your gills with super troll pals, but maybe I want to know you, okay? Can you please just indulge me?"

You open your mouth to tell him that makes no sense, gills are for sea dwellers, that's not how friendship works, you can't just walk up to someone and make them be your friend—

—but the words get stuck in your throat as you watch his larynx bulb bob up and down, the pressed mouth covering up the minute tremble of his lower lip, and you sense that if you reject him right now you'd be the most gargantuan asshole to ever live. You don't know why this human wants to be your friend so much, or why the fuck he's so broken up about it, but whatever reason he has, it's evidently important to him.

And yes, that's a little frightening, but you don't think you can just walk away, if not because of what it'll do to him, then just because this feels important, like you'd be sidestepping the central plot hook in your very own mystery thriller or tragic romance or whatever. It's silly, your life isn't a novel, but the gut feeling persists and spurs you on.

So, against your better judgement, you sigh.
"I'm Karkat Vantas."

You might just regret this.

Strider follows you to lunch.

You didn't actually invite him, but Sollux's schedule doesn't usually line up with yours, you don't know anyone else to sit with, and you don't have the heart to chase him away, so you let him join you. Maybe he'll be less annoying if you let him talk at you longer. Desensitization therapy. No such thing on Alternia, since phobias just get you culled, but you've heard about it from the human Internet.

"Your dorm has a cafeteria? What the hell? Mine only has this shitty overpriced vending machine. I've been scammed so hard. This is an outrageous injustice."

You scoff as you get in line.

"You should have picked your block earlier. First-come first-serve, your shitty accommodation is your own fault," you sniff.

The teenager shuffles his feet, sizing up the place as he looks around. The caterblock, if the small room with decrepit steel furnishing and a single bored woman manning the open stall could even be called that, isn't exactly lavish dining. But it's cheap food, and you're on a government welfare budget, so you don't get to complain.

"I actually applied late, barely got in," he admits. "They just randomly assigned me one of the few remaining rooms. I didn't even realize there were catered halls on campus."

"So what have you been eating every day?" you ask. It's not like the dorms have kitchens.

"Um. Doritos, chips and AJ, mostly." He doesn't even have the shame to look guilty. You wrinkle your nose in poorly-concealed disgust.

"AJ?"

"Apple juice," he clarifies.

Your right eyelid twitches. "Why wouldn't you just say apple juice like a normal person?"

Dave pffts. "Says Mr. Gander Precipice and Hydration Cylinders."

"May I take your order?" A sharp voice cuts into your pointless exchange, and with a start you realize that you've reached the front of the line, and still haven't figured out what you're ordering. As you swing around to locate the menu, Strider shimmies past you and shoves a handful of bills forward.

"Two of C, please," he tells her, nodding politely. Nudging you with an elbow to catch your attention, he says, "One's for you. I'm paying."

"I didn't say what I wanted," you hiss.

"You'll like it," he assures in a deadpan voice, smirking ever so slightly. "Trolls basically all have the same taste anyway."

Wait, does he know other trolls? What happened to "woe be me, I have no friends?"
To your chagrin, you do end up liking it, and as much as you complain, judging by his smug look he can tell. On the other hand, Strider himself seems to be picking at his food.

"Are you bribing me just to have lunch with you?" you growl the moment the two of you sit down at the end of a long table.

"Wow, presumptuous much?" he says, clutching his chest in mock offense. "Being graced by my impeccable personality and charm is its own reward, you should be bribing me. You won't believe how many people want a piece of this. The State Department has a three-year waiting list on my appointments. You're lucky I let you jump the queue, I don't do that for just any troll. Just the short angry ones. And the president, I guess. I can always make time for my boy Obama."

You just stare at him, fork stabbed inside a chunk of mystery Earth grubsteak. Once more you're not certain if he's trying to complement you or piss you off again. Is this some piss-poor attempt at black flirting? Or he's just fucking with you. Probably the last one.

He shifts nervously under your scrutiny. It's odd how he can flip from shameless bravado to borderline trepidation in the blink of an eye, like he's treating you like an old friend and then suddenly remembering that you're still a stranger he's yet to impress.

"You know, you can ignore 90% of the things that come after the first sentence of anything I say, because none of it will be important."

"...I noticed," you say drily. It seems to be the right thing to say, because he brightens up.

"Uhm. Well..." Strider takes a second to recover his words. "I bought you lunch just to be nice, you know, like a housewarming gift for the start of term or something—wait, that's stupid, ignore that. Also, I know you don't get much of an allowance in the refugee program, assuming you are in it, which uh I guess is kind of rude to assume, but I saw a red tint to your blush earlier, and red's the lowest caste, right?"

Red tint. Your stomach drops like a stone. Fuck, you didn't think it was that obvious. You don't get up close to people much in Alternia, but here—if a human can tell you're redder than typical in a first meeting, that's— no, he probably just doesn't differentiate between red and burgundy, and humans all bleed red so of course he would use the familiar word; nobody ever noticed before, so stop freaking out, god.

Oblivious to your internal crisis, Dave rambles on. "Was that insensitive? Am I not supposed to talk about it? I don't know much about troll etiquette, so sorry if I just basically asked for your dick size or something. Bulge size? You know what I mean, they're basically cultural analogues anyway. I thought it'd be fine, since you broadcast your blood on your clothes anyway, but maybe it's not polite to actually say it?"

You try to regulate your breathing. Even if they find you're a mutant, you tell yourself, they won't cull you here. Humans don't care about the hemospectrum; hell, they have the same color of blood, it might even put them at ease. The Imperial Drones can't get you on Earth.

"I'm not a charity case," you settle for, not trusting yourself to say more. You're safe, you repeat to yourself in your head.

But Strider clearly reads something more into your answer than the subject change that it is, because that sets him off like nothing else.

"I didn't mean to imply— it was just a spur of the moment decision, you're taking this the wrong
way. I'm not implying you're a princess in desperate need of rescue or anything. Wait, aren't your princesses super badass stabby fish royalty? Maybe not the best metaphor. Oh who am I kidding all of my metaphors are brilliant. What I'm saying is that it's not why I talked to you. You just seemed cool and fun, and..."

He trails off as he notices you're not listening, and you follow his eyes to your plate. You realize you're angrily mashing your tuber paste into your plate instead of chewing, and stop to swallow the masticated slurry in your mouth.

"You okay, dude?" he asks tentatively.

"Fine," you grumble, and you are. You're over the stupid panic.

"...Cool," he repeats.

The two of you chew on your food for a few minutes before Strider finally speaks up, apparently physically unable to restrain himself from filling any silence with his infuriating voice.

"Do you have any troll friends? Or human friends, I guess?"

Friends. Kanaya. Gamzee. Nepeta. Terezi. Eridan. Memories and names on the tip of your tongue, but they're not for him. You're caught off-guard yourself by the burst of cold anger. How dare he? But the dam's broken, and all of a sudden you're flashing back to days long lost, caught in an avalanche of recollections and repressed frustration triggered by the casual question, struggling to stay afloat in your own mind.

All it takes a split second, then the moment's over, and reality snaps back into focus. You clench your fists, pushing down the tangled mess of emotions threatening to overflow your think pan. Troll Jegus, this guy is possibly the most unfathomably dense, cull-worthily simple-minded creature you have ever met, and that's a list including fucking Makara. You managed to hold it back the first time, but he just had to keep prodding. You take a drink of water to calm yourself down, but you can't stop the next words from erupting out of you.

"I used to, and guess what? I left them all behind on my deathworld home planet, so I'm never going to see them again unless I want to get culled on sight! If you already know why I'm on Earth, why the bulgeboiling fuck would it possess your pitiful monkey brain to ask me about the people that might as well be dead to me? Have you ever, in your entire tragically short life, had a civil conversation without sticking your saunterpod all the way down your digestive tract in an epic display of gymnastic acuity?"

Fuck that felt good. You inhale deeply, feeling your aggravation sponge wind down and the earlier nerves and panic wash out with your deflating anger.

"Have some fucking tact," you finish. "You're going to get yourself killed pissing off the wrong troll, and that day will be a goddamn blessing upon all of humankind and trollkind."

The human's hanging mouth closes slowly while your breathing even out. Rubbing your forehead, you scoop a hunk of pulverized food and shove it in your mouth in case the urge to flip your shit rears its head again. Maybe that was a slight overreaction. To be completely honest, it was more for your therapeutic benefit. Yelling is good. Familiar. You needed the excuse. He didn't know. You repeat it to yourself.

It takes a while, but once you've calmed down properly and he still hasn't said anything, you decide to take take pity on his kicked expression.
"Sorry for yelling at you," you mutter in a clearly unapologetic tone.

"No," he says back, sounding not entirely traumatized, to your relief. "It was a shitty question, you were absolutely right."

"My blockmate came to Earth with me," you offer. "Majoring in some computing subject, I forgot exactly what he picked. You probably haven't heard of him."

Strider pauses, cocking his head with a spoon paused halfway to his face. "Sollux Captor?"

Your head jerks up, the sharp motion sending metal cutlery clanging against the plate. "You know him?"

"Know of him," Strider mumbles with his mouth full. He takes a moment to swallow and continues. "Psionic, red and blue glasses, really good at programming?"

You nod slowly. Strange; you didn't think Sollux was that well-known, especially outside the department. Maybe being a troll draws attention? You're not sure.

"Does he write tildath?"

"What the hell is teldath?" It doesn't ring a bell. "Is that a language?"

Strider mutters something inaudible under his breath. "Nothing important," he says aloud. "Just an obscure library. So do you do programming as well? I don't personally care much for it, but I've dabbled..."

The human takes that lead and runs on with it. You're relieved that you didn't already irreparably fuck this basic interaction up, but that disaster of a start has you pretty wrung out on words, so you end up mostly letting him talk at you about random topics, throwing out short prompts whenever he runs out of steam.

You work on finishing your meal while he fills the air, and to your surprise you find the nervous tension draining from the air and yourself starting to relax. It's obvious you're tuning him out, but Strider either doesn't notice or doesn't seem to mind. You catch references to human celebrities you've never heard of, a friend called John, and for some reason their economic policy which he has weirdly adamantly opinions about?

"Alternian economics is mostly just ways to bully vassal colonies into giving tribute," you tell him when he asks you. "That's why the homeworld's practically post-scarcity, and you know, functioning despite consisting of literally unemployed children that spend most of their time killing each other."

He never seems to stop for breath, and at a point you start wondering if he needs oxygen to survive. You manage to squeeze in a question about where all of this conversational equivalent of white noise is coming from, and his answer is, as expected, rottenly dumb and utterly meaningless.

"Talent," he says, raising a completely serious finger. "Pure, unadulterated talent. No extramarital affairs with this talent, nope; we're fucking devoted to each other, got rings and everything."

So you let your thoughts wander. At least for a while, it's nice to just have some non-judgmental company while you eat, and you're almost disappointed when before you know it, you're returning your trays and standing outside the building, raindrops pattering above you.

"Well, nice meeting you, Karkat." Your name slides off Strider's tongue with an unsure stilt, like
he's not certain he's saying it right. His hands are shoved in his pockets and his eyes not quite meeting yours. "See you around."

"Uh. Same," you grunt back. Both of you are just standing there awkwardly for a moment until Dave remembers how to move, shuffling back a few steps before turning around properly. You stay in the walkway considering at his receding back a few seconds longer.

That experience was bizarre, you can concretely say that. Beyond that, it was rough at the start, certainly, but overall—

—not unpleasant?

The next day, Strider sits next to you again.

You don't tell him to go away.
Space

Chapter Summary

"If you try to argue that the abysses of time eternal in the first LOHAC script are a metaphor for sunglasses, I will literally punch you."

Chapter Notes

I did not expect the final editing passes to take this long. Mostly more irrelevant exposition and words I made up for worldbuilding.

The human seems to take your tentative tolerance of his existence as an invitation to hassle you every time you see each other, which you come to reluctantly admit is less of a nuisance than you thought it would be.

Part of it is that "every time you see" turns out to be much less than you'd have imagined, since you find out that the few times you caught him were the only times Strider actually showed up to class. His attendance picked up after your official introduction, but he still barely makes half the lectures he claims to be signed up for.

"Why the hell are you never here?" you finally ask him one slow day in Mythology. You've been given five minutes to discuss among yourselves why the Mesopotamian profile of the Knight of Time changed through history, but for some stupid reason Strider keeps snickering at the pictures in the handout, so you've given up on getting anything done this session.

It's a shame, since this is actually pretty fascinating—archaeological preservation isn't really a thing on Alternia with its barely-functional government run by literal children, so nobody has any idea of what ancient Sburbist worship was like apart from that it existed at some point. What little survives of your mythology is just scattered legends passed down by word of mouth and the occasional schoolfeed for the more well-known tales, which makes their historical authenticity highly suspect, to say the least.

"I dunno," Strider shrugs. "Just stuff, I guess. I'm a busy guy. Ten hours of lectures a week? Is this a school or an reeducation camp? Do they think I'm made of time or something?"

Then he's snorting again, prompting you to kick him in the leg.

"No, but seriously. What the fuck are you even doing with all that time?"

"Do you miss me? I knew you cared."

You glower at him. "In your dreams, maybe. It hurts my brain to even attempt to conceive a universe in which I'm anything but ecstatic to be liberated of your presence, but I'm sure your twisted, sleep-deprived human brain can manage. I'm talking about the trimester project. If your ineptitude tanks my archeology grade I'm going to murder you in the most painful and drawn-out
"Is that your way of asking me to be your partner?" Dave pretends to swoon. "Are you sure you're not an English major, Karkat? My knees are shaking from the sheer eloquence in that speech, stunned by this raw literary talent the likes of which have never been seen before on this planet. They though the aliens would came bearing gifts of space travel, clean energy, secrets of the universe itself, but no— this is the real deal, Karkat Vantas and his fabled communication skills. Generations of poets and artists will weep at this immortal moment."

"Fuck you." You fling your arms out, rolling your eyes, the guy to your left shooting you a dirty look as you almost knock over his cup of coffee. "Do you see anyone else lining up here to work with me? Behold the legions of stampeding fans clamoring for this vaunted slot! You did it, Dave, you managed to triumph against these truly insurmountable odds. Do you want a fucking medal? A gold statue built in your honor, maybe?"

Strider adjust his shades with a hand as he picks himself up from the bench.

"That would be pretty nice, but I'll settle for the plaque, thanks," he says, grabbing your outspread hands and dragging them back to a resting position. "If you must know, I've been crashing the Myers archives. The sofas are comfy as fuck for quick naps. I've been hogging the second floor study corner for so long I'm pretty sure it's legally mine at this point. Squatter's rights, they're legit."

"You sleep in the archives?" you ask incredulously.

"Hey, it's open twenty-four seven. And you know humans don't need slime coons or whatever to sleep, we just flop onto the nearest horizontal surface and call it a night."

God, you wish you had a recuperacoon. You don't think you've seen a single drop of slime since you got here; sopor's worth more than its weight in gold on Earth.

"What the fuck are you doing in the archives anyway?"

Strider tosses his shoulders in another exaggerated shrug. "Research."

You roll your eyes. "Obviously, you nubslurping imbecile. What are you researching?"

"Meteor shit. Sburbian tech. Fewkes' classical paradoxes—I'm a filthy pop science casual, I know. Transportalizers. You know the works."

"Transporta- what?"

Something flickers over his expression, but it's gone so fast you wonder if you imagined it.

"Anyway, what I'm saying is that you don't need to worry," Strider continues, brushing past your question. "I know all the Sburbology things. I'm the Sburb master, the second coming of Howard Carter himself. This project will be so kickass Rodriguez won't know what hit him, just pow and the next thing he knows he's waking up in hospital, paralyzed from the waist-down and drowning in medical bills. We'll get sued for assault, but it won't even matter because they can't submit our paper as evidence; anyone that reads it just straight-up dies from being so goddamn schooled with pure, liquid knowledge."

"I'm seeing some unresolved issues with academic authority," you mutter under your breath.

He snorts. "Oh god, not you too. Please don't go all full Lalonde on me. Stick to excessive rants and
existential crises about minor inconveniences, it suits you better."

"Who the fuck is Lalonde?"

"Oh, right," Strider says, raising an eyebrow. "Childhood friend. You haven't met her yet."

Scowling, you retort, "If she's survived sweeps of associating with you I'd certainly like to, because I feel my think pan losing cells every extra second I listen to your ludicrous shout-sphincter operate."

"It's a talent. The shout-sphincter thing, I mean. Though the survival part also is, I suppose."

Then someone from the row behind shooshes the two of you angrily because the professor's talking again, and you're forced to shut up.

You're back in your respiteblock looking up how to spell Caledfwlch for the fiftieth time when your palmhusk chimes with the sound of an incoming text. Eager for any distraction from the mind-numbing hell that's comparative analysis of fictional swords, you snatch it up with perhaps more force than strictly necessary, skimming the notification. It's Sollux—it's always Sollux, who the fuck else is there to troll you on Earth anyway?

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

TA: ii hear youve been hangiing wiith dave 2triider a lot.
CG: WHY THE HELL DO YOU CARE?
TA: 2o you are?
CG: WE HAVE THE SAME CLASSES, AND HE SHOWS UP TO INVADE MY PERSONAL SPACE WHENEVER THE MOOD STRIKES HIM. WE CATCH LUNCH SOMETIMES.
CG: IT'S NOT LIKE WE'RE GALLIVANTING THROUGH THE MEADOWS SINGING AND HOLDING HANDS.
TA: you might as well be
TA: you know youre the only person two keep hiim in a conver2atiion for more than thiirty 2econd2
CG: I WISH I COULD GET STRIDER TO SHUT HIS SEEDFLAP FOR THIRTY SECONDS.
TA: exactly.
TA: he talk2 at people, not two them.
TA: he2 oddly iintere2ted for 2ome rea2on.

You won't lie, you have no idea what Sollux is trying to get at here. Is there a purpose to this conversation beyond prying into your personal life?

CG: WELL, I HAVE NO IDEA WHY I'M SUCH A SPECIAL FUCKING SNOWFLAKE ALL OF A SUDDEN.
CG: AND I DON'T PARTICULARLY CARE.
CG: WHY ARE YOU SO INTERESTED IN THE MORON ANYWAY?
TA: ii dont trust hiim.
TA: you cant tell me there2 not 2omething 2u2piiciou2 about all thii2.
CG: YEAH, BECAUSE NO RATIONAL PERSON WOULD VOLUNTARILY SUBJECT HIMSELF TO MY HORRID COMPANY WITHOUT SOME FORM OF ULTERIOR MOTIVE.
TA: that2 not what ii 2aid.
TA: but you have to admiit that you wouldnt be the fiir2t choiice iif the guy got 2pontaneou2ly affliicted by a thir2t for quality companyin2hiip.
CG: I KNOW QUITE WELL WHAT A PUNGENT WASTE OF RESPIRATORY GAS I AM,
YOU DON'T HAVE TO REMIND ME.
CG: BUT I DOUBT HE'S GOING TO HARVEST MY ORGANS AND SELL ME INTO SLAVERY EITHER WAY, SO WHO THE FUCK CARES IF I REMIND HIM OF HIS CHILDHOOD PET OR SOMETHING EQUIVALENTLY MORONIC?
CG: AND DON'T ACT LIKE YOU'RE ANY BETTER THAN ME, DOUCHE BAG.
TA: ii dont follow.
CG: I'M TALKING ABOUT THOSE HANGONS THAT FOLLOW YOU AROUND JUST TO LEECH OFF YOUR ASSIGNMENTS, WHAT DID YOU THINK?
CG: I DON'T SEE YOU BEATING THEM OFF WITH YOUR KEYBOARD EITHER.
TA: i keep them around becau2e their ineptiitude ii2 entertaiiniing.
TA: unlike you ju2t de2perate for 2omeone who can tolerate you more than two miinute2 at a tiime, but nice try.
TA: ugghh fiine, go back crawling to your human be2t buddy, what do ii care.

twinArmageddons [TA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

CG: HA HA. GO ON, RUN AWAY.
CG: YOU ARE SUCH A GRUBBY HYPOCRITE. WHY DO I EVEN REPLY TO YOU?
CG: ALL I EVER GET IS ANOTHER FACEFUL OF HATEFUL VITRIOL AND PROJECTED INSECURITY. 

If he has something to say, he can come and tell you to your face, you seethe in your mind, lobbing your palmhusk at your slumber plane where it skips off the soft material, smacks against the wall and rolls a few more times before chittering angrily and skittering back under your pillow.

You'd suspect he's jealous of Strider, which is be ridiculous anyway since you barely even know the human, but this has been par for the course for the last few weeks. He's tolerable when he's in a good mood, but the aggressive episodes have been getting worse and more frequent since you two got here, and he's never out of bones to pick with you. Maybe this is just how he is when you're not in different hives separated by half a continent, and the month of hurtling through the void of interstellar space and another one trapped in this tiny room with another irritable troll have finally gotten to him.

Not for the first time, you wish you had another troll to vent at. With FTL communications gated by the Alternian Fleet, all but one of the handles in your Trollian are grayed-out, and unless Feferi manages to topple the Condesce and deprivatize the hyperlanes—like that's ever going to happen—you don't think you'll ever see that hemospectrum of trolltags in its full rainbow glory blinking across your screen again. But despite the sharp sting in your chest every time you swipe past, you haven't found it in yourself to delete the graveyard of dead usernames clogging up your list. Because you hate yourself, you sometimes find yourself scrolling through not just Gamzee's old sopor-fuelled psychedelic spiels and Terezi's ridiculous legislacerbator roleplay logs, but even those long-forgotten arguments against Vriska, Eridan's pages upon pages of moaning and bitching that you used to ignore, Aradia's cryptic spam and 0_0s ever since she fucking died... It hasn't even been half a sweep, but you're already forgetting what Kanaya looked like, and you keep wishing that you'd met up more with the others instead of hiding in your hive and yelling at people over memos.

But getting depressed over lost sweeps is for when you want to feel sorry for yourself, not for purging pent-up frustration. What you need now is a distraction, and the one thing you've learned about the human internet is that it's as chock-full of drooling idiots as the troll one, but without highbloods and their automatic mod privileges ruining everyone's fun. Cracking your finger joints, you open a new tab on your husktop.
Time to flame some morons.

Your mature response to your blockmate's reservations regarding your taste in companionship is, naturally, to make your utmost effort to hang out with the human as much as obnoxiously possible. Your sudden forwardness takes him by surprise after you spent so long trying to ignore him, but he takes the development in stride.

After trying to get him to watch Alternian romcoms with you a few times ("Jegus, I can't believe anyone ever thought you were scary.") and listening to him prattle on irrelevant tangents through every film ("Just shut up and let me hear them talk, Strider."), and a single failed attempt at this fabled human "partying" in which you awkwardly stood around doing nothing while Dave fended off drunk girls and the odd guy trying to flirt with him, you end up settling into a routine where the two of you hole up in the library for study sessions, of all things.

That's also how you find that, despite the human's pathological aversion to lectures and practically nonexistent attention span, he does, true to his word, "know all the Sburbology things."

His knowledge isn't the textbook understanding that comes of reading all of the assigned texts and studying your course notes, but a disjointed patchwork of historical tidbits and amalgamated lore that spans everything from Aspect ontology and Consort legend to the sedimentary timeline and Skaian metallurgy. It's a stark contrast to the way you methodically pick through your books with a pen and highlighter, earmarking important pages and furiously scribbling in the margins as you go, but in a way that lets you complement each other.

Most of your sessions end with the two of you in the stacks, hunting down a citation for whatever weird factoid Dave's insisting this time is totally canonical and not at all made-up—and to your eternal irritation, more often than not you find that yes, according to the Sumerian LOHAC murals, there is a Time-Doom fraymotif specifically foretelling inevitable deaths, implying the existence of evitable deaths and therefore that mortality isn't intrinsically predestined.

(You rebut that that strictly speaking Doom is distinct from the concept of death, and and so the Epictetian interpretation of the Aspect is still valid. Strider calls you a sore loser.)

Once you've warmed up to his constant, loudmouthed presence, you find yourself actually looking forward to your impromptu meetings instead of just tolerating it as a sad substitute for a functional social life and giant middle finger to Sollux. You're not a Teal, studying has never really been your thing, but debating Strider's on his bizarre headcanons seems to scratch that competitive itch left over from your species' ancestry of war and violence.

Which brings you here, to the secluded corner of the Moore library you've come to claim as yours, glaring your study partner down because you don't give a bulge-cawing fuck, the Sylph isn't a goddamn rainbow drinker.

"If anything, the myth of rainbow drinkers was inspired by the Resurrection legend," you argue. "Also, rainbow drinkers aren't real, dumbfuck."

You originally pitched this session as a reprieve from the freakish heat wave that just hit the state—not like you really need an excuse to hang out, but Strider humors you—so there's no particular chapter or text you're going over, and Dave decided to hit you instead with his newest bullshit theory that the Sylph of Space is a fantasy creature straight out of shitty contemporary Alternian romance. Naturally, you took objection to this.

"So you saying that the Sburbian gods are?" Dave raises an eyebrow as you splutter and say that
then that makes even less sense, Sburb canon isn't even consistent enough to support any conspiracy theory.

That's when he chuckles and asks the question.

"Why are you such a Sburb geek anyway?"

Your thoughts grind to a halt.

It's not that you haven't thought about it—in fact, the exact opposite is true. You've tied yourself up in knots trying to understand your relationship to Sburb, because it's dead center in a convoluted web of so many personal issues and childhood influences and weird neuroses that an Imperial psychovivisector would have a field day teasing anything useful out of it.

"Says the king of useless mythological trivia," you retort, buying time to think.

Why you're here right now, languishing half your afternoons away arguing Sburbology with Strider, is simple enough. You don't have anything better to do, and yeah, Dave's conversation is passably entertaining. Why do you spend the other half of your afternoons brushing up on yet more Sburb in your respiteblock while Sollux screams obscenities at his screen in the background? Well, you do actually like the subject, and also the government will stop feeding you if you fail your exams, so there's that.

"Hey, if I'm the king of useless mythological trivia, you're the damn god of pointless Sburbist history. The supreme overlord of dreary archaeology textbooks. His Imperious Condescension of the Alternian Sburbo-Empire. Why do we even need to know about what the Mayans thought their gods wore? Get this, department: nobody cares."

But why did you get into Sburb in the first place? That's the crux of the issue: was it Crabdad's weird thing for zodiac-themed home decor? Aradia's obsession with ancient ruins and old corpses trickling through the grapevine? You could mention the Sburbist cult that sprang up in your old hometown and got mass-culled within the perigee, how you went scavenging through the ruins of their hives and spent a little too long staring at the scattered bits of religious memorabilia. In the privacy of your own mind, away from prying psychics, you might even think about the Knight of Blood, the Signless and their eponymous followers, about how your blood marked you for death before you even learned to speak.

Or you could look at it from a higher level: Is it the draw of the mystery? Fear of the unknown? The thrill of rebellion? Maybe it's how the symbolic abstractions of an ancient world paint over a cruel cosmos with gentler brushstrokes, a welcome distraction from the ordeals of adulthood and injustices of Alternian society. There's a certain appeal to a dead religion untethered from time, belonging to no one but its Speaker, serving no empress but Life. But that's not it.

That's not precisely why you picked Sburbology to study after crashing to Earth, because while all that applied at some point in time, when you were reading the orientation booklets on the refugee transport, browsing the University course website in the prison cells they call government accommodation, when you filled in the boxes in the application forms, cosmic truth and social reform might as well have been the last thing on your mind.

"Hello? Earth to Karkat. You alright?"

You break out of your introspective stupor, head whipping up at the sound of your name. Dave's face shifted to hesitant concern when you weren't looking, evidently realizing that the question isn't as innocuous as he thought. It takes a moment to remember what you were thinking about, and
manage to string the remnants of your thoughts into a coherent reply.

"It reminds me of my friends."

Strider blinks, clearly not expecting that answer. A peculiar expression flits across his face.

"Okay, I just..." the human trails off mid-sentence, frowning. "Were your friends, like, big Sburb fans or something?"

You exhale. You're not sure why you chose this explanation when you could have said something utterly banal like seeing a cartoon as a wiggler or something, but the meowbeast's out of the carrier sack. "Not really. I mean, Aradia liked archeology, and I guess lots of FLARP campaigns are one way or the other Sburb-inspired, but none of them were really particularly enthusiastic about it. And to be honest, even I only understood it in the most general abstract before coming here."

You leave it at at that, and half-hope that Dave drops it.

No such luck.

"...and?" he prompts, crinkle on his forehead warring between curiosity and caution.

"The gods kind of remind me of them," you admit, dipping your head in embarrassment. You should be telling him to get his nosy cartilage nub out of your business, but the words spill out on their own. "I know, it's fucking ridiculous."

"I assume you mean the troll gods?"

"How much do you know about them, outside of patronage?"

Who are you kidding? Strider could probably lecture you on matriogenesis.

"Less than I should," he admits to your surprise. "There are 12 of them, each with a Beforan and Alternian incarnation. The Beforans were the ancestors of the Alternians?"

"The ancestor interpretation is one of the less popular ones. Most people just consider the incarnations the same gods, just under different systems of worship. Like your..." you root through your memories, the names slipping your mind. "...Greek and Roman pantheons?"

Dave nods.

"But that's not the point. What I'm getting at is that the twelve comes from every caste of the hemospectrum, rust to tyrian. If you look at other troll gods in Alternian history, they have either mythical blood or far-end; the Archtyrant Ascendant, the Mirthful Messiahs, you know.

"The Sburbian pantheon has no blood hierarchy at all, and that's something truly unique through all our millions of sweeps of history, or at least the it's only one that's survived to today. I'm half-convinced the only reason the Condesce hasn't scrubbed Sburbian folklore from troll society is its nebulous cosmological significance or whatever. And also because her lusus throws a shitfit and wipes out half the population whenever she tries something."

You swallow. This aspect of Sburb isn't something anyone openly acknowledges on Alternia, so saying it out loud feels almost like treason, which makes you nervous. Well too bad, Empire, you're already kill-on-sight for fleeing conscription, so not like you can get any worse in their books. For what it's worth, Dave seems to be taking this seriously, listening with an intent look behind his shades.
"My group back home—my extended social circle, I guess, it's more like a bunch of intersecting groups tangled up in our shared penchant for excessive drama and fucking revenge cycles—is the same way. Wide-spectrum, I mean. I don't think I can properly convey how bizarre it is to have sea dwellers and lowbloods trolling each other just like that—" You snap your fingers "-even factoring in quadrants, but we did it somehow. Jesus, the way I talked to Eridan would get me assassinated in my sleep if it were any other violetblood," you laugh nervously.

"It couldn't have lasted, even if me and Sollux didn't end up fleeing the draft. After your Ordeals trolls get deployed all across the Empire, and even in the one-in-a-billion chance that you get assigned with someone you know, the chain of command gets in the way."

You're aware that you're starting to ramble. You have to tie this up before you blab any more.

"So, yeah. It was good while it lasted. And with Sburbism, a lot of people forget the canonical ages of the gods because they're always drawn as adults, but they were really our age, you know? Just divine kids killing shit and getting into stupid drama. That's why I signed up for this."

"So you're essentially retroactively interpreting it as the most pretentious self-insert fiction in the universe."

"Well, yeah, if you want to put it like that," you grumble.

You look at Dave, and his face is pensive, not a trace of that poker face left. His earlier flippant words are at odds with his almost wisful tone, which unbalances you. It strikes you that you don't really know much about the human boy's past, as much as you've vomited half your life story at him. Earth isn't as vicious as Alternia, but maybe he lost people as well, if not to the Handmaid's needles then perhaps just to mundane time and distance.

The silence drags on, and now that you've emptied your self-allocated exposition queue, you're beginning to feel a bit embarrassed. The mood's getting uncomfortably pale, you realize with a shudder, and your stomach flips as you catch Dave's softened expression again. It was more of a Alternian sociology lesson than anything, you tell yourself. No big deal. Why are you even obsessing over this? Strider's a human, he's biologically incapable of giving a shit about this.

His chair creaks as he pulls himself up and rests his head on interlaced fingers. "I can relate to that, as you've probably guessed already." He quirks his lips in a smile. "As in identifying with the Sburbian gods, not the hemospectrum stuff, obviously. Would be pretty hypocritical to call you out for casting yourself as literal divinity."

"Huh?"

Strider waves at himself. "Y'know, Knight of Time."

You blink in incomprehension for a moment, gander bulbs sweeping over his apparel. Wait. Red clothing. Gear symbol. Holy shit, how did you not notice this?

"You've seriously been playing wiggler dress-up this entire time?" you say, groaning. Fuck, it all makes sense now, the obsession with timekeeping, the cape jokes you're suddenly a lot less confused about. "I thought you were just being weird."

"You didn't notice me low-key cosplaying the dude we spent half the term studying?" A smile's playing on Dave's face, and it's not in a mocking way, but you feel like an idiot all the same. "Legendary observation skills, Vantas. I get called out three times a day by complete strangers, it's been, what, four weeks? I thought you were just being polite and not mentioning it. Shameless
albino weirdo with cult pajamas, better not point out his profound mental disorder and probable schizophrenia, you know?"

"When have you ever seen me be polite, nookmunch?" You glare at him, mentally running over every conversation you've had in the last month. This explains so much.

"How did you not realize? I literally wear the same thing every day."

"Most trolls wear the same fucking thing every day! And I thought the gear was your sign, which obviously doesn't make a bulgelick of sense since humans don't have signs, but don't look at me like that I've spent most of my life on a different planet, alright? Or it might be another band I've never heard of or something, how would I know? It's a gear; you can't get a symbol any more depressingly generic than that."

Strider's tries and fails to contain his laughter, which attracts a curious look from a human girl browsing a bookshelf behind you. You flush in embarrassment and glare at her until she scuttles off nervously.

"Holy shit. I can't believe you."

"Well, what are the sunglasses supposed to be?" you grouse, scrambling for holes in his argument. "Unless I'm grossly misinformed, I don't think the Knight of Time wore asshole shades, and they're pretty much 70% of your personality. Snark and unnecessary shades."

"No, look, hear me out." Dave raises a finger. "It's ambiguous, but the literature states--"

"If you try to argue that the abysses of time eternal in the first LOHAC script are a metaphor for sunglasses, I will literally punch you."

"-damn, you beat me to it."

You both break out in laughter, and there goes any hopes of accomplishing any serious work today. Your bickering eventually gets the two of you kicked out of the library for the fifth time, but it doesn't put a damper on your mood. You're grinning on your walk of shame out the building doors, embarrassing slip of pity back there all but forgotten, shoving Dave in playful annoyance as he makes another deliberately terrible mythology pun, and from the microscopic rise at the edge of his mouth, you can tell he's amused too.

And that's the feather that tips the scales for you. You might not enjoy being stuck on a planet of hairless pansy apes with snotty human teenagers, but now, you decide, at least you have some tolerable company to endure it with.
Chapter Summary

"I can't just get another Karkat, this is a limited-edition collector's copy. And the shipping, Jesus Christ, the shipping fees. Any idea how much smuggling a troll across the galaxy costs?"

Chapter Notes

Once again, this took too long to edit. I rewrote so much of the thing it's stupid. It's 4 in the morning in the UK as I type this. At least it's a Saturday.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A loud thump in front of you shakes you from your phone. Pocketing the device, you look up. A foot-high stack of books has materialized on the table, with a Dave leaning over the top.

"Care to explain your big idea for the project now, or are you going to make me wait another twenty nook-chafing years while you putter around building your collection of twentieth-century prints?"

"No need to get your panties all in a twist, Karkat," Dave says as he slides into his chair, opening the lid of his laptop. "I thought you'd like the suspense. You do love manufactured drama in your films, after all. Now be prepared to be awed by my groundbreaking genius and brilliant wit."

Letting the human convince you to watch more movies with him after the first failure of an attempt? Terrible decision. The literal worst. You've managed to wear down his tendency to talk over literally everything in a film, which was what ticked you off in the first place—that's not the problem. What really grinds your gears is all the romcom jokes, like you don't see him awwing under his breath himself when Troll Jenny Slate snuggles up with Troll Jake Lacy. Fucking hypocrite.

"How I await with bated breath," you deadpan, though being completely honest you are curious what he's been harping on about all this time. "Blow me away, human Stephen Hawking."

Spinning his computer around, Dave presents you with an unfamiliar map with a principal landmass dotted all over with colored crosses. It takes you a moment to parse the caption and realize what you're looking at.

"The LOTAK paleolocation papers," he announces. "A meta-analysis of high-resolution biostratigraphy and plate reconstruction-

"-placing all known LOTAK sites within the same two million years of the Triassic period and five hundred kilometers of each other," you finish for him. "Yes, I can quote Wikipedia too. Most famous result of the last century, earliest real evidence for the terragenic hypothesis, everyone knows that."
"Exactly. But what less people know about is that there's been a metric ass-ton of follow-up papers trying to show the same thing for different sets of Consort sites and even meteor sites, using different dating methods, different reference frames—mostly broke PhD students trying to horn in on the victory pie after the fact. But none of them were quite as pants-dropping as Larson's original work, and after you guys showed up most of the interest evaporated, because why are you studying rocks when you could be anally probing aliens instead?"

Dave clicks through his slideshow as he talks, segueing from screenshots of abstracts and Nature covers, to some guy's graduation photo JPEGed to oblivion and photoshopped stabbing a cake cutter into a clip art pie, before transitioning into a shittily drawn MS Paint troll bending over with an equally shitty pink human sliding a gray rectangle between its comically swollen buttocks. You blankly stare at the pictures, at a loss for words.

"What I want to do is collate these studies—a meta-meta-analysis, if you will—to develop a definitive conclusion for when and where these sites collectively center on, and obviously what reference frame we're using to define position because on this time scale it makes no sense otherwise."

The Powerpoint reaches the end of presentation black screen, which is your cue to collect your thoughts from where they're stuck processing that vaguely xenofetishistic art monstrosity to parse Dave's words. It takes you a few seconds to catch up. As a matter of fact, you have heard about these derivative studies, and while you admit it would be a suitably impressive term project, that's only if it works.

"You're staking a whole lot on there actually being a singular center and reference frame," you point out. "Sburb's famously obnoxious for constantly defying every expectation of sense and rational logic. We already know primary sites don't date consistently, and even the original paper's been accused of cherry-picking its data."

"Well, yeah, exactly. Sburbology doesn't make sense, which is why this is going to work! How is it possible that the sites keep showing up in the same place over literally hundreds of millions of years when the original plates have moved an ocean away? Scientific reason says it's clearly impossible, which is why my totally sound logic says it must be true. Trust me, I'm an expert."

You eye the crude drawing of your Materials Science lecturer Dave's pulled up now, with a speech bubble saying "ther must B a perefectly Scientific explanantion for tunggsten suparalloys frorn 10000000000 b c" and a sword (sorry, sord), stuck through his chest by a flying Dave wearing a cape. You have a sneaking feeling that your friend might not be too impressed with Sburbological naturalism. Where would you ever get that impression, you have no idea.

"The last time you said 'trust me, I'm an expert' end with me waiting hours outside the public load gaper for you to finish your astonishingly lifelike impression of a massive misfiring human shit cannon, so forgive me if I'm slightly skeptical."

"Come on, Karkat," Strider punches you lightly on the shoulder. "I've grown as a person since that day, you know. So much character development you wouldn't believe me. I am now far wiser than that past me could have ever dreamed, and this me says I know what I'm talking about. It's way different."

You scowl at him. "Yeah, the difference is that you getting takeout from a shitty Mexican food truck wasn't the only thing standing between me and a failing grade. You know, if that happens, I'll be kicked out in the streets with the city vermin, scavenging through garbage receptacles and fighting trash pandas for half-eaten sandwiches. Is that what you want to see? Karkat Vantas,
homeless college dropout, cautionary tale against trusting Dave Strider's terrible ideas one too many times?"

"You can't keep pulling the hapless refugee card forever, dude," he complains. "What's the worst that could happen? Look, if it doesn't come together all puppies and rainbows then it's still a legitimate literature review, right? We'll just say that everything sucks and nothing makes sense, go back to probing aliens, which is what the prof was expecting anyway—it's not like this is your graduate thesis. Embrace being a disappointment! It's all us first-year undergrads are good for. That and making poor life decisions, but I think we have that covered already."

"I'll also point out that this isn't what the rubric asked for." You fish the crumpled instructions sheet from the bottom of your bag. "I quote, 'postulate and develop based on archeological evidence a thematic linkage between an Aspect and any relevant cultural or historical phenomenon'. Unless they recently discovered a new Aspect of Pulling Rubbish Theories Out of Your Ass, I don't see how this relates."

"That's just Mind," Dave informs you. "But yeah, it also says 'project ideas outside the scope detailed above can be approved on a case-by-case basis', aaand..." He smirks. "I already asked Oliver and got the thumbs-up."

Goddammit. Wow, you're actually slightly pissed at that.

"Well, I guess we don't have a choice, then!" you hiss, throwing your hands in the air. "Since you went ahead and decided for us without as much as a 'hey Karkat, what do you think about committing a third of our archeology grade to my hubristic Sburbogenesis circlejerk?'"

"Aw, no," Dave's expression drops. "I didn't mean it like that. We can still do something else if you want, I just thought this way we could get started earlier instead of waiting for the five-year email turnaround. Look, what do you wanna do? Turtle pottery? Mayan reliefs? I'm up for whatever."

"No!" you growl. "I mean, I didn't say I won't do it!"

Wait, are you really agreeing to this? For all your complaining it does sound pretty interesting, you have to admit. Fuck. It's not like the professor can mark you down on a null result if he personally approved it, but...

"I'm tentatively not outright rejecting this idea," you finally relent. "Tell me more about it and then I'll decide. But if I fail this class, I'm blaming you."

Dave silently pumps his fists in victory.

You cave in the end.

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Two hours later, you're taking back every good thing you ever said about this project. "Pretty interesting" your numb, mutant ass. You've been rifling through so many ancient issues of discontinued journals and old books that your eyes are glazing over—though that might just be the dust from all these pages that haven't seen the light of day in sweeps.

"How the bulge-chomping fuck can two studies of literally the same stratum date it fifty million years apart?" you roar. Quietly. You don't want to get kicked out again.

You just barely restrain yourself from throwing the book you're holding at your research partner, who still looks infuriatingly unruffled by the mountains of garbage data the two of you have been
"I'm starting to think we should just chuck all the isotope dating studies," he sighs. "They're all assuming the terragenic hypothesis anyway, which if our hypothesis holds any water has to be devastatingly wrong on every conceivable level. The dendrochronological ones also don't look right, but I'm not sure how to justify tossing them from purely naturalist argument."

You strangle a frustrated yell. "So why the everloving fuck did you have me read through seven years of Radiocarbon? Is all of this an excessively elaborate way to troll me? Do you stroke your bulge at night to the mental imagery of me tearing my hair out over shitty halfnium tracing methodology?"

"Geez, chill. I didn't know it wouldn't work out before we tried. It's not just your time we've been wasting, you know."

"You just told me why the data has to be wrong, so clearly we could have seen this coming!" you snarl, flailing your hands. "In fact, we were tested on this just last week! What are we learning all of this if you can't even apply rudimentary critical thinking to it?"

"Well, Troll Sherlock, if it's so obvious, why didn't you speak up earlier and save us all this trouble?" Dave snaps, whatever forced cheer there was earlier gone in a second. You bristle, but fuck, he's right. You should have caught this, you have no business calling him out. You're both morons. Morons that deserve to be stuffed down a load gaper and flushed out to sea, if only to escape this hell of your own creation.

"Urrgrghh," you groan as you sink down into your seat and squeeze the lids on your gander bulbs. "Sorry, I didn't mean that. I'm just so done with this hoofbeast shit."

He sighs. You hear the soft click of a husktop lid snapping shut, the sound of pages rustling and then a dull thump of a book hitting its pile. When you reopen your eyes, Dave's standing right in front of you, reaching his hand out.

"I'm exercising my executive rights over this table to call a lunch break. C'mon, we've been at this long enough."

Now that's a good idea if you've heard one. It's past one already—trolls don't tend to have a strong sense of mealtimes, but you've picked up humans' obsession with fixed diurnal schedules. Maybe you'll be in a better mood after a break. Or maybe you can just drop this whole project business, quit human college, and embrace your new life as a wandering hobo. Dumpster diving can't be that much worse than this academic purgatory.

You exhale in resignation and grab Dave's hand, letting him pull you to your feet.

"Let's just leave this stuff here, it's not going anywhere. Any place in mind?" Dave asks.

"Die," you grunt.

"Are you telling me to die, or do you want to go die? I'd like to keep living, thanks, but if you die who's gonna do all this grunt work for me? I'd be left bereft of a library slave. Truly the tragedy of the century, I know. I can't just get another Karkat, this is a limited-edition collector's copy. And the shipping, Jesus Christ, the shipping fees. Any idea how much smuggling a troll across the galaxy costs?"
"Yes," you say, exasperated. "I'm aware. If you don't have anywhere better, there's this new Alternian place that just opened on Regent Street. Have you eaten troll food before?"

A lot of Alternian ingredients aren't actually digestible by humans—and they call themselves omnivores, ha—but the "Alternian" food they serve on Earth is all imitation stuff made from Earth ingredients anyway, since imports will cost you an arm and leg. The taste, on the other hand, is another matter: humans have all sorts of hangups about moving things and insect parts in their food, which isn't something you fully understand, but they're free to eat whatever they like.

Dave shrugs, which is a better reaction than you hoped for. "A few times. Wouldn't be my first choice, but I've developed a taste for it. Cool with me."

You frown. "If you're sure," you caution. "If you throw up all over my food you're paying for it."

You have seen it happen.

"I've down," he insists. "Let's go, dude. Lead the way."

Bookmarking the journal issue you were just on—actually, on second thought, you just close it and toss it in the return pile, since you've decided to scrap this route—you sling your coat on and get moving.

The place is quite a ways from Sidgwick, but it's a nice chilly day, so you don't mind the walk. Eventually you arrive at your destination, standing at the entrance of the restaurant, waiting for a jogging Dave to catch up to you.

"Ever heard of looking both ways before you cross?" he huffs as he slows to a stop.

You scoff. "Ever heard of autonomous emergency braking?"

"You know that most cars don't have that, right? And it doesn't actually stop the car, just slow it down enough to not instantly kill you."

"Statistically I'm not going to die in a car crash," you say, rolling your eyes. "Did you actually look that up?"

You're genuinely confused. "Why wouldn't I look up leading causes of death going to a new planet?"

Dave opens his mouth, leaves it there for a moment, then closes it without a sound. "...Forget I asked. So this is the place, huh?"

It's not a large establishment, you note, only seven or so booths visible as you peer through the windows. You've passed by once or twice, but not really walked in or paid that much attention to it. There's a wide sign at the top of the storefront, two lines of Alternian lettering spelling out the name of the restaurant in olive. No English translation, and as you squint at a menu through a window, you realize the menus are all Alternian-only as well.

"Regent Street Plateaued Nutrition and Seated Consumption Servicetradeblock," you hear, prompting you to turn and cock your head in surprise. "Jegus, trolls sure are literal with your names."

"You read the language?"
Dave shrugs. "Picked up a bit here and there."

Huh. The revelation leaves you mildly stupefied. Dave's never indicated any knowledge of Alternian, and learning a foreign language with completely different phonetic, grammatical and etymological foundations that's only been introduced your planet for just over a decade is hard. Every time you think you've figured him out, the human seems to find new ways to surprise you.

"It's appeal to tradition," you explain, shelving your confusion for the moment. "This kind of store name has been falling out of favor for generations, but trolls don't come here for the freshest design fads, they're looking for a taste of the familiar. Same with hemotyping the sign: the place is probably run by an oliveblood. Maybe staffed by olives too, just to hammer the point in, even if that's not strictly part of the convention."

Dave hums in understanding. "That's why I'm not seeing any translations, I guess. Can't have icky human monkeytalk desecrating their troll shrine." He squishes his face against the window, eyes flicking around the room. "Don't see any humans in there."

You wince, only just realizing that yourself.

There are two types of troll shops: the kind catering to humans, cashing in on the novelty of the alien craze, and the kind run strictly by trolls for trolls, the ones that would love nothing better than for humans to leave them alone (and maybe surrender their planet to the Empire while they're at it). By the looks of it, this restaurant's firmly in the latter camp.

But before you can suggest going somewhere else, Dave's already pushing through the glass door and swaggering in like he owns the place, not a care in the world. You curse silently to yourself and trail him into the restaurant. The smug nook licker knows exactly what he's doing. He probably wants to see what happens when he kicks the waspbug's nest; you're well familiar that he was born lacking any sense of self-preservation. God, it's a miracle he's even survived to young adulthood.

<Table for two, please,> Strider says to the troll behind the counter, dragging out the syllables slightly to get the clicks and snickts right. You shiver at the sound of his voice—so he can speak it too. His Alternian is rumbly and just slightly overinflected, with an elongated drawl that reminds you of a purpleblood, but it's still clearer and much more lucid than it has any right to be, none of the usual stumbling and vowel artifacts of most humans trying to make the right sounds with their maladapted vocal cords.

From the surreptitious whispering that propagates throughout the room, the other trolls seem to have also taken notice. You scan the room, locating a couple of goldbloods, two indigos and a purple in a suit, a separate pair of clowned-up purplebloods, as well as a sea dweller with deep violet irises and long, corkscrewing horns who stops a conversation with his cerulean tablemate to appraise the new arrivals. You suppress a twitch as his eyes rake over you, trying not to let your nerves show. That's a recipe for disaster.

Your waitress is meanwhile an oliveblood, as you predicted earlier. Conical prongs hooking back slightly at the end with a notch in the left one, her rolled-up work uniform exposing bandaged forearms. She hesitates, bloodshot eyes glancing between the two of you, before gesturing towards a small table with two wooden stools. One of the ones for lower castes, you suspect, even if she's not sure what to make of this odd pair. You sit down after the human, picking up the menu already placed on the meal platform, which prompts another round of muttering.

"They don't seem too happy about this," Dave remarks unnecessarily.

It's not as bad as you expected. Nobody's yelled at you or tried a stabbing, at least. You guess that
living on Earth has desensitized trolls to all the aliens swarming around them, and probably also de-violenced them to some extent, with murder being unconditionally illegal and everything. You get a few nasty looks, but everyone appears to be minding their own business for the most part.

"Need me to walk you through the menu?" you ask, shielding your face with said object, really just eager for something to distract you.

"Thanks, but nah." Dave's flipping through the laminated pages at casual ease, which is still disconcerting. "I'm not letting any troll explain food to me again after that time someone described grubloaf as, I quote, 'troll cake', completely failing to mention that it's a savory meat brick instead of you know, flour and a serving of instant diabetes."

You scowl. "Yeah, no. Proper grubloaf is supposed to come out spongy and aerated, with physical properties similar to human cake. It's not supposed to be insect meatloaf, which is of course the first goddamn thing humans always compare it to. If you order grubloaf and get a brick of meat you've been scammed, and I'd be surprised if it was cooked by a real troll, let alone with authentic ingredients."

Dave hmmphs. "No, that actually sounds along the lines of what I had. I still call false advertising: cake is sweet, period. It's not sweet, it's not cake. On second thought, maybe they were trolling me? In the classical sense, not like the troll species. I don't even know what that would mean."

He pauses his reading, mouthing something under his breath before continuing louder.

"These names are ridiculous, by the way. Come on, does 'Oblong meat product' come with a bun or is it literally just the sausage? And what meat is it made from? You'd think excessively literal names would be more descriptive, but no, you managed to actually make it even more ambiguous what you're talking about. The wonders of troll kind will never cease."

You cringe slightly as you hear another wave of unhappy murmurs. Shit, everyone heard that. You glare daggers at Dave, trying to convey keep it down, Jesus Christ. Like "hot dog" is a shining beacon of clarity in the vast and bountiful lexicon of the English language. What are you doing? you mouth at him.

He's doesn't respond, and you can't tell if he's ignoring you or just oblivious to your irritation. You chance a glance around, and that violetblood from just now is still looking. Your attention snaps back as Dave snorts. "And it comes with 'oil-fried tuber cuboids'. Hey, are Alternian tubers the same as Earth potatoes? I mean, obviously they're genetically different, but in English potatoes are a type of tuber, so y'know, it's ambiguous whether your species named one plant after an entire family in another stroke of pure genius."

You roll your eyes. "They're the same, and no one who did the translations cared about the biological minutae of mapping our respective ecosystems to each other, so don't complain. Now are you ready to order or are you going to keep making fun of lowblood lingo?"

You are this close to just pulling out your palmhusk and yelling at him over Trollian to shut the fuck up. He's riling up the room, and now you're sure he definitely notices, he just doesn't care.

"I'm gonna have the dumb hotdog," Dave says, and it's almost like that physically summoned the waitress, because when you look up, the oliveblood is right there in your face, scribbling away with notepad and pen in hand. You yelp in shock at the abrupt intrusion and you almost fall backwards in your chair, barely reaching out in time to grab the table and recover your balance.

The menu clatters to the floor in your panic, which does nothing to mask the snicker of one of the
purplebloods from the next table. The olive waitress is glancing between you and Dave with an unreadable expression.

<And you, sir?> she addresses you.

You mumble an incoherent apology and scrabble under the desk to recover the menu. No time to look through it again; and even if there were, you're not in a state to think about very much right now.

<The same. Thanks,> you say. Dave's smirking at you, as is most of the restaurant as you glance over the room. Oh, fuck. That's even worse than the evil eyes you were getting earlier—pissed highbloods get you culled, but when a clown think you're funny, death might almost be the preferable fate. And if they find out you're a mutant, you're even more fucked.

<Take-away, please,> you snap at the oliveblood. The claustrophobic prickle of paranoia creeping up your spine is an old but not unfamiliar sensation. Dave tosses you a questioning look, traces of humor gone now, but fuck him. You're getting out of here. It's not funny anymore. It was never funny, but it's extra unfunny now that half the restaurant's looking at the two of you like you're dessert.

<That'll be ten dollars and fifty-nine cents.>

You fork over five dollars from your wallet and dart to your feet, hearing Dave call out as you beeline for the door. The violet chuckles, and you almost freeze, but you force yourself to keep going. Don't look back, you repeat to yourself. Don't stop. Don't look back. It's an excruciatingly long seven meters, with the human's pattering footsteps behind you and hued irises boring into your back all the way.

By some miracle, you make it past the threshold without bumping into someone's horns or tripping, and it's only once you're around the corner leaning against the concrete wall that you remember how to use your lungs, drawing in large gulps of air. Moments later Dave's there next to you, directing a concerned expression at you.

"Karkat. You alright?" He has the gall to ask that? "What happened? Come on, talk to me."

"Why the hell were you deliberately trying to piss off those trolls in there?" you growl. Dave blinks in confusion. "Don't give me that face. You know exactly what shit you were stirring, you fucking ass plumber."

The human raises his hands in surrender, bewildered look still in place. "No, look. I was messing with them, yeah, but I didn't do that much, just a couple rude comments. You're gonna have to explain how that translates to 'let's flee the room with our imaginary tails between our legs'. You're practically hyperventilating."

"Didn't you see how those highbloods were looking at us? That sea dweller with the cerulean?" you hiss. How is he so oblivious?

"Purple-eyed fish guy with the antlers?" Stop looking so perplexed!

"Yes."

Dave joins you on the pavement, crouching and resting a hand on your knee. You don't remember sitting down. When did you do that?

He speaks slowly.
"What I saw was a patron of the restaurant staring at the weird human and his friend that just came in, and who was later maybe slightly annoyed about what I was saying. I don't think he was going to jump across the room and eviscerate us where we're sitting."

"No, you—" you scramble for words. "—you can't just assume that, you can't trust highbloods to be predictable, or just emotionally stable in general. Fuck. You can't mess with a roomful of purples and violets and hope for the best unless you have a goddamn death wish."

"Karkat."

"Trolls are dangerous, okay, just get that into your addled pea-sized think pan-"

"Karkat, look at me," Dave insists, shaking your knee. Your eyes snap to him. "This is Earth. This isn't Alternia. If a someone rips your head off, whatever his blood is, he gets charged for murder and goes to jail, not given a high five and points for style. He wasn't going to kill us. If that guy wants to keep his visa, he's not going to kill anyone, ever."

You swallow. You know that, but—

"You think they care about that?" you snarl. "Trolls kill each other illegally back home all the time, it's not all just legal culling. And it's he doesn't have to get caught: he could chase us down later and murder us in a back alley, or hire an assassin or something. It's not safe."

"I don't think anyone was intending to murder us, directly or via proxy," Dave repeats. "If a few feeble jabs at their language—not even that, lowblood slang the higher castes don't even use—is enough to get someone into murder rage, they'd have killed someone already and be rotting in jail. If he can handle old ladies holding up the queue at Walmart with their six bags of change, he can handle a few jokes at his expense."

The hammering in your chest's winding down, breath evening out. The things he's saying are ostensibly sensible, but it's wrong, it doesn't-

He-

Your brain short-circuits as you try to complete the thought. You take a deep breath and replay the interaction in your head, picking through Dave's words, so certain in yourself, but-

-he's right.

You slump back, head knocking against the wall behind. "Fine. I overreacted. We're probably not going to get hunted down like antlerbeasts in culling season. But I stand by my assertion that you're a fucking maniac and need to stop giving me cardiac arrests."

Now you finally remember why you haven't been to a troll restaurant in weeks.

It's not the food.

"Hey, it's ok," Dave says, bumping his shoulder against yours. You finally detect the first hint of apology in his voice. "They're basically your natural predators, you're entitled to some emotional distress. Those instincts probably helped you survive back in murderland; you just need to work on recalibration. Now, getting hit by cars, there's a better way to spend your patented Karkat Freakouts."

You snort. "Heart disease, maybe."
"And I'm actually sorry. I shouldn't have ticked them off for the fun of it, I thought it was funny, but evidently not for everyone else." He rubs his head. "Maybe Kankri's on to something," he muses. "You good now?"

Nodding, you get to your feet, dusting off your pants with a grimace. Dave stands up too, smiling gently. It's a look you never expected to see on his typically stoic face, but it's not a bad one, even if it sends weird jitters down your stomach.

"I think I know why I got spooked there," you mutter. "Apart from the general menacing vibe of the place, I mean."

"It wasn't menacing," Dave says, rolling his eyes, but he lets you continue.

"Did you know that there are no adults on Alternia?"

The human blinks. "Yes? Why- oh. That sea dweller was an adult, wasn't he?"

You nod mutely.

Dave looks down. "Yeah, I know a bit about that. You're conditioned to see adults as uber-terrifying monsters, or something. Not too clear about it. Is it a biological thing, or just cultural or what?"

"Maybe both?" It's not like you try to think about it much. "You don't see adults on Alternia much, and when you do, it's easy to get dismembered if you so much as look at them wrong. Even adults on film are usually played by large teenagers since 'actor' isn't a valid adult job. So, uh, you don't get to build a resistance until you graduate to the Fleet."

"And that guy was a sea dweller and an adult," Dave affirms.

"Essentially," you mutter.

"Hey, understandable." Dave ruffles your hair. It ought to be irritating, but you find it oddly comforting instead. Why is he so understanding? you groan internally. You can't even stay mad at him. "Sorry I ruined lunch," you say.

He snorts. "Ruined is an overstatement. I mean, it's not like it was a date or something. And to be honest, that vibe back there wasn't the greatest place for a sit-down meal even if it wasn't specifically of the murder variety."

A cough from behind interrupts your conversation. You jump, spinning around and reaching for a nonexistent weapon, before you realize it's that server from before, holding two brown paper bags. Your food. Right, you almost forgot.

Forcing yourself to relax, you thank the oliveblood, snatching the bags from her outstretched hands. Dave simply stands there, an eyebrow raised at you as you glower at the retreating troll's back until she disappears into the restaurant.

"What the fuck is wrong with her?" you seethe once she's gone and the two of you are stalking—well, you're stalking, Dave's walking normally—back across the street. "How does she-" you make a wiggling gesture with your fingers "-do that? Nepeta's not that stealthy, and she's been doing her best to physically and spiritually transform into an ambush meowbeast for as many sweeps as she's been alive!"

Dave chuckles, drawing a fry from his bag and sticking it in his mouth in lieu of a reply.
Your furious rant about the state of the service industry these days and infuriating trolls that find it funny to jump scare people (just asking to get accidentally decapitated someday) continues as you storm back towards the library. As you walk, the clouded sky gives way to a few drops of rain, which turns into a light drizzle just before you duck through the double wooden doors of the department.

With the rain pattering against the glass windows by your study spot that only intensifies into a roaring deluge, you and Dave end up stuck there all afternoon, so you might as well keep powering through the project work. The towers of reading material and spreadsheet entry punctuated by the odd coffee from the vending machine is no less tedious, but it's at least refreshingly normal after that debacle at the restaurant.

And right now, that's all you need.

Chapter End Notes

Do please tell me if anywhere the flow seems off or if there are any typos. I changed around a lot of stuff, so there mistakes might have slipped in there.

Also, if you haven't noticed, I make up chapter titles as I post, which is why they all suck. I'll probably go back and change them all at some point to not suck.
"Don't tell me you're taking me to a lake in the forest to get in touch with my inner self under the loving embrace of Mother Nature."

Dave sticks his tongue out at you. "Well, no, but I might just do that now just for the hell of it since you've accused me of such frivolous unoriginality."

**Chapter Notes**

Why is the first half of this so shit and the last half at most only 50% as terrible? Why does editing take more time than writing? Some questions will never be answered. At least I'm not posting at 4 in the morning this time. It's great being in a timezone hours ahead of the US, because this way I'm never technically late.

"Look, I'll grant you that from a certain perspective—a really fucking dumb perspective, but one nonetheless—you could interpret that as red-black vacillation, but that doesn't automatically mean the blueblood's going to flip pitch with Homura, their concupiscent chemistry is a flaming trainwreck."

"No, I meant pale, not pitch. Look at episode eight, you can't tell me that's ashen, okay, their auspistice isn't even there, they should be at each other's throat. I mean, they're obviously not morail BFFs or anything, but there's something beyond hate going on, amn't I wrong?"

"That scene has pale undertones, yes, but it was put there specifically to subvert the conciliatory inversion trope. You saw the aftermath, it's not some twisted 'tough pity' thing, she was actually going to cull her. And they're already triangled in the same quadrants with the protagonist, so—"

Your diatribe is cut off by the loud yawn of your respiteblock door swinging open, interrupting your heated argument over the paused episode of Trogodytarum Magimessor. Trailing off, you turn to identify the intruder.

Sollux is standing there there in the doorway, blank stare fixed on where and Dave are huddled on your slumber platform, wrapped in the blanket and your humming husktop between you. You feel the human shift next to you, cocking his head in confusion at the psionic. Not a word has been said yet, but he's definitely catching the raw hostility radiating off the troll.

"Look, I don't know which of your multitude of puppies I apparently kicked, dude," Strider finally remarks, disentangling his body from yours and shuffling out a gap of a few centimeters between you. "So maybe chill it with the death glare?"

Your argument over Trollian weeks ago about the very person sitting next to you is long lost to the annals of your chat history, but now that you think about it, you never actually resolved that
conflict, which might have not been a great idea given how much time you spend with Dave these days. It's honestly surprising that it took so long for this to happen, with how much you've been using this respiteblock as an impromptu hangout lately.

Oh well, no time but the present.

"Dave, my friend Sollux, in case you haven't figured it out already. He lives here." You were about to say "best friend", but chickened out at the last second since, well, you're not sure if you still hold that title—if he still holds that title. How long has it been since you last hung out with him? Fuck, if you're going by that metric, Dave's your best friend. You suppose it's not exactly that difficult when you have literally two friends, but still. The realization gives you a mixture of apprehension and excitement.

And yeah, from the psionic's darkening look, he noticed your slip-up. You wince. Fuck, think of a save.

"Sollux, Dave Strider. Don't tear each others' throat out, I swear to god, and I'm looking at you, Captor. I'm not auspisticbing between my two best friends."

"Your idea of authpitiththm could turn moirailth black, KK," he snorts. His mood hasn't improved any, eyes still boring daggers into the centimeter gap between you and Dave, but fuck this. Who cares about best friends? What even qualifies "best"? You're not wigglers anymore, Sollux, grow the fuck up.

"I'm majoring in Sburbian studies, with a minor in Alternian linguistics," Dave offers. You... actually didn't know that second part, how did you never figure it out? You guess you just forgot that minors were a thing for other people, since you're locked into remedial English. It partially explains his unnatural fluency in Alternian, at least. "Karkat said you do computer science?"

"Computer engineering."

He waits a second for Sollux to elaborate, but decides to just barrel on when nothing comes.

"Not sure what's the difference, but sounds cool. I tried to learn programming once, but didn't really get far into it. I'm good at a lot of other computer stuff though. Music, digital art, all the esoteric permutations of multimedia technology, you know. You want someone to remix your math lecture into a flawless rendition of the Titanic theme song, I'm your guy."

Another expectant pause. You can feel Dave gritting his teeth next to you.

"So, you have, like hobbies? Cool projects? Secret superpowers? Ominous conspiracies? Voices in your head from beyond the mortal plane? I have no idea what I'm talking about. Are you going to say something, or are you just gonna just stand there staring at me like I'm a particularly misshapen cockroach you found in your trash?"

"Do you ever th'ut up?" Ah, shit, now both of them are annoyed. Voices comment? Not the greatest move, Dave. "I'm not sure he's physically capable of doing it, to be honest," you snort, trying to defuse the tension.

Sollux doesn't take the hint. "And what'th up with the douthebag thun'glatheth?"

"These shades are the pinnacle of fashion," Strider scoffs. "How else will people know what a massive prick I am if I don't wear the douchiest glasses I can find?"

"They're a gift from his friend," you interject again. "Don't be an asshole."
"What do you want with KK?"

Okay, yeah. No.

"Oh my god, are you seriously trying to defend my virtue? Is that what this interrogation routine is? I can take care of myself," you groan incredulously. Fuck your life and your shitty blockmate. "Just do us all a favor, fuck off and meddle with your own friends."

"I'm honestly confused as to what you're trying to ask here," Dave remarks.

"Don't play dumb, Th' rider." Sollux steps forward, psionically lifting himself off the ground with a roiling blanket of red and blue energy as he crosses his arms. The static crackle and burning smell makes you flinch, but Dave doesn't twitch a finger at the transparent intimidation tactic. "You literally never talk to anyone else but me. What maketh him so interethng to you? What'th your angle?"

Dave frowns. "Yeah, that is kind of how friendship works, you know. I talk to my friends more than I talk to strangers, what an astonishing discovery. Have you won a Nobel Prize yet? Oh dear, what insidious motives could I be hiding under the guise of structured social interaction?"

He taps his chin, continuing, "Wait, do you think I'm a sexual predator with my eyes on poor, innocent Karkat here? Or—gasp—" He actually says the word itself. "—conciliatory predator? Is that a thing, abusive auspistices running around kidnapping unwary trolls and coercing them into unwilling triads of delicious ashen hate?"

The psionic's left eye twitches.

"Don't worry, these nubby little horns and sulky face are all kinds of adorable, but I wouldn't dream of putting my depraved human fingers on widdle Karkat and infecting him with my blasphemously human cooties." Dave reaches over and squishing your cheeks, sending a furious blush down to your toes. What the fuck is wrong with him? Is this supposed to be convincing to anyone?

You bat his hand away, hissing at him, "What are you doing? Why are we even trying to prove anything? Just tell him to leave us alone!"

"This is his room too," Dave points out in a whisper. Which to be fair, is true.

The sparking and sizzling of Sollux's psionics masks your frantic exchange quite nicely, but he seems to have had enough of the cute banter, because he drops to the ground, shutting off the light show, before storming up to the bed.

"Fuck. Off." Sollux bites out. "I'm onto you, Th'trider. If you want your thecreth to thtay thafe, you're going to back off from Karkat and never thhow your fathe again."

"When have I ever done that?" you sneer.
"Do you want me to light them off for you? TZ-"

"That was not crying, it was barely a few paragraphs, shorter than-"

"What about KN-"

"What do you mean, I broke up with her-"

"-your pale fling with GZ-

"It's not my fault he turned out to be afucking psycho-"

"Gee, KK, it's almost as if the point of moirallegianthe is to pacify-"

"As much as I love getting the latest scoop on your alien love life," Dave cuts through the two of you, raising a hand tentatively. "Do you really want to air your dirty laundry in front of me?"

His voice jolts you back to your senses. He's right, you're embarrassing you both, this whole thing is pointless, but you're not the one doing this. Sollux wants to play hardball? You'll kick the rumpus sphere right through his smug, ugly mug. Extricating yourself from the nest of bedding you've ensconced yourself in, you climb to your feet, narrowing your eyes at the psionic who's leering at you defiantly.

<Well, aren't you a hypocrite,> you growl, jabbing a finger at him. <Like you've ever formed one meaningful connection with another sentient being since you were a wiggler. Keep throwing stones in your glass hive, and maybe it'll distract you from what a sad failure of a troll you are.>

<Thome connection you have here.> Sollux sneers. <Do you even know where this guy came from? When he was born? His family? Birthday? Mother's maiden name? Are you thure you're not just dethperate for attention and clinging to anyone who gives you the time of the night? We all know who's got the fragile ego here.>

<Desperate for attention? You're one to talk. Look at me, 2uch a hot2hot hacker wiith my dii2gu2tiing bees! Remember those viruses you used to send me? What were you even trying to prove? Do you think bragging gets you friends? Study all the algorithms and data structures you like, you'll always be as fake as that shitty movie hacker persona you hide behind.>

The psionic stamps his foot. <How about you? Big bad Threshecutioner with your dumb th'ickles, like they'd let culbait like you get within a mile of a flaythquad ecthept for your thummary ecethecution. You've alwayth been deluthional, and ugly and horrible and utterly incompetent at everything! At least I actually know how to program, you'd probably cut your own nugbone off using a butter knife.>

"Butter-" you start, but a tap on your shoulder cuts you off. "Karkat," Dave says from behind you. You swing around, roaring, "What?"

"Let's go."

No, you want to say, turning back. *I'm going to destroy him so badly his descendant feels phantom pains in their ego. I'm going to rip that smug mutated head of his pissblood shoulders. I'm going to-*

"Dude. Shhh."

Your fists clench and relax on biological instinct as your eyes whip to his mouth and closed teeth. Confusion wars against anger in your chest. What is he doing? He can't just...
Dave's eyes are apologetic behind the shades as he pats you on the back. "Calm your goddamn tits. Both of you need to calm down. Let's step out for a moment and you can continue your catfight later, okay?"

With a start, you realize your palms are bleeding candy-red from where your nails have broken skin. The air's awash with the scent of ozone, invisible energy rippling through the room. Sparks of red and blue are fizzling at the center of the other troll’s forehead as his glowing eyes flare brilliantly behind tinted glasses, and you don't think he's doing it intentionally.

"Fine," you bark, stalking off towards the exit. He's right, you don't have to deal with this. The human moves to follow you, but out of the corner of your eye you see Sollux grab at him.

"Don't you leave, Strider.” he hisses, reaching out again as Dave sidesteps. "I'm not done-" Dave slaps the goldblood's hand away, producing a sting of static discharge, and keeps going.

You can tell from how Sollux tenses and his fingers flicker with light that he's considering making another grab or using his telekinesis, but he won't. Posturing and making noise is one thing; touching a human directly with psychic or psionic powers is a one-way ticket to criminal court. You shoot him a warning glance just to be safe.

As you enter the hallway, you see heads peeking out from rooms all the way down the corridor, looking for the source of the disturbance. Their inquisitive looks scatter at your furious glare.

"Keep going," Dave whispers to you, tugging on your sleeve.

You follow.

You're fuming as you pace around the steel bench that Dave's lodged himself on, outside your dorm building. He's been listening to you rant about your shithead respiteblockmate for the last five minutes, but it's only a matter of time before your well of inventive curses finally runs dry, train of profanity slowing to a stuttering halt.

When you finally run out of words, a few seconds of silence pass before he speaks.

"Are you two... going to be okay?"

You pause in your seven hundredth circuit around the bench.

"No!" you snap in reflex. "Yes! Eventually."

"Eventually."

You roll your eyes. It's not even worth denying, you know it'll happen as mad as you are right now. "He'll give me some half-assed apology, I'll do the same, maybe the other way round depending on who caves first. Then we'll pretend it never happened and bury our problems until the next time one of us gets in the mood to resurrect the issue, and we'll repeat the whole fucking cycle into perpetuity just as it was before you came along."

That came out more acerbic than you intended, but unfortunately it's true. You and Sollux spend a quarter of your time angry at each other, but you always make up.

"Do you do this a lot?"

You tap your feet restlessly. "Sometimes. I don't know what stupid fucker decided to stick us
together in the same room. Oh wait, that was me. I hate myself sometimes. We've been doing this song and dance since we were wiggles, it just used to mostly be over Trollian."

"And it's always this bad?" There's a touch of plaintive concern in Dave's voice that's irking, but you resist the urge to snap at him again.

"This is one of the bad ones," you admit. "I don't know what's gotten into him! Since- no, you've heard enough of this. Sorry I'm unloading all of this on you."

This isn't how it's supposed to work. Is what you want to say. I shouldn't be telling this to you. Not with what we are right now.

"I don't mind," Dave shrugs. "At least I'm expanding my vocabulary of Alternian curses. Though you already do that all the time, just kind of you say anything at all. But—and I can't believe I'm saying this—but is that healthy?"

"Some degree of antagonism is expected between troll friends," you sigh. Lecturing, yes. Lecturing always makes you feel better. You slump into the seat next to him. "'Friends' isn't even the right translation, there's no word in English that correctly maps to <friend>, I've heard 'hatefriend' used, but all that does is the distinction between the troll and human concept, it doesn't explain anything. <Friendship> is about the rapport, not how nice you are to each other. That's just a bonus.

"But sometimes I dunno, maybe we're not cut out for this? If we hadn't known each other since we were two sweeps old, would we really be friends? It's not always like this, his mood swings make it worse, but dealing with Sollux has been just so difficult these months."

You're not even trying to keep your boundaries drawn anymore, you dimly register. Dave's human, he doesn't think of things that way, but you're letting your affections dip beyond the strictly platonic, and that would be a recipe for disaster even if their subject weren't biologically incapable of reciprocating. He's going to catch on eventually, you've forced enough shitty troll TV down his throat, and then you don't know what will happen.

Sadly, you're all out of fucks to give at this point.

"Come on, you don't mean that," Dave says. "You and Sollux are cool."

You scoff. "You've met him for five minutes."

"You talk about him all the time, dude."

"I do?" You lie your head back, staring at the ceiling overhang above you. "Yeah, because he's a slobbering bulgegrubber that leaves his stuff all over the room and doesn't know how to use headphones. I don't know that many people, what do you expect me to talk about?"

Dave picks at his fingers. "Our lecturers? Work? Movies? Contemporary art?"

You don't have an answer to that.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Now, as in right now?"

He nods. You let your head hang as you think.
"I have no idea. I'm not going back in there, can you imagine the awkward silence when when we're both just sitting there? Ignoring each other like wigglers? Just kill me now. What, do you want to keep working on the project?"

Dave gets to his feet. "I thought of somewhere I want to take you."

You eye the human warily. "Where?" you ask. "If it's a secret underground torture chamber, I'm friend-breaking up with you."

He snorts and presses a palm to the gear on his shirt, "You wound me, Karkat. Please, My torture chambers are all legitimate and above-ground, who do you think I am? Government-certified and licensed by the National Torture Association. Come on, it's a surprise."

"Don't tell me you're taking me to a lake in the forest to get in touch with my inner self under the loving embrace of Mother Nature."

Dave sticks his tongue out at you. "Well, no, but I might just do that now just for the hell of it since you've accused me of such frivolous unoriginality."

You sigh. Might as well, it'll take your mind off things.

"Lead the way, Strider."

The white-haired boy takes you through the central campus, down past the river to the end of Madingley and then off the left into the small roads, talking your ear off all the way with a meandering stream of trivia and dubiously veracious anecdotes, until he stops you behind the back of what looks like an old apartment building.

You're looking at a dingy metal door built into the side of the structure, the iron doorframe discolored and rusty, but the hinges and door itself seemingly more recently replaced. The entrance is shielded by the brick perimeter around the block with only about a meter of clearance, so you couldn't really see it from outside, and you suspect that security's related to whatever Dave's about to show you.

"Not really helping to disabuse the 'not a torture chamber' theory," you comment drily.

Dave lets out a short laugh, but doesn't comment otherwise, instead working on jiggling the antique lock open with a silver key. When it finally grinds open, the doorway's a tight fit for the two of you, especially with the old cans and plastic bottles littering the ground that Dave just kicks off further down into a corner, but you manage to squeeze past and through into the small room behind.

The interior is unexpectedly clean and homely, and you immediately pin this as wherever Dave's been sneaking off when he's not with you, and probably where he sleeps half the time as well, because you know for a fact that he barely knows where his college-assigned respiteblock is. Most of the cramped space is taken by a little coffee table with a wooden chair stowed underneath, a miniature sofa against the longer wall, and two tall shelf racks lining the back. A single fluorescent bulb hangs from the ceiling and Dave flicks it on with a switch beside the door, its dim light casting gentle shadows across the room.

The table's covered in a mess of disorganized papers and scrawlings, as well as a half-full mug of brown liquid—coffee? The little glimpses you catch as Dave collects up the sheets on the table seem to indicate something Sburb-related, though you don't recognize anything specific from your courses or from the term project.
Tuning out the rustle of paper, you scan the shelves at the back of the room. The top shelf is populated by a lineup of books, from which you manage to identify *Aspects* and *Five Years of Alternia*. Library copies, from the peeling stickers on the spines. There's a few unmarked leatherbound volumes—personal notes or journals?

The racks underneath, on the other hand, hold quite a few strange gizmos: there's a large pair of black record discs fused concentrically to crimson gears by some kind of weakly luminous white substrate, another duplicate pair of gears but with keyboards (?) grafted to the top, and a broken sword with an bizarre mechanical hilt and protruding spokes lying on the bottom shelf.

"What *is* this place?" you mumble. Fuck, you didn't mean to say that out loud.

Dave flops onto the mini couch, patting the spot next to him. "Feast your gander bulbs on my humble abode. It used to be a store room, but with how many times the building's changed hands in the last few years I'm 90% sure the current owner either forgot or doesn't know this place exists, so I appropriated it for my nefarious super villain base. And I mean the whole structure's pretty much abandoned already, so there's no one around to care."

"It's cozy," you remark. "I can see why you'd ditch your dorm room for this."

You lower yourself to the seat. How long has he been stowing away here? The first term's just six weeks in, but this place feels astonishingly lived-in, from the scuff marks on the hardwood floor under the chair to the lingering scent of copper and sea salt that you've always smelt hanging around Dave. Or maybe it's the other way round, that Dave smells like this place?

"Nah, *that's* just mainly because I don't want to share with a roommate." He shrugs. "I do most of my studying here when I'm not in the libraries."

You return your gaze to the tomes on the wall as he waves at them, taking in the worn-out titles. *Lithostratigraphy of the Skaian meteors. Nanomaterials and the Aging Paradox*. Half of them he's shown you before, most of them for the project, but *High-Energy Physics of Sburbian Metamaterials? Perfect Crystals in Metastable Phases?*

"This stuff is way beyond our course's scope," you note. Is Dave doing other research projects outside of your assigned group work? How much time does he have?

"I *know*, I'm a fucking nerd now. A *humanities* nerd, nonetheless. All my cool guy cred is gone, Karkat. All gone."

Relaxing into the couch—it's a nice couch, so sue you—you just enjoy the soft velvet against your skin for a moment. This is nice. You're glad Dave brought you here, even if it's *really weird* that a college freshman has a secret hideout in an abandoned building off-campus, and this well-furnished too, while you're talking about it.

"Hey," you mutter after a while. "Not to be ungrateful, but what exactly are we doing here?"

Dave snorts next to you. "I have absolutely no clue. I just remembered I've never taken you here before and thought you might use the distraction. There's no plan or anything. I'm not much of a plan person."

Yeah, you know. "Hey, it's an excellent distraction. Consider my cognitive train throughly derailed."

You follow suit as he props his feet up on the table, taking the opportunity to stretch your legs. Wiggling his toes under the sneakers, Dave says, "I have my laptop here. We could finish the
Your stomach growls, interrupting his suggestion.

"That’s my digestion bladder," you clarify before he has the opportunity to get confused. "It’s a sound trolls make when-"

"I know, humans do that too." Dave laughs. Huh, really? "It was literally just lunchtime, dude. How are you hungry already?"

You cross your arms, scowling irritably. "I only had a slice of toast. My tutor meeting overran, didn't have time for anything more."

"You should have told me!" The human hits you in the arm, removing his legs from its elevated emplacement. "I'll get you something to eat. Gimme a second."

Grabbing his shoulder as he makes to get up, you try to say, "You don't have to-"

"Hospitality, Karkat. My Airbnb ratings, can't let them fall any lower—I'm already serving out of an abandoned hole in the wall. And I need to clean out my..."

Dave leans over you, silencing any further protestations, and pulls out a drawer from the cabinet beside you. Peering over, you catch a glimpse of a clutter of glossy multicolored polyhedrons before the human slams it shut and withdraws another one.

At first it seems to be another collection of the plastic shapes, but then he reaches farther in, flattening his body until his midriff is grazing your lap to get enough elbow room, and from somewhere deep in there procures a metal tin wrapped in cling film. As he lifts it out and onto the table, you get your first proper look at the brown stuff in it, and you momentarily gape.

Dave peels the film off the top, and it comes away with fluid sticking to it in greasy patches. It's fucking grubloaf. Real grubloaf with Alternian beefgrub and collagen flour, not the shitty imitation meat brick you told him about before. The pale mucous on top glistens in the warm light, and you can tell it's even the right consistency, just slimy enough to for the texture but not gelled into clumps.

You put your finger to the edge of the tub. To your surprise, it's warm to the touch.

"Where the fuck did you get this?" you mutter. "It looks... fresh."

Putting aside the disturbing authenticity of the dish, you can't just make grubloaf on Earth in the first place. Millions of years of selective breeding on top of billions of evolution have made Alternian fauna too invasive to safely breed on younger planets, so as you've said before, to get the requisite ingredients you need to import across a thousand light-years of interstellar space, which is not only ludicrously expensive in the first place, but taxed to hell and back on by Alternian and human authorities.

All of that means that nobody indulges in the real stuff unless you're a highblood asshole with too much money to burn, and even then you're probably ordering it at an offensively expensive novelty restaurant, and not home cooked in ratty metal molds.

"You just had this sitting around in your drawer? I can't eat this. How much did it cost? Where'd you get this from?" you demand, fending Dave off as he pushes the knife and fork he procured from nowhere into your hands.
"Nothing, dude. Got it from a friend some time ago. You'll probably appreciate it more than me anyway. Not that much of a fan of the whole creepy crawlies aesthetic, even if the umami in troll beef is goddamn heavenly. Seriously, how do trolls do it? Is it some species of witchcraft? Sacrifices to the horrorterrors?"

It's like you've stepped into an episode of the Trolllight Zone, and when you turn your head you'll be in an alternate universe where rust is the highest caste, culling's been redefined to getting hugs and kisses from the Condesce herself, and interstellar trade's been revolutionized by the advent of transgalactic telepads. The impossibility of what's sitting in front of you feels like someone's hacked into the command console of reality and spawned in an item supposed to be restricted for another play area.

But thinking over Dave's words, they do makes sense, if just barely. If he somehow knows a troll with the money to ferry their way between Earth and Alternia, if they for some brainless reason decided food was an appropriate gift to bring on a month-long journey, and if the human's oblivious enough to leave an expensive, perishable present rotting away in a corner instead of eating, or hell, selling it.

But you've long learned to stop questioning the oddities of Dave Strider by now. That way lies nothing but insanity. The loaf wouldn't even get taxed, you rationalize in your head; you remember reading somewhere that the Alternian food black market is mostly fed by unwitting tourists swindled right off the spaceport, and Jesus fuck that sounds really goddamn stupid now that you say it out loud in your head.

"Holy shit, Karkat, you look like you want to fuck that thing. Just eat the grubloaf."

You give him another skeptical look. "Do you really-"

"Just eat it."

"I-"

"Doo iiitt."

"Fine!" you growl, stabbing in with your knife. The protein membrane sinks briefly before rupturing under the sharp edge, thick scent of insectoid doughspunge bursting out the rift. You lever a square out of the tin, crumbs scattering before you can stop yourself, and raise it to your parted lips.

Flavor explodes in your mouth as you bite down, the savory kick and slight tang of Carathenian spice overloading your senses all at once. You bask in the salty-bittery aftertaste as a spindly leg crunches under your molars, juice trickling warmly down your tongue. Fuck, it's been so long, you almost forgot what this was like. Real food designed for troll taste buds.

There's a hint of Durthag root and black petal, which catches you by surprise. That's not Imperial Standard: you can count the number of times you've tasted this exact blend on one hand, and it takes you but a second to recall where—no, who from. It almost stops you in your tracks.

You remember the words like the day you received them in the mail, scrawled on a page of dried barkpulp: I Have Recently Been Experimenting With Baking Using Certain Plants Native To The Oasis Around My Hive And It Is My First Attempt But These Are Some Of My Initial Results. I Would Ask For Your Opinion But I Know You Will Be Unable To Resist Offering It Regardless So I Shall Not Bother. You remember un_wraping the foil on the package, quizzically smelling the tin and kicking your lusus’ inquiring pincers away from the container, accidentally burning the first
one in your irradiative heater...

With a start, you realize you've been frozen, fork in your mouth, for quite a while now. Dave seems vaguely alarmed by your response (or lack thereof), fingers frozen in the air above the table he was restlessly tapping just a moment ago. You cough, throat choked with unbidden nostalgia and half-chewed grubloaf.

"Are you okay?" Dave's throws out hesitantly.

This is stupid. It's just a fucking cake. Angrily wiping a trickle of sauce from the corner of your lip with the back of a hand, you try to bat away Dave's reaching hand with the other.

"Get off me, you moron," you snap at him, trying to collect your wits. "It just reminded me of an old friend's recipe. She used to send me her baking, before..."

She told you she got the idea from a website, so obviously a bunch of other trolls have the same recipe, but you've only ever associated it with her, and now that you're finally tasting it from another's hands for once, it's another bittersweet reminder of the home you lost.

"Oh," Dave says quietly. "I'm so sorry. Who..."

You stare blankly at him for a moment, and then it clicks. "She's not dead, you festering ignoramus," you half-snort, half-laugh. "I just left her behind on my piece of shit home planet. So I guess it's almost the same thing, but she's fine. Kanaya, I told you about her."

The boy's face seems stuck halfway between embarrassment and apology now, and another look at him makes you crack up for real. He takes it in good humor, though, rubbing the bridge of his nose sheepishly. "Come on, Karkat, you're the one that made it sound like there's a terminal disease and crying and tearful goodbyes involved, don't blame me for trying to be sensitive for once. Do you know how hard that is for me? The emotional sacrifices I made for this gesture you so recklessly squandered?"

You dig into the cake grubloaf instead of replying, chewing on baked gristle. You'll be damned if you don't do your best to enjoy this, you can reminisce sometime else. Who knows when you'll get another chance like this? "Thanks," you finally remember to say between bites. "I mean it. This is really great. I don't know how to pay you back for this."

He seems unsure how to respond to your sudden bout of sincerity, flickering between feigned nonchalance and an uncharacteristically dopey smile that looks good on him, just out of how honestly expressive it is. You can't help but smile back. Ugh, the flips of pity in your chest aren't even worth denying, you just fucking love this smug asshole.

"Hey, you deserve nice things too," he tells you, a mild look of panic squirming under his face, like it's news that Dave Strider is allergic to emotions. "Aren't table manners a thing on trollworld?" he tries to distract.

You sigh, lowering the tin from your mouth where you were shovelling grubloaf into your mouth. You shoot him an annoyed look. "I'm trying not to get even more crumbs all over your stuff. Oh, do you want some?" you ask, tilting the non-stabby end of the fork towards him as it strikes you that you're not being a very good guest. "Hey, don't be shy. It's yours."

"Eh," he waves off. "Seeing you canines rending through bug entrails would have ruined my nonexistent appetite even if I had one. As I said, you'll appreciate it better than me."

You set the tin on the table anyway, laying the cutlery on top. Not just to be polite; you're actually
mostly full now, and grubloaf isn't supposed to be a main course in the first place, and definitely not an entire canister for one person. Maybe he can wrap it up again if he needs to—you still don't know how he got it to stay that fresh all this time.

"So was that what you brought me here for?" you ask, reclining into the soft back of the couch. "Gourmet dining and check out your illegally occupied residence?"

Dave lies back with you, staring forward into space as he puts his feet back up. "Well, yeah. Not much to do here. It's like a bonus level, dude, post-credits scene in the Dave Strider friend sim. No content, just Easter eggs. I mean we could also, like, talk about your shitty friendships, I guess. If you want."

"Hey, only I get call my friendships shitty," you warn him, another smile tugging at your lips. "Talk, huh? Watch what you say to a troll, who knows how they might take it?"

Shit, was that too on-the-nose?

You play it off by throwing another casual look around. Bonus level, huh. Your eyes skim over all the racks of yellowing books, inscrutable devices packing the walls, dim light on a scratched-out table. Drawers of paper and colored polyhedrons and bizarrely well-preserved food. He said it jokingly, but there's always a grain of truth under his layers of defensive humor. Showing you this is a gesture of trust; it's not just a secret rumpusblock, it's his, all so Dave, from the irreverent toys to embarrassing nerdy library collection, cluttered surfaces and well-worn furnishings and all.

"Talk," Dave repeats. "I know exactly what I'm saying. Take it as you like."

His words slip past your mental fingers, tumbling uncomprehended for a split second before you catch up again, parsing them once and twice and thrice until you're absolutely sure you heard him right. There's no doubt what he's implying, Dave's not that oblivious. Your head snaps around, catching his gaze.

His ocular shields might as well be transparent under this light, and you can see the red irises flitting nervously behind the dark lenses. Your own eyes are reflected back at you, black cores on lucid amber, and you can only infer what's running through his mind, but it's enough.

Before you know it you're tilting forwards hesitantly, shaky hands reaching up without your conscious input. He twitches like from an invisible electric shock, and after a split second leans into the motion as well.

Your palm hovers over Dave's cheek, and your internal screaming escalates to new heights, half of you howling wait, the other half do it. You already know which you're going to choose.

And then you pap him.

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry, we'll get back to our scheduled dose of plot™ next week. Unless you're here for the shipping, in which no of course not this story is 20 (which is an estimate subject to change, by the way) chapters of slice of life what are you talking about you didn't read that
In all seriousness, I'm hoping to keep a balance of plot and character stuff (and hopefully tie them together in a meaningful way). Note that this isn't the endgame of the Dave Strider/Karkat Vantas tag; while I'm trying to keep the gratuitous angst and contrived misunderstandings minimized, there is more to come than "and then they smooched/shooshpapped the end".

On the same note, there's actually tidbits of plot scattered through this one, and a lot of things that could be speculated on. Most are obvious, but there are a few things in particular I'd be highly impressed if anyone catches/infers because there's too little to go off of.
Chapter Summary

"If you're not up to sharing your tentacle vore fetish or whatever, fine! Because I'm a mature person and I know how to take no for an answer! My capacity to handle verbal negation is light years beyond your mortal mind's ability to comprehend! That's how fucking okay I am!"

Chapter Notes

I've reworked the titles to be Aspect themed. Very original, I know, I'm sure nobody has ever done the same thing before (I didn't actually check). What do I do when I get past 12 chapters? Not a damn clue.

Also notice that planning has finally come through, and for once I'm not posting this past midnight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dave blinks as your palm glances off his face, a flabbergasted look spreading over him. His head's frozen in place, eyes staring straight ahead.

You swallow and scoot away as you avert your gaze, trying to gauge his reaction out of the edge of your vision. His features contort from stunned shock to bewilderment to worry, and in the meantime you feel like bashing your own head in with the next blunt object you can locate because what the fuck were you thinking!?!?

You had to sit through an entire two-hour lecture on precisely this. You don't pap a human. They aren't wired for it. Humans don't even have a pale quadrant.

But he said-

Yes, he said. Dave was practically flashing diamond eyes at you across the couch, whispering sweet nothings into your auricular sponges, but whatever fucked up game the two of you are playing at here, facts are he's not a troll.

The silence stretches on, and now the human's snapped back to his blank mask, stone walls in place before you can blink, and that feels far worse than any disgust or fury could be. The endorphin high's draining out of you together as your momentary lapse in common sense gives way to painful self-consciousness, and the fierce jackhammering of your agitated blood pusher's twisted up into a gnarled knot of frustration and regret and unbearable doubt.

You didn't read that wrong, did you? You know you didn't read that wrong.

"Uh. Shit," you hear him say. The apologetic defeat in those two words are a stab to the chest. "I didn't mean to..."
"To what?"

Dave doesn't answer.

"Did you or did you not mean what you said?" you growl. "Are you just fucking with me? Is that what this is, some sick cross-species social experiment?"

This is when he's supposed to say something like "No, Karkat, this is all a tragic misunderstanding! I was simply struck speechless by your impeccable papping technique! Let's pile passionately right here as it cuts to black!" But putting aside the biological improbability of half those things, what tumbles out of Dave's mouth next baffles even your dirt-poor expectations.

"Hey, I'm up for some cross-species experimentation," he blurts out automatically, before pure horror envelops him as he processes what he just said. "Wait, fuck, that's not what I meant to say."

You bury your face in your hands, not sure if you want to laugh or scream.

"Karkat," Dave says, grabbing your hand tight. "I didn't... This is real, okay?Fuck labels, I care about you, you're my best friend, you're literally my favorite person in the world. It's you. You're awesome. You make me happy. The details aren't important."

The "but" is right there, just hovering out of reach. You clench your fists.

"I get it," you say brusquely. "You don't need a moirail, I could be your best goddamn friend, your platonic fucking soulmate, but that niche doesn't exist in your social context, I'm aware of all that. I'm not just braying up the wrong frond nub, I'm not even on the right planet."

"That- this is coming out this wrong," Dave trips out. "If it were just that, I'd diamond this shit up in heartbeat. I'd pet the living drool out of you, even do the exclusivity thing if it's how it needs to be, sign over my Strider manpain privileges forever."

"So what's the problem?" you hiss as he pries your fist open and laces his fingers through yours. You hate how your heartbeat accelerates at the contact, like it hasn't gotten the fucking memo that happy fun time is canceled. For the eminent foreseeable future, it seems. "What are you trying to say?"

What I'm saying— I'm saying that humans only have one type of romance," Dave forces the words out like he's pulling teeth. "I can't keep this strictly conciliatory, that's what I'm getting at. The flush flirting wasn't just a running gag, I-"

Is that it? Is that all it is?

"I don't care about that!" you lash out. He rears back, surprise and hurt in his eyes, and you immediately amend, "We can work with that. Red vacillation as miserably vanilla as you can get, when has it ever stopped anyone? It's not like we're not Troll Romeoh and Julliet here."

"This isn't vacillation, Karkat, you know that. I'm never going to settle into a quadrant. It's just not possible," Dave says. His tone is soft and understanding, but that's somehow worse than frustration, because at least then you would be actually arguing. This just feels like the human's humoring your desperate ass. "We'd just be Eridan and Feferi 2.0, and you're the one that's always moaning about them."

"Don't make this a species thing, Dave," you growl. "Tegiri and Sanza's sickeningly cute matespiritship's working out just fine, and Google it, human-troll moirallegiances exist."
"I don't want to make this just one or the other," Dave says, tugging at you.

You throw your hands in the air. "So what? You want to just stay in this nebulously undefined limbo of unresolved red tension? Schrödinger's quadrant, you can fabricate whatever reality you like as long as we don't poke it with a stick or look too hard?" Belatedly, you realize that that is probably precisely what Dave wants. "I can't fucking believe it. Look, we can be human partners, 'boyfriends' or whatever. That good enough for you?"

Just say yes, stop being an obstinate grubfucker.

"You don't even feel that way about me," he snorts with a hint of despondence. "Flush, I mean."

"How do you know until we've tried? Maybe I am," you retort, but the words come out unconvincing even to your own ears. You try imagining it, your lips against Dave's, human fingers curling under your ribs, the heated friction of grey skin against white—it rails against your instincts, the quadrant lines you've drawn in your head, and while it's not entirely disgust, you don't know what to make of the soup of conflicting emotions welling in your gut. You squeeze your eyes shut.

"I don't believe you," Dave states. You flinch at the direct callout, and have to stop yourself from immediately hurling back in retaliation. This isn't where you wanted this to go. You thought you'd be burying yourself in a newly minted moirail at this point, not reexamining the social strictures of troll culture. You're not prepared for this.

"And—" Dave hesitates briefly before powering on. "—that's not all. You heard what Sollux said."

No, in fact, you don't remember. What the fuck is he talking about?

"I'm keeping things from you. Important things. I don't think saying that they'd change everything is an exaggeration in the slightest. You don't know the first thing about who—what I am, but you know I could probably write half your biography by now? Whatever weirdass dynamic's going on between us, it's not balanced."

He's right, you realize with a sinking feeling. You could fill books on Dave's likes and dislikes and moods and personalities, the quirks and idiosyncrasies you've learned to love over long afternoons, but as much as you scramble to come up with something, anything, his past is still as much of an impenetrable black box as the day you met him save a few enigmatic references to friends and siblings you've never even seen pictures of.

But what that means is that you're a shit friend and proto-moirail, yet it sounds like he thinks he's the problem.

"I'm not sure I can, that's the issue," he continues. You get the sense that he's less talking to you as much as trying to justify something, whatever it is, to himself. "I don't know if it's right, or hell, even safe to dump all of this on you, it's like kicking a puppy, except my foot's a sledgehammer of cosmological recontextualization and the puppy's your internal paradigm of selfhood. I mean, we joke about your life being a disaster now, but—"

"The fuck are you talking about? What, are you secretly running from the law or something?" you demand, cutting through Dave's circular waffling. His excessively melodramatic narration is only making you more confused. "Or an undercover investigarrote? On a quest to uncover the shocking truth behind your parents' death and avenge their murderers? Got a stalker ex-matesprit trying to swing pitch? Don't tell me you're a rainbow drinker in a vicious feud with a pack of feral lupine polyshifters."
Dave makes a sound of frustration. "This isn't... Look, the specifics don't matter. It's a matter of informed consent, okay?"

A seed of unease has wormed its way into the back of your throat. Rejection you can handle fine: you'll be whining and bitching all the way down, yes, but you'll survive. You've done this before. You're not going to be the spurned side character pirouetting off the metaphorical handle in a desperate bid for attention when the subject of your affections tries to break it off.

This, though—this sounds like something bigger. No, you're starting to feel like the clueless token rustblood in a paranormal thriller that gets ganked offscreen for cheap tension, or perhaps, you reflect somewhat deprecatingly, the designated love interest kept in the dark to "keep them safe" who spends half the runtime screaming and running away from things. Which would make Dave the sarcastic hero with the troubled past, too cool for emotions until said love interest eventually teases him out of his shell...

...Okay, this line of thought is starting to make you uncomfortable. Your brain's still laboring to process this shitty anticlimax of what you thought was a romantic moment. It doesn't need more mixed signals from your overactive subconscious.

Dave kept going while you were daydreaming about cinematographic analogies. "Don't be such a-" He gestures wildly, grasping for words. "-dickweed! The sarcasm isn't helping. This isn't fun for me either."

"You're the one making everything so nookscrapingly complicated," you growl. Perhaps it's just wishful thinking, but it's starting to seem like was the real issue all along. "We both feel pae for each other. Let's do something about that. The rest is details, we can pore over the fine text later."

"This isn't the mid-season finale of <Graveyard Spades>, Karkat," he snaps at you. "'Go with your heart and fuck the consequences' isn't a life strategy conducive to continued survival in real life. Do you think everything will go our way just because we want them to? We can ride off into the sunset shooshpapping each other in the worst demonstration of horseback etiquette to ever grace this planet?"

"So tell me what's going on!" you snarl. "Or not! I'm not blind, I knew there was something up with Creepy Shades Dude the first time I laid my gander bulbs on you. Guess what? I don't give a fuck! So what if your spooky backstory is a state secret? The only one playing this masturbatory game of evasion and self-flagellating angst is you! Dave Strider wins! Get your gold medal now!"

Your outburst manages to make Dave flinch, but as viscerally satisfying it is, the way his expression hardens into quiet resolve is less so. The human tilts away from you and falls silent, empty gaze pinned on the floor with his arms crossed. You don't know what you said to elicit the sudden change in his demeanor, but it evidently struck a nerve somewhere.

You're not going to be the first to break the silence, though. Turning away yourself, you leave yourself to stew in your thoughts. He's not the only one who can play this game. Your gaze trails over the shelves of books and junk, and you feel a twinge of guilt for desecrating the space with this freshly precipitated shitstorm, even if it's half Dave's fault. As you look at the forgotten tin of grubloaf on the table, you wonder if you'll ever get the chance to come here again. Would the memories be too awkward, or will you just have a laugh about what a bunch of idiots you were?

Goddammit, this is such bullshit. You eye the door, idly considering making a run for it before the situation devolves any further, but no, that would just make it worse for Future Karkat—and Future Karkat really doesn't need more ammo with how much self-hate fuel this metaphorical automotive collision's already got stockpiled for the next seven sweeps. You can already hear the insufferable
asshole with his smug twenty-twenty hindsight ranting to himself about present you's breathtaking incompetence. Motherfucker.

What is Dave's problem, anyway? Realistically speaking, you mean, not through the satirical lens of "gritty urban fantasy protagonist". Crippling debt? No, that's just the average college student. Criminal background? Human "family" issues? You know that for all his cool and collected demeanor, Dave isn't that much better-adjusted than you: he just hides it better. Now you're regretting not prying more into his life, because you think you recall something about an older brother between his aimless ramblings, but far from enough to put together anything definitive.

Is it related to his pigmentation? You know Earth still has a legacy caste system based on skin color, and his is abnormally light, even to your inexperienced eye. But no, you decide, he's never indicated anything but indifference regarding whatever that is, not like you are with... your... blood.

...Which you still haven't told him about.

Why haven't you? It doesn't really matter anymore, not like it did on Alternia, but old habits die hard. You've just been letting him assume you're burgundy, dancing around the specifics every time it comes up in conversation, though you'd still give it good odds that he's figured it out anyway because Dave alternates between being unbelievably oblivious and irritatingly perceptive whenever it suits him. It doesn't change the facts, though.

That is, that you're a fucking hypocrite.

It's not the same thing, you know. For one, you're not leveraging your blood status to papblock yourself in an pointless exercise of emotional masochism, but also, it's not important. Dave wouldn't care. Most of the population of this planet wouldn't care. You're hiding it for purely fabricated selfish reasons, clinging to a long-irrelevant cultural artifact like a wiggler to its dead lusus. So who are you to yell at Dave for keeping secrets with (probably) legitimate cause?

Does that give him the right to lead you on a wild honkfowl chase through the quadrants and ditch you at the last second to go home and stroke his isolation complex? Fuck no, but it does mean that in this game of infantile stop-being-stutid-no-u, you have a lot less high ground to yell from than you imagined.

Whatever, fine. The spontaneous lunacy of your few-minutes-ago self is a thing of the past, and Dave's still sulking like an obstinate wiggler, so it's up to you to drag this train back on its rails. He doesn't want to be moirails (matesprits? fuck if you know), that's his choice. You can't make him do anything, so all that's left is a matter of playing this conversation out to its foregone conclusion, Dave's predictable plea to keep being friends, your equally inevitable acquiescence to the compromise, and then you can go home and yell at idiots on the Internet until you feel wrung-out enough to angrily cry yourself to sleep.

So just ignore the aching pit in your thoracic cavity, push down the churning nausea in your digestion bladder, and open your mouth to speak.

Then of course Dave Strider beats you to the punch.

"I'll tell you," he says abruptly.

Words stall in your mouth. "Huh?" you say intelligently.

"You told me to cut the bullshit, that's what I'm doing. I'll warn you in advance that it's heavy shit —listing the trigger warnings would take until the Green Sun sputters out and the ravenous black
hole borne of its explosive demise swallows all of reality—but you're right. You should know. Frankly, I should have done this sooner."

What? You were about to be the bigger troll and let it go, and now he's just going to undercut you like that? You know it's a stupid thing to get pissed over, but getting to this point took an entire sixty seconds of furious introspection and painful personal epiphanies, and fuck you to crotch-blistering hell if you're letting that go to waste.

"Hold on for one dicksquatting second," you bark, a bit louder than you intended. "What happened to 'it's not safe'?!"

"Well, what happened to 'just tell me'!?" Dave scowls back, confused. "I thought this was what you wanted!"

"I changed my mind!" you snap back. "I mean, no, I didn't change my mind, I still want to know, but I'm respecting your decision! If you're not up to sharing your tentacle vore fetish or whatever, fine! Because I'm a mature person and I know how to take no for an answer! My capacity to handle verbal negation is light years beyond your mortal mind's ability to comprehend! That's how fucking okay I am!"

Why did you say that? This is such a terrible decision. You're already categorically certain that you'll regret this. This is exactly how ludicrously ill-timed misunderstandings are created, and you being you, those misunderstandings will likely involve less wacky pratfalls and more violent bodily mutilation and irrevocably ruined relationships. That's how you'll meet your end, your throat slit in a back alley through some convoluted chain of coincidences stemming from this moment's stubborn refusal to suck up your big boy ego.

"What are you even talking about?" Dave's yelling now as well, clearly having no idea what's going on now. Neither do you. "Do you or do you not want to hear this?"

"Yes!" you growl. "But not as fucking collateral, Dave! Not as the last tickbox in your Steps To Fucking Karkat Vantas checklist! I'm not blackmailing you for information, I only want it if you want to tell me."

There, you managed to pull off the Trollympic-level mental gymnastics to twist that mind-boggling display of social aptitude into something somewhat resembling logical sense. You try to control the furious thumping of your pump biscuit as you wait for him to respond, hoping you didn't fuck everything up; this is it. Your continued premium membership and possible promotion in the Dave Strider rainbow rumpus fun club hinges on the next few seconds.

"I do want to," he finally says, spiking a jolt of relief through you. "I trust you. I always trusted you, this was never about that. It was just always this whole thing hanging around like an ominous hot air balloon waiting to run out of fuel and come collapsing down on our heads, and I didn't know how to break it to you, but it had to happen eventually. Has to happen, now. I don't want this as a wedge between us. Full disclosure, I swear."

You didn't think you could be surprised any more at this point, but you are, an unexpected surge of effervescent warmth filling you as he speaks. Dave trusts you. It's not that you thought he didn't, but to hear it out loud, spoken without an ounce of irony—You know how much Dave hates relying on others, how he despises being vulnerable.

Those few words tell you more than any love confession or physical act of affection ever could, and it's all the confirmation you need to know that this tangled web of red the two of you have caught yourselves in isn't just a product of desperate, lonely minds. There were a few speed bumps,
maybe, just maybe, this is going to work out.


Jesus, Karkat. Can't you come up with something better than "I appreciate this"?

"Okay," he repeats after you. "So..."

Dave trails off. You fidget in place, folding your legs up as you turn to face him proper. The human's looking down, blood-red eyes visible from above his sunglasses, moving from side to side as he licks his lips tentatively. Already regretting his decision, or just composing his words for the big reveal?

The answer to the question will never be known, because then you're interrupted by the warbling scream of your palmhusk's call shouter, the startle almost knocking you off the couch. You fumble to grab it of the table before it vibrates off the uneven plane, and you only catch a brief glimpse the caller ID for a fraction of a second before it cuts out, the screen going black again. Sollux Captor.

You look up, and Dave's staring at you, eyes wide and questioning. Fuck, of course, of all the times to leave it not on silent-

"Take it," he says.

Once you unlock your device, you're bombarded by a swarm of notifications crowding the top of your screen. A call isn't all you missed, you realize: the goldblood's been messaging you for the last hour, twelve unread messages from twinArmageddons blinking in the corner. Did he call you just to force you to respond? What the hell could be so urgent?

"Gimme a moment," you mutter as you open up Trollian and scroll to the top of the unread logs.

The initial annoyance and confusion that hits you as you skim the first few lines transition into gut-wrenching apprehension and genuine alarm as you read on. Before you know it, you're already moving to pocket your wallet and keys and climbing to your feet, earlier thoughts scattered to the wind.

A human hand grabs your wrist, stopping you in your tracks. "What's wrong?"

You angle your phone screen at Dave, watching his expression darken as he translates the Alternian characters in his mind. The human glances back up at you once he's finished.

"I'm coming with you," he states.

"No!" blurs out of your mouth. Bad idea. Worst idea. "Whatever catastrophe he's stuck himself in again, he won't be happy to see you. I'll handle it. Let's finish this later."

"But."

"If you want to," you add, knowing fully well that's not what he's trying to say. "Gotta bolt. See you tomorrow."

You stumble over a table leg in your haste to escape, the door opening to your push with surprising ease. You're forced to shield your eyes as the orange sunset pools into the room, stepping into the light before your pupils have time to adjust. Dave's right behind you, holding the door as you dart your eyes around for the way out.
He points at the way you came from and you dash off, distantly aware of the receding figure behind you shouting something you can't hear. You dial Sollux's number. He's not picking up. Half of your mind is trying to map the way back to Washington campus, sketching the city out in your head, while the other half is still stuck on the other troll's message, struggling to parse the context behind the words. So preoccupied in your thoughts, you're almost run over by a scuttlebuggy crossing the street. You ignore the angry honking as you pick yourself back up and keep going.

Above everything, one thought runs through your mind.

*What the hell is going on?*

---

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

TA: iim 2orry. ii 2houldn't have 2aid all that.
TA: but ii had rea2on2.
TA: real one2. there2 thii2 you need two know about 2triider. he2 not a2 iinnocuous a2 he look2 and he already look2 really gru2kuiiing 2u2piciiou2 iin the fiir2t place 2o that2 2ayiing 2omethii2ng.
TA: iim not maki2ii2 all thii2 ju2t becau2e iim a jealou2 2hiit.
TA: ii have real proof ii ju2t diidnt want to 2how my hand when he wa2 there.

---

twinArmageddons [TA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

TA: karkat ii need to 2ee you riight now.
TA: iim 2eriou2 thii2 i2 really ii2nt a game.

---

twinArmageddons [TA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

TA: plea2e ju2t do iiit.
TA: iim not joki2ng thii2 ii2nt a game.

---

twinArmageddons [TA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

TA: karkat where are you hurri2

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully nobody's too upset for the sudden turnaround/tone shift from last chapter, but it was always the plan, and I think the rationale behind that characters' actions (most of them) is sound. And they make up if not for the gratuitious plot interrupt at the end anyway (plot contrivances, bad writing, blah blah, I know), so don't worry, I'm
not going to drag this out too long.

Next chapter: Plot! Intrigue! Things!
Chapter Summary

If you wanted to make a run for it, this moment of distraction would be the time to make your move. Turn the tables, grab the weapon, abscond as fast as you can.

You're not suicidal, so you don't.

Chapter Notes

These more action-oriented chapters have been proving easier to edit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Worst-case scenarios flit through your imagination as you approach the metal gate leading to the alley behind your residential block. An attack? kidnapping? Falling out the window?

The lock unlatches with a click, little LED on the keypad turning green as it recognizes your student keycard. Slipping through the small gap, you blink your eyes, letting your night vision kick in as you take in the dark stretch of asphalt before you.

You check your palmhusk nervously. You've been calling Sollux all the way here, but he hasn't responded once. Whatever it was, you pray you're not too late. If he's in danger he could call the human police, right? And it's not like you or him have particularly pissed off anyone recently, as far as you're aware.

...The run-in you and Dave had with the highbloods at the restaurant last week occurs to you. No way, even the most violet of assholes wouldn't be vain enough to really call a hit out on you over that.

<Karkat Vantas?> a voice startles you from behind, and you spin around, almost falling on your ass like an idiot. By the time the moment of disorientation's past, the approaching tall figure has resolved into the form of a female troll. Short, hooked horns, a burgundy sign on a dark coat. You don't immediately recognize her, but the face is vaguely familiar, so you're reasonably sure she's a fellow student?

You nod cautiously.

She produces a choked laugh of relief, tension bleeding from her shoulders. <Thank god you're here. Sollux is in trouble, we need to move fast. Follow me,> she says, beckoning you with a hand as she steps back. Before you can respond she's already turning around, headed towards the white van in the yard you'd passed earlier without a second glance.

<Wait!> you call out, taking a few steps before stalling. <I have no idea who you are. What happened? What the fuck's going on? Where's Sollux?> You swear, if he's gotten himself wrapped up in some crazy conspiracy again...
The rustblood pivots 180º on her heel and stalks back towards you, irritation apparent in her gait. <We don't have time for this.> she hisses, grabbing your arm and tugging you towards her with unexpected strength. You resist, prying at the iron grip digging into your forearm as you hiss through your teeth. <Just trust me for a second.> she insists.

<Hold on->

She ignores your protests, and you're no match for her strength, barely slowing her down as she stalks towards the vehicle. Why does she even have a van? The troll’s tall, you notice now that she’s up close to you. Taller than any other adolescent you’ve seen. Not adult tall, but still enough to twig the primal warning bells in your mind. Something's not adding up.

<How do I know I can trust you?> you shout. Your raised voice finally elicits a reaction, but not the one you were hoping for. The stranger jerks you up close with one hard motion, then in the blink of an eye her arm’s around your neck and crushed against your windpipe as you flail in panic, struggling to draw breath. Before you can formulate a response, something sharp digs into your side and you're forced to freeze.

<Don't make a sound.> she whispers into your ear amidst your internal narration of oh fuck oh fuck oh motherfucking fuck. <I'm going to let go.>

The chokehold loosens a smidge and you can breathe again, but the acute pressure of the blade jabbing against your body deepens, sending a chill down your spine. You have to resist the urge to jerk and try to break away despite the flight instincts screaming at you to make a run for it. Whoever this person is, she's most definitely going to take offense to that. Offense most likely involving your grisly murder and/or mutilation.

Keeping your body absolutely still, you give a nervous nod of assent. The stranger— kidnapper, you relabel in your head, because you're now pretty certain that's what's happening here—slowly retracts her arm, grip relocating to your shoulder and the weapon moving to your lower back. Just enough leverage to hold you still and plunge the knife through you the moment you do something wrong. It's already digging into you so hard you're afraid you'll die if you so much as twitch.

Troll skin is incredibly tough from millions of sweeps of guided evolution, but the tissue underneath the keratinous matrix? Not as much. What that means is that if or when the pressure rises to the point of piercing skin, the weight behind the blade will be more than enough to continue cleaving straight through your squishy flesh and gut you like an oinkbeast. You can make a shallow cut, but there's no such thing as a shallow stab.

In other words, if she breaks skin, you can only hope her weapon's short enough to not hit too many of your major organs. They're only redundant up to a point.

<Act natural.> she whispers as she start walking, pushing you along.

You glance around, hoping for someone to see what's happening and maybe call a drone—the police—but there's not a soul in sight. It's an unused lot after dark, and you know from experience that the only windows overseeing it perpetually shuttered and the rooms probably abandoned, which you now realize makes this the prime setting for a troll heist. This was planned. She knew you would be here, she knew you by name, lured you here with...

Fuck, does this mean they have Sollux? He'd never let his devices get compromised digitally, so if this person has been talking to you through Sollux's Trollian, they must have interrogated the password out of him. He's probably tied up in a basement, or— shit, is he already dead in a dumpster? The mental imagery of gold blood draining from the slit throat of a familiar twinhorned
corpse is starting to make you queasy.

No, you can't believe that. You refuse. Whatever's going on, they obviously want you alive. You don't know what for, but if that weren't true, you'd be dead right now. Unless you're the target and Sollux was just bait, in which case...

You force yourself to stop thinking about it. It's not productive, you need to figure a way out of this jam.

The rustblood maneuvers you to the back of her van and pins you against one of the doors with the knife, opening the other with her free hand. If you wanted to make a run for it, this moment of distraction would be the time to make your move. Turn the tables, grab the weapon, abscond as fast as you can.

You're not suicidal, so you don't.

The opportunity passes, and next thing you know, you're being roughly shoved up and into the interior of the vehicle. As you expected, it's not boxed of plush toys waiting to be delivered sitting there in the dark. There's a simple metallic chair bolted to the floor with a pair of handcuffs and a spool of rope lying next to it: restraints. They came prepared. Your captor closes the doors behind you with her foot, silencing the ambient chatter of the city, and waits for you to stop your fidgeting.

<Let me make the facts clear, Vantas,> her voice echoes through the space. There's a scraping undertone to the rustblood's voice only audible against the silence that's creeping you out even more.

There are no lights in here, at least none that are on, and the only source of illumination is the thin lines of moonlight trickling in through the door cracks. A human would be completely blind under these conditions and even as a troll, you're only getting a vague monochrome outline.

<I'm getting this straight before you get any funny ideas. The sign's a disguise, I'm a midblood.>

She reaches up to her left eye and pulls something out—a contact lens. She turns on the torch at her belt, filling the room with scattered light for a second before plunging it back into darkness with a second flick, but it's enough to catch the green specks in her eyes. The brief glimpse isn't enough to tell if it's olive or jade, but she's mid-spectrum for sure, and more importantly, halfway through second maturation from the fact that there's color there in the first place.

<So believe me when I say I'm a trained assassin, I'm stronger and faster than you, and you will not win if it comes down to a fight. Especially not without a weapon. Now, the contract says dead or alive, but there's a bonus for alive, so you're a smart kid—it would go better for both me and you if you don't do anything stupid.>

You swallow. You weren't holding out any hope of overpowering the enemy troll anyway, but that clinches it for you. No way you're fighting a near-mature midblood, even if she seems to think you're burgundy—chromatically that's the closest match, but physiologically you're somewhere between gold and olive. But the most important part of that entire exchange was that there's a contract out on you, and you have no clue why.

<Got it,> you answer hoarsely. <Wasn't planning on it anyway>

A moment of silence.

<Good. Remember: you scream, you die.>
She pushes you onto the chair and shifts her knife to your jugular, pinning your neck against the metal seat back as she walks around. A moment of rustling later she's recovered the handcuffs and swiftly secures your wrists one-handedly behind the seat back, winding the chain around the horizontal bars so you can't lift them over. She withdraws carefully, avoiding your legs to pick up the rope, and uses it to tie your ankles to the chair. Another length of rope goes around your torso to bind your arms.

A bead of sweat trickles down your forehead into an eye. You blink the sting away, grimacing. Slowly so she doesn't hear, you test the strength of the handcuffs—Yeah, you're not going to budge them, and the edges are sanded smooth, meaning they're probably rated for highbloods, so that's another strike in the Fuck Karkat Vantas column. Your already dismal chances of escape are dropping by the moment.

Once you're properly immobilized, the kidnapper takes her time patting you down. She tosses your wallet and keys into a corner and pockets your palhmusk, takes off your shoes to check for hidden stashes, and you can tell the exact moment she realizes that you don't have a weapon on you, a small contemptuous sneer spreading over her face as she steps back.

What did she expect from a broke college student that hasn't seen a cholerbear in perigees? It's not like the school will let you bring sickles to your lectures, as much as you'd love to. You did carry around a penknife for a few weeks before you realized there wasn't anything for you to use them on.

After a brief moment of consideration, she also grabs a black plastic gag off the ground and stuffs it in your mouth. You wince at the taste of dust and grime, but there's no point in struggling. A band of cloth loops around your head to stop you from spitting it out, and now you couldn't make more than a muffled grunt even if you want to.

<Sit tight.>

Then she's gone, the dim evening light slipping in between the doors for an split second as she exits, leaving you all alone in the dark back of a stranger's van.

A few seconds later, the rumbling vibration of the engine starts up, and you sense the dull tug of acceleration as the vehicle pulls out of the lot.

Fuck your life.

At first you try to count the turns as the van drives to wherever this lunatic is taking you, but after the eighteenth one you give up. What would you even do with the information? You know that you haven't left the city from the sound of traffic filtering through the thin walls and the frequency of stops, so at least if you inexplicably manage to somehow escape or defeat your captor, you won't be trapped in the middle of nowhere outside some troll's clandestine countryside murder dungeon.

After what feels like an eternity, but is probably less than an hour, you feel the vehicle slow down and shift into reverse. You're here, wherever "here" is. You're not sure how you want to feel about this. On one hand, you're sick of being tied up here, unable to move and simultaneously bored and stressed out of your mind, but on the other hand, once you're out of this van, the terrible fate indubitably about to befall you will be that much closer to coming to pass.

The hum dies down as the engine switches off, and a few seconds of faint scuffling later the back doors of the van swing open. You're blinded momentarily by the sudden onslaught of light—there's a street lamp right there—and reflexively slam your eyelids shut, waiting for your pupils to adjust.
When you reopen your eyes, your kidnapper is there.

The troll walks up to you and squats down, and for a second you're confused before you figure out that she's unbolting the chair from the floor with a wrench. It takes a minute for her to remove everything while you wait in nervous apprehension.

Once she's done, the troll makes her way behind you wordlessly and grips the base of the seat with one hand, then the top of the frame with the other. You brace yourself: you've seen this trick enough times in action movies to work out what she's planning. With a heave, she lifts the entire chair, with you still tied to it, and casually slings you up and over in one smooth motion. There's an instant of terrifying vertigo as everything swings, your equilibrioceptive senses recalibrating in panicked confusion, and then you're balancing over her shoulder with your face just inches from the ceiling.

You force yourself to remain silent—not like you have much of a choice, to be fair, but you refrain from making any inaudible grunts through the gag—as the troll strides forward at a slight crouch to courteously avoid smashing the ceiling with your face, and with a slight hop disembarks the vehicle. You're not even fully recovered from the lurch when she turns around abruptly, sending your world spinning with the sharp rotation, and slams the doors shut.

Swallowing your nausea, you take the opportunity as she locks up to survey the surroundings. It's not anywhere you've been before, but your guess is that it's somewhere in the suburbs from the lack of tall structures in the immediate vicinity. You're in an open-air parking lot enclosed on all sides by mundane brick architecture of no immediately obvious purpose, with none of the few small windows visible lit up. Some kind of low-end office complex or industrial building, maybe one of the more underfunded university departments?

No obvious escape routes, whatever entrance the van drove in from not visible from this angle. No other people in sight; it would be pretty stupid to carry your tied-up kidnap victim around with witnesses about, but this at least suggests that this one troll might be it, instead of there being some massive troll trafficking ring. You still have no idea what you or Sollux did to invite this upon yourself—if it even was something you did and not the capricious whim of an insane troll—so you weren't sure what to expect.

You're being carried towards an unlabeled set of double doors inset in the brick, which with a soft click and a push yawn open slowly. As you pass in, you crane your neck to discover to your relief not a terrifying torture chamber, but what seems to be the interior of an small abandoned storage warehouse, stocked floor-to-ceiling with empty steel racks.

The place isn't anything special, but the echoes of your abductor's footsteps and the ominous backlighting from the open doors casts the whole place with a skin-crawling vibe, and just as you think that, something moves in the distant shadows, twigging your already-frayed nerves. Your startled jerk elicits an annoyed growl and muttered curse from the troll carrying you, who seemed wholly unconcerned on her part.

You're abruptly reminded of someone else you know who kidnaps random trolls to never be seen again, a certain somebody with a demonic spidermom who also likes to dwell in deep and dark places. Your pulse ratchets up a few notches. Fuck no. How would you even get a—

Then she flips a switch and the lights flicker on, revealing the source of the motion.

Thank god.

It's just your shithead roommate, tied to another chair identical to yours, clearly agitated and
dissatisfied with his current lodgings, but also equally clearly alive and kicking. From the angry red and blue electricity spasming through the psionic suppressor cables suctioned to the back of his scalp, he doesn't seem as happy to see you as you are to find him.

The brief respite from sickening dread doesn't last long as you realize that he's probably been here for hours, restrained in place and continually milked of every drop of psi in his brain. Jesus Christ, it's every one of his nightmares about helmmsmanship in twisted manifest; no wonder he doesn't look fantastic. Then it occurs to you that those nightmares might become a whole fucking lot less thematically reminiscent and more of a vivid, crisp reality very soon, what with the obvious reason why anyone might go to such lengths to capture a ludicrously high-powered mutant psionic.

The prospect of the two of you getting culled suddenly sounds a lot less terrifying than it was just seconds ago.

When you finally reach the center of the room you get a better look at Sollux, and thankfully he doesn't look excessively traumatized, just mostly furious and annoyed. You breathe an internal sigh of relief. Straining to catch his attention, you do your best to convey commiseration and apology in a nod as your kidnapper sets you down; he reciprocates with a middle finger from where his hands are secured behind his chair.

Well fuck him too. You roll your eyes where he can't see.

Maybe being stuck here for so long has tempered the fear response with sheer indignant boredom.

From your new grounded vantage point, you're facing your captor and the entrance, which finally completes its excruciating slow swing shut in a reverberating *clang* as the mystery troll steps back, satisfied that you're settled into your new temporary prison.

She then proceeds to completely ignore you and start tapping away at her palmhusk.

You don't know, you were kind of waiting for her to start gloating about her master plan and the bloodthirsty gamblignants she's going to sell you to, or the unhinged blood purists that hate your mutant guts for the ostentatious crime of existing. You suppose that's not very realistic in retrospect, since first of all she's probably a mercenary for hire just waiting for pick-up at this point, and second, even if she *were* in on a hypothetical master plan, she would have no reason to fill you in on all the sordid details.

So instead you sink back into your seat and turn to try and catch Sollux's attention again. That part's not hard, since he was already trying to do the same thing at you while you were busy dissecting literary tropes in your head. It's nice to see that as worn most of the goldblood looks, his unimpressed stares still convey as much distilled derision as ever.

You unfortunately don't have much time for exchanging more snide gestures, since your probably fatal and most likely grisly fates are drawing closer by the second, and though your respective stints of sitting alone in a warehouse and being driven around in a van have taken the edge of the initial panic, the reality of your shared situation is no less grim than when it started. From the other troll's gritted teeth, he's perfectly cognizant of that.

You tip a head towards the fancy headset he's wearing. *What's up with that? Can you get it off?*

*I don't know,* he manages to shrug despite the ropes. He shakes his head in a *no.*

You nod at your host and splay your hands from where they're bound. *Who is she? Why did she kidnap us?*
Another shrug. Either I don't know or I have no clue what you're trying to convey.

You try to cock your head and angle your hands into a vague expression of query. Well then, what's the plan?

Sollux stares blankly at you. Okay, that's definitely a no idea what you're saying.

This isn't working. You shift your body and wiggle your arms, trying to see if the ropes have loosened since the fiftieth time you tried this back in the van. Who knows, maybe all of that rough tossing around dislodged something? No dice either. Fuck, time's running out. To be fair, you don't know precisely how much time you have, but however much it is, it's running out.

When you look back over the Sollux is doing something with his fingers, rapidly gesturing at you. Is he trying to use sign language? You glare at him, wrinkling your nose. You don't know any sign language. There aren't even any Alternian sign languages, so when did he find the time to learn an Earth one?

You watch closer. It doesn't feel like sign language, he's not angling his digits enough to make actual signs. It's more like he's signaling with each finger as an independent unit... or bit?

Is he transmitting ASCII at you in binary?

No, less complex. He's only using one hand, so just the letters of the Alternian alphabet encoded in order? Assuming that's what he's doing, you still can't parse letters that fast. You try to gesture at him to slow down, and he does, albeit with an annoyed look. Which is the least significant bit? Goddammit, you're not cut out for this.

<Stop that,> your abductor says, sounding mildly peeved. Sollux stops signing. She's put away her palmhusk and narrows her eyes at the two of you. <You're not escaping. You want maiming, this is how you get maiming. They can give you bionic fingers if they decide you need them.>

Could she just stop it with the pronoun games already? Just tell you who wants you dead. Or, apparently, "dead or alive, preferably alive". Besides, if she didn't want you communicating she should have put your seats facing away from each other, that brainless pail-botching amateur. You of course don't say that to her face, both because it would be a terrible idea and also because you're still gagged and can't speak.

She looks back down at her screen, and that's when you see the flash of red.

It's only for a split second at the corner of your eye, behind one of the small windows set up high near the ceiling. It's barely visible against the darkness outside and gone in an instant, so brief you almost wonder if it was just a trick of the mind. Your abductor catches your eye movement, however, and twists around, trying to identify whatever it was you saw. You glance at Sollux while she's distracted, and you can tell from his befuddled look that it wasn't your imagination. He saw it as well.

You tear your gaze back towards your jailer as she turns back, watching the two of you warily.

Whatever that was, it's not one of hers, and that's probably good for you. Your blood pusher beats faster in its cage as you try to act nonchalant, praying that she buys it.

Another blip of red flashes, this time on the floor of the far end of the warehouse. The sliver of color resolves and stays in position for half a second before vanishing again. You do your best not to react.
An ally?

Despite your best efforts, the female troll senses your agitation and casts another look around.

There is it again, this time paired with a snippet of reflective white, just when she's looking the wrong way. This one's closer and behind one of the steel racks a distance away.

A moment of bated stillness.

It appears again, on the other side of the room, next to a large cylindrical bin before disappearing behind it.

Your captor definitely knows something's up now, drawing the short dagger tucked in her belt. She looks hesitant whether to step back or approach the two of you, seemingly unsure if whatever's happening is your doing or something else entirely.

To be honest, you don't know if whatever this is will go in your favor either. But even if it's just another mercenary trying to poach her prey, though at that'll buy you more time.

Her gaze locks on Sollux as she finally makes a decision. The blade in her hand raises at the same time as she steps towards the psionic, opening her mouth to speak, but that brief distraction is all the unknown entity needs.

Flickers of crimson trailing metallic white and a hint of black blur across the warehouse floor in an erratic, darting path, but the evasive maneuvers are unnecessary. The troll responds too late and before she can even turn around, the shadow is upon her, violently slamming the tall figure into the ground in a full-body downwards tackle before materializing erect above the prone body the next instant, snow-white blade already pressed to her neck.

Relief floods you.

"Sup," Dave says.

Chapter End Notes

If this were an illustrated fan adventure, Karkat would have a flashing <33333 next to his head.
You pause for a second, a thought striking you. "And why are you still here? I don't give a maggot-infested shit who or what the fuck you really are, but you're not getting your dumbass self killed over us. Go home and read another outdated geology textbook. This isn't your fight."

You'll be honest, what you really want to do is cling to Dave like an overgrown wiggler, bury yourself in his absurdly comfy clothes and let him spirit you away to safety on his secret ninja spaceship, but you're not letting him put himself in more danger that he already has. Also, he probably doesn't have a secret ninja spaceship.

"I vote he thayth here and buyth time for our ethcape," Sollux mutters.

Dave lifts his right foot from the floor and stomps on the fallen troll's chest with all of his weight, forcing a choked shout of pain out of her.

While she's recovering, his sword swings out at you in a swift arc, inciting a brief moment of panic before you register that it's passed by you entirely and gone back to menacing the troll's jugular.

Then you hear a clatter to your left, and you realize that he wasn't aiming at you. The contraption on Sollux's head is sliced cleanly in two, somehow missing his actual cranium entirely, wire-frayed halves now rolling on the floor. First it's a crackle of static electricity, then the burst of ozone, then as you watch, psionic energy lashes over the goldblood's body. His cloth gag tears, followed by the loud snapping of the ropes binding him to the chair and the sound of something solid bonking against the ground.

"What the fuck ith wrong with you?" he snarls, attempting to rise to his feet, only to almost fall over as his limbs refuse to respond in a coordinated manner.

"You're welcome," Dave mutters as he steps on your kidnapper's hand that just made an bare grab at his blade.

Sollux surges forward, finally finding his feet, and lobs a furious kick at the troll's skull. There's an uncomfortably loud crack from her column as her head snaps the other way, prompting a slight wince from you, but you're not feeling sympathetic right now. She's a midblood, she can take it. You're not as much concerned about the assault victim's pained groans as the state of mind of your freshly freed friend.

"You almost took my head off!" he explodes literally, showers of red and blue sparks spraying from the twin spots the cables were just leading out of seconds ago.

"Hey, you wanna help Karkat first?" Dave's flippant tone just pisses Sollux off more, but he stops fuming long enough to take the hint and rip off your restraints with a telekinetic gesture.
You're swarming with questions as you spit your own gag out and let the unlocked shackles clatter to the ground, running your tongue over the inside of your mouth to try and clean out the taste of dirt and dust. The dual shock of having just been abducted off the streets for no discernible reason and subsequently immediately rescued by Dave fucking Strider, who apparently neglected to ever mention that he's an expert combatassassin, is a bit much to handle at one time.

Is this part of what he was about to tell you earlier? Is he seriously part of an honest-to-god urban ninja guild hellbent on enforcing vigilante justice on this garbage dump city or something? This has to be your ironic comeuppance for not mining out your dialogue trees before embarking on a horrendously ill-advised quest.

You need answers, and you need them now, because otherwise you might just devolve into a hyperventilating puddle of troll from all this shit you've had to deal with in one day.

"Explanation," you manage to cough out, still recovering your bearings from the hour of being tied to a chair and tossed around by a crazy troll lady. Dave holds an arm out to steady you and you cling to it gratefully, too exhausted to care about embarrassing yourself.

"I concur," Dave says, to your momentary confusion. He digs his sword deeper against his captive's neck, putting a stop to her wriggling. He directs his next question at her. "Who are you, and why are you after these two?"

Oh. That. Yes, possibly the more urgent matter at hand. That's totally what you meant. You glance at Sollux, who's not quite ignoring you, but neither really paying any attention to his fellow ex-kidnapppee either. His lips are pressed into a grim, resolute line, but overall he seems the least confused of the three of you. Does he know something? What isn't he saying?

The midblood rasps weakly, and Dave takes some of the weight off her chest. She draws a weak breath. The troll's not exactly down for the count yet, but from the way her eyes are darting between the three of you, you don't think she fancies her odds outnumbered like this, so you don't think she'll try anything. The dagger she was holding is lying a few feet away and you don't see any obviously accessible weapons on her, though you're sure she has a few stashed away somewhere if she's as professional as she claims.

"I was hired... to capture them... I don't... know any... thing," she wheezes in a facsimile of weakness. Yeah, no—she's an olive, from the blood trickling from the corner of her mouth, so she's most definitely exaggerating her injury. You glance at Dave, and he doesn't look impressed either.

"I guess we don't need you alive, then," Dave says, terrifyingly casual, and he raises his sword and swings-

Her left hand snaps upwards in a flash, blocking with bare flesh, only a few inches away from decapitation. The edge has buried itself to the bone, sending rivulets of fresh olive streaming down her arms and neck. She'd tried to catch the flat of the blade with her fingers but only slowed it just enough to not slice clean through her joints. "Wait!" she gasps raggedly.

Holy shit. You gulp. A troll would hardly leave a stranger that attempted to kill them—or their friends—alive to murder another day, but Dave's not a troll. You didn't think he had it in him; under all the smirk and defenses, he's soft just like most humans. Earth and its denizens' pathological aversion to conflict have resensitized you to the displays of capricious violence typical on your homeland.

Then again, he wasn't really trying to kill her, was he? He can move faster than that, you saw it—Jesus, that was unhinged purpleblood speeds he was pulling off, and with more finesse than any
clown has ever possessed—so he must have been expecting the oliveblood to block, or he might have stopped just just shy of outright lopping her head off, or something.

You hope.

This steel and ice-cold anger is a new side to Dave you've never seen before, but you think you know him at least that well. But that's what you thought about Gamzee too, and look how that turned out.

"I'm listening," the human allows.

"Orders from the Alternian Fleet," she says, still shakily but having lost the earlier stutter. You still, blood freezing in your veins. There's a heavy Alternian accent to her English, too-sharp consonants and thoracic artifacts that don't exist in mammalian phonetics, but there's no way you misheard. "Capture or cull. There was a bounty, sixty thousand, uh, forty thousand in dollars."

"That's a medium bounty," Sollux mutters, but you've come to the same awful conclusion yourself.

Jesus Christ. That's bad. No, bad is a pitiful understatement that fails to capture the magnitude of this catastrophe—of all the things you could be hearing right now, this is unequivocally the worst. The Alternian Fleet is after you.

You fled the Alternia as a nameless refugee, a mutant deserter barely worth the effort of cursory pursuit when you were still in Imperial space. They just strike you from the registers and write you off as one more eliminated-in-transit, it's all the same to TR. Having your name on the official Imperial cull-list is a different game entirely, even if you're only a medium-priority target. The Fleet doesn't do things by half-measures: escape one assassination, they send another; last long enough, your priority gets upgraded; kill enough agents, and before you know it you're running from an army of drones through a hailstorm of laser fire while flaysquads airdrop from orbit around you.

They'll track you to the edges of charted space and end of time, because why not? The Empire numbers 180 billion trolls just on active duty, and the blacklist is, what? Eighty thousand? It's not about holding a grudge, it's more that mopping up enemies of the state is their idea of a relaxing break from relentless galactic conquest. Taking out the trash, not even worth doing yourself until the kitchen starts to stink.

From the ashen look on Sollux's face, he's thinking the same thing. You sit back down into the chair, energy leaking out of you: It's never over, is it? You're just done running from the law and fighting tooth and nail for a sliver of a chance at survival, but once again you find yourself well and comprehensively fucked beyond your wildest imagination.

"Dude, quit the kicked puppy face. We'll be fine," Dave says, face scrunched up somewhere between consolation and mild confusion. What does he know? You suppress the urge to laugh. Whatever the swordsman's deal is, however he caught wind of your danger and located you, and whatever inscrutable motive gave him the balls to strike down a proxy agent of the Condesce in your defense, it doesn't matter at this moment. His is a fundamentally human perspective, and you've learnt that his species' concept of the galactic stage is woefully lacking in many aspects.

"Earth is not a safe haven—nowhere is. Many humans conflate their planet's sovereignty with regional authority, equating the Empire's recognition with its respect. They believe that their laws mean something within the borders of their official jurisdiction. A laughable delusion: anyone with a wiggler's grasp of interstellar politics will tell you that while any individual alien is more or less
at the mercy of the locals, the Fleet as a beast in itself couldn't give less fucks about little inconsequential things like national borders and extradition law.

The reality is that the Alternian Empire could squash humanity like a quadriplegic squeakbeast under an industrial tractor. Earth's formal status as an Imperially Sanctioned Sovereign System (Subjacent But Not Subordinate To Her Imperious Condescension) has nothing to do with the difficulty of hypothetical conquest, or even the long-term logistics with occupying a planet with a first guardian, as some scholars prefer to insist. Ultimately, the only thing standing between the human species and extinction or enslavement is the disappointing lack of useful natural resources not readily available on other less infested planets. It's the sheer depressing mediocrity of the world, save a few morsels of cultural history left for civilians to fret over.

*She Who Condescends To Rule*, they call her. It captures the essence of the idea. The universe is vast, and this system is another of many below even the contempt of the Empress.

In other words, Earth can't and won't do shit to help you. The people in charge will have seen the war footage in the first contact package; they know what happens to species that stand against the Fleet when it gets *motivated*. The archaeological collateral might deter the nuclear bombardment and gravitonic pulse drivers in this one case, but ground cavalreapers troops are perfectly capable of culling billions in days. If you run crying to the human authorities, you'll be ushered at gunpoint into an off-world transport and shipped off into the Condescence's fishy claws by the end of the week.

"Why?" escapes your mouth. Not that it changes your fate, but might as well know the reason you're being hunted down. "Why are they after us?"

<Fuck if I know,> she says. <I just do my job.>

To your surprise, it's Sollux that answers your question instead.

"The Heiress, you illiterate fucker," he says, an unexpected amount of venom in his interjection.

It all snaps in place almost violently, forgotten memories triggering at the reminder, carrying back an entire repressed facet of your past. The succession. *Feferi*. You've been so busy distracting yourself with alien culture and carving out your corner of this foreign world that the Challenge and everything entailed therein completely slipped your mind, accidentally or deliberately you don't know. It was always such a distant concept even before, yet another intangible tragedy collecting dust on the eternal horizon, ever relegated to the "not your problem" pile, since by the time it mattered you would either be thousands of light years away or a rotting carcass in the cull pits.

Of course, you *did* escape, just in the nick of time too, and Alternia hasn't been standing still while you were floundering around with hairless apes. When Feferi's tenth wiggling day arrives the inbound sweep, she'll have to fight the Condescence, and, well...

...die. Probably in a most gruesome, dragged-out and undignified way.

You sneak a glance at Sollux, and the tired and sullen look on his face tells you that the other troll never forgot for a second, even stranded on this godforsaken rock. He was Feferi's matesprit, or close enough, anyway—you don't know if they ever made it official. Was this burning away at the back of his mind all along?

"Don't look thothurprithed, KK," he spits. You're taken aback by the anger directed at you. "Who careth about FF and Eridan? No, you're too busy pranthing around with your new boyfriend to watch the fucking newth. What'th it matter? Not like thhe rithked her hide to help uthe ethcape or anything."
You're not entirely sure what he's referring to, but the guilt nevertheless hits like a punch in the gut. Dammit, he's right. You and Feferi weren't the closest in the group, but you were still friends for sweeps and sweeps, and she deserves more than an afterthought. After all she did to save your respective asses, and you just went and forgot that she had her own crisis going on? What's wrong with you? The sea dweller pulled rank to forge the documents to get you off-planet, chipped in for the ship, she was there to send you off at the end with the others. You still remember the strained optimism on her face as she waved goodbye.

She declined the offer to run away with you and Sollux, just as well signing her own death sentence, because she knew it would decimate your chances of escape.

But what were you supposed to do? Wallowing in survivor's guilt isn't productive, and you can't do anything stuck on this rock anyway. Everyone on Alternia's essentially dead to you now and vice versa, so what if you're trying to forget? The first weeks of your voluntary exile were emotional hell, so you quickly learned to lock everything in a box and shove it in the deepest, dustiest corner of your brain. You suppose that in the end, you did it just a little too well.

"What would we even do?" you grasp, as much as a defense for yourself as for explanation from your attacker. "We're on Earth. Even if we wanted we couldn't help Feferi with her..."

Challenge? Rebellion? Escape? Every now and then a heiress tries to cheat their way out, but you didn't think this particular one had it in her. Evidently you were wrong. It's fucked up how you can list Trizza Tethis' assassination plots and Salvez Vixens' revolutionary leaders from your fuzzy recollection of old schoolfeeds, but piecing together what your friend's doing from old Trollian conversations and half-overheard gossip from the rumor mill is a struggle. The clawing shame in your chest digs harder.

"...movement," you decide. You're pretty sure. You think. It fits her personality, at least, and there was something about a book? You didn't connect it to Feferi before, but it sounds like something she would do. Or commission someone to ghostwrite. "They should be assassinating highblood sympathizers or whatever. Why is the Empire after us?"

You avoid Sollux's unimpressed glare. Every fumbled word out of your mouth is endearing you less and less to the goldblood, you can tell. It's painstakingly obvious that you have no idea what's going on with the incoming succession, and if he wasn't sure you're a monumental asshole before, he definitely is now.

Fuck, is this why he's been so mad at you?

"I think those would be the high-priority targets," Dave says at the same time as Sollux growls, "Hostages."

The troll pushes on. "If they know I'm in the fluth'h with Fef, or even just that th'he helped us escape, then they know I'm important to her. They can uth'e uth for blackmail, or ath phychological weapon, whatever the fuck they do with high-value thivilianth. You and fishdick had a pale thing going on too."

Wait, what?

"What the grubloving hell are you talking about?" you splutter, self-reprobation forgotten for a second. "I don't know if it somehow slipped your overbloated brain, but Eridan's with Feferi."
Sollux rolls his eyes, and for a moment it's just like old times, the teasing and friendly jabs, but the flash of humor's gone in a flash.

"Wait, let me get this straight," Dave cuts in. "Eridan's diamonds cheating on Feferi with you because he was going for matesprits in the start-"

Oh god, that is such a twisted misconstrual of the entire situation. Why did you vomit your quadrant clusterfuck woes all over him that time? Sollux shoots a weirded and mildly offended look at the guy, but Dave seems to be enjoying himself despite holding a downed captive at swordpoint this very moment.

"-but she's dating you and wants nothing flush with Eridan? And you're being kidnapped to sow discord among their ranks? What is this, a soap opera? Do I need to start drawing a diagram?"

"I am not Eridan's palemate!" you hiss. This is so stupid, why are you discussing this right now? "You can immolate your nascent shipping chart in the nearest available trash incinerator. So what do we do? We're not standing here marinating in our misery until another soulless imperial sellout inevitably shows up to re-murder us."

You pause for a second, a thought striking you. "And why are you still here? I don't give a maggot-infested shit who or what the fuck you really are, but you're not getting your dumbass self killed over us. Go home and read another outdated geology textbook. This isn't your fight."

You'll be honest, what you really want to do is cling to Dave like an overgrown wiggler, bury yourself in his absurdly comfy clothes and let him spirit you away to safety on his secret ninja spaceship, but you're not letting him put himself in more danger that he already has. Also, he probably doesn't have a secret ninja spaceship.

"I vote he stay here and buyth time for our escape," Sollux mutters.

Dave's grip tightens on his sword. "I'm coming with you. Both of you. If it's Condy, you need my help or you're fucked sideways to hell."

"We're fucked either way!" Sollux snarls. "You can't be deluded enough to think you can fight off thenturion threshecuthoneth with an overthized butter knife. That troll you took down was an teenage amateur. And how do I know I can trutht you?"

This again? You spin around, annoyance welling up. "It's not the time for your horseshit, Sollux."

"You don't—he—" He's grasping for justification, but finds none. Instead, he changes tack. "We should just kill ourselves."

What the fuck?

"What the hell are you talking about?" you yell, the shout echoing through the empty storehouse. Before you know it you're slapping his stupid face and shaking his shoulders in vehement objection. "I didn't endure four weeks of your insufferable mood swings in a tin can hurtling through the interstellar void for you to give up now. Fuck that. Fuck the Condesce. Fuck the Fleet. Don't you dare say anything like that. I will literally force-feed you valproic acid, you contradictory crotchwipe."

"We're not getting out of thith, KK," Sollux hisses, meeting your eyes with equivalent force. The handprint on his cheek's yellowing with a developing bruise, but he pays it no attention. "The Empire alwayth win'th. I'm not doomng mythelf for your revolutionary cruthade. The cotht-benefit analythith doethn't work out."
"How is suicide different from dooming yourself?"

You hold the uncontested place of worst friend ever, you've demonstrated that time and time again, but you can't let this happen. Nevertheless, the iron resolve in Sollux's bifurcated oculars betrays how indelibly serious he is.

"Karkat's right," Dave's voice sounds from behind. You glance backwards, and he's walking up to you, weapon clenched in tense hands. Cuffed around a pillar further back is the oliveblood, secured while you were smacking the brain damage out of this troll.

He continues, "Look, I'm aware we're not on great terms, but we've got this. We're going to blow up the Battleship and royally fuck up the Condesce and all that good shit. It's not all over yet. You have allies."

"What, you?"

The bristling scorn in Sollux's voice tells you how much he thinks of Dave's help.

"Uh, yes?" the human's expression wars between incredulity, confusion and annoyance. "Me. Did you miss the part where I tracked you halfway across the city and rescued your miserable rumps like puppies from PETA? This isn't the place to talk, but I'm damn committed to this, I'm powerful, and so are my friends. I'm not letting either of you get captured or killed, and that's all there is to say about it."

"As I thaid: I don't know who the fuck you are, but you're not going to do a thing against a fucking army," Sollux scoffs.

You've had enough of this. "So you're just going to take the easy way out? Not even got the guts to fight?" you snarl.

"Fight?" the goldblood's defeatism abruptly balloons into anger, pushing you a step back. "Gut'th? Eathy for you to thay. All you've got waiting for you if you fail is at moth thome light torture and public execution. Me, I'll be wired into a helmthcolumn, begging for death, until I'm a withered, hollowed-out huthk. You want to risk your life, be my gueth. I'm not going."

You swallow as psionic energy bursts from his head again. A psychosomatic response or a deliberate demonstration, you can't tell. You sense Dave's sword arm next to you shift on instinct.

<My anthethor'th been hanging from the Condethe's helmthblock for longer than thith Mother Grub hath been alive, fuckathhe. The aethropaths of Cortana Matro'thka have been hearing hith p'thycic thcreams acrothh the cothmoth for ath long ath their recorded hithtory. You're not the one about to be thtrung up next to him for the retht of eternity, tho don't talk to me about gut'th!>

You don't even know what to say to that. Your gut's screaming that he's wrong, this is a mistake, but your brain's failing short on arguments. Is he right? The corona of energy sends your clothes billowing and your hairs standing on end, forcing you to take another backwards step, but Dave stands unruffled even as splinters of red and blue crackle down his blade and ground into the concrete floor.

"Sollux," he says, with only the slightest the waver in his tone betraying any reaction to the psionic's outburst. Did he know, you wonder? The mechanism of helmsmen is public knowledge, but the tale of the Battleship Condescension in particular isn't as widespread as you'd think, and the scale of its service even less so. "I won't let that happen. We can get you some cyanide pills or something in case of emergencies—do you have suicide teeth? I personally guarantee I'll strangle
You in our cell if we're captured and it looks like we're not getting rescued."

Your eyes dart between the red-clothed human and the overclocking psionic, almost expecting a fight to break out, but the grim statement seems to achieve its reassuring intention at least a smidgen despite the distrustful edge lingering in Sollux's gaze. His eyes lock on you, hardening at the corners, and you realize what he's asking.

"God. This is so fucked up," you mutter. "Yes. Okay! I'll kill you if it comes down to it, lop your head off like a fucking troll piñata. I know the stakes, you don't need to tell me twice."

You can see Sollux's resolve eroding as you make your promise. The light show stutters, and seconds later disappears with a final crack, leaving scorch marks and a lingering smell of static in its wake, and the troll at its centre looking exhausted to the core.

<I'm holding you to that,> he mutters at you, still with a tremor of suppressed fear. You don't think you've ever seen him this shaken before except when Aradia died. You always knew psionics had it worse than you, but the extent of the gulf has never shown itself as viscerally as right now. <I wathn't actually going to do it anyway.>

You clap his shoulder gently. <I won't let you down,> you swear.

"Great," Dave interrupts, the sudden urgency in his voice startling the two of you apart. He's checking his phone—no, not his, the kidnapper's? "Sorry to interrupt the heartfelt reunion over, but we've got to move now."

"You," Sollux snarls at the human interloper, guard snapping back up as he turns. "Don't think I've forgotten. You talk a lot, but you haven't explained a thingle thing. Who the fuck are you? What'th your real name? And what the hell are you trying to do?"

Dave narrows his eyes, finally fed up.

"My name is Dave Strider," he states. "And you're welcome for the save, by the way. But we're not doing introductions in front of her. The chick called the extraction team in, and I don't fancy fighting more trolls, even powerless ones. Our priority right now is getting the hell outta dodge, and then finding a secure place to crash."

Fucking great.

"You didn't mention this earlier why?" you growl, panic rearing in your head. You're already wheeling around looking for alternate escape routes.

"I just found out! And I was slightly distracted by all the suicide threats being thrown around!" he snipes back. "They're supposed to be here in ten minutes. I don't know how armed they'll be, they didn't come expecting a fight, but they're trolls."

"Soldiers will always be armed for combat," you confirm. You studied the military handbook back in the day, and you still remember bits and pieces of the protocol. Trolls are a paranoid bunch.

"We're not waltzing out the front door into a potential ambush," Sollux says.

Dave nods in agreement, already heading towards the shrouded back of the room. In a lower voice, he says, "There's another door back there that I think leads outside. We can use that instead."

"The whole block's surrounded by barbed wire," Sollux points out. "I've been around here before. I think it used to be a prison complex."
"Wait, are we just leaving her here?" you interject, jerking a thumb back at your shackled captive.

"Yes." "We should kill her," Dave and Sollux say at the same time.

The human glares at the troll. "Our cover's blown anyway, and I'm not killing a defenseless prisoner."

"You can't stop me," Sollux growls, his eyes lighting up with twin glows behind his spectacles. "She has information on us, and we need to stall the troops as much as we can."

Oh, fuck. Why did you bring this up? Dave brings his blade to bear, staring levelly at the goldblood. "Watch me," he states calmly, challenge in his voice.

"Let's just fucking go!" you yell before either of them can call the other's bluff. Your blood pusher's beating wildly as the standoff breaks and both of them turn their eyes to you. "Shut up, Sollux. Dave saved our lives, so listen to him at least this once. What's the plan?"

They reluctantly turn away from each other. These two are a recipe for disaster, you just know it. But they're all you've got right now, so you'll have to make it work.

"We'll get past the barbed wire when we get there." The swordsman scowls, appeased for now by Sollux's reluctant grunt of deference. "You're right. Let's go."

He sheathes his sword with the *srrrkt* of steel on scabbard and disappears into the shadows, Sollux trailing closely behind. A swallow of trepidation later, you follow their echoing steps into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

The Ψiioniic's story is honestly one of the most existentially horrifying ones in Homestuck.

Also, fun fact: the term "psionic" is appears to be used exactly once in the entirety of Homestuck, and that's in Sollux's introduction. So it's definitely canonically the term (and I believe we see it in Friendsim) for troll telekinetics, but Hussie never uses it for some reason.
Chapter Summary

He reaches forwards and out, palms level and facing down like an operator over an invisible control panel, then in a flash of brilliant crimson, hefty red and black contraptions flash into existence under his fingers. They're the same gear-discs you saw at Dave's place earlier, but now they're spinning on their axes, gleaming and glowing and radiating invisible energy where before they looked dull and dead in comparison.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You keep checking behind you to see if anyone's following as the three of you hurry down the featureless gray hallway. It turns out that when Dave said there was a way outside, he meant that he saw a fire exit on the outside of the building, and a door at the back of the storage room you were being held in, then proceeded to prematurely assume that they connected in some way.

Which isn't an unreasonable assumption by itself, but it does mean that now you've already spent two minutes backtracking through corridors of claustrophobic office space and utility closets decades uncleaned. From the human's annoyed muttering, he didn't expect your escape route to turn out to be an urban labyrinth either, but he doesn't appear excessively concerned about the prospect of discovery. Is he that confident in his combat skills?

You would be more suspicious about Dave Strider's unexplained presence and unnatural competence, but he was about to dish out the explanations earlier before this whole fiasco went down, so you're willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Even if that weren't the case, you'd probably trust Dave with your life anyway. You might not have known him for that long, but the two of you have grown close in more way than one, and once you claw past his pretense of careless indifference, the human reads like an open book—he tries to hide it, but when he looks at you there's a genuine caring in his eyes that you've only seen otherwise when he talks about his human friends. He's not going to betray you.

Sollux, unfortunately, does not share this unconditional faith in your human ally.

"Care to give uth an explanation yet?" he growls quietly as you turn another corner, fed up with the silence. "Let's th'tart with who you really are. Dave Thrider's not in any government or hospital databatheth. You didn't even go two the schoolth you lith'ted in your path. What's your real name? How did you get in this college? Who are you working for?"

So that's why he was so paranoid about Dave?

"You hacked into government computers?" you hiss, silently assimilating the fact that Dave's apparently not a real person and trying not to freak out over the ever-mounting stack of problems on your dining platter. "Are you trying to get culled?"

"The panthy-athhe legithlatheratorth here can't cull people for thhit," Sollux scoffs. "Answer the question!" he yells—quietly, because you're trying not to draw attention here—at Dave, who's...
consulting a floor plan on the wall a few meters ahead of you.

"Dave Strider is my real name," the human says, taking off again as you scramble to keep up. You feel a sting of relief—not that an alias is that big of a deal compared to everything else, but your gut emotions don't care about conventional logic. You're just happy you don't have to start calling him 'Stan Egbert' or something equally stupid.

"And I don't work for anyone. Can't this wait... ah, fuck it. It actually might make the next part easier if I just explain. I'm from another... I was going to say timeline, but then again there's no possible timeline where Alternia and Earth coexist in physical space, so I guess universe is the right word? Universal iteration?"

Another universe?

"You'd better have thome damned good proof for this, becauthe that soundth like a fat load of hoofbeath thhit to me," Sollux says. You can't help but reluctantly agree: even your suspension of disbelief has its limits. Dave hasn't ever acted any less than mentally stable, but crazies don't always look the part.

You really hope he hasn't lost his mind.

"Shush, I'm explaining. That's what you wanted. I'm from a parallel universe where all of us were playing a game to resurrect our respective species after giant meteors killed everyone. Or the Vast Glub in your case. The same game, but we were in different sessions—which kind of merged in the end—and Earth and Alternia weren't in the same universe, we crossed over kinda—fuck, this is too complicated. TL;DR: We were the last survivors of our dead civilizations and playing a massive computer game to make a new universe."

Holy shit, ou have absolutely no idea what the fuck he's talking about. You gloss over the end of the troll species for the moment, because Gl'bgolyb finally losing her marbles is maybe the least unbelievable part of the story. Even the alternate universe you put off for now, and the game: you're mostly just confused at that.

The pronouns are what catch your attention.

"Game?" Sollux repeats just as you ask, "We?"

You turn a corner, and thank god there's the green fire exit sign glowing dimly through the darkness of the hallway.

"Sburb. That's what the game was called. I don't know if it existed here, since apparently you don't have tildeth." What does Sburb have to do with anything? And tildeth: you've heard that before, but you can't remember where. "-but it's basically a reality-altering game, kind of like FLARP which is somehow still a thing? But a lot more cosmic and complicated, with a side order of world destruction. It kind of sucks, really."

"We?" you repeat more insistently as you arrive at the exit, struggling to restrain the slew of questions spawning more of every second the human speaks. One part at a time.

Dave hesitates for a moment, looking on the red "alarm sounds when door is opened" warning on the side, before depressing the panic bar.

He talks over the shrieking alarm as you wince. No going back now; you don't have much time before this place gets much, much more crowded.
"Yeah, we. You, or another version of you, played the game before us and later with us, but either you got mindwiped or you're separate clones or something. You don't remember the game, or you never played it in this timeline, I don't know. I'm not clear on the temporal logistics myself so I won't go into it. There were twelve trolls and four humans in the start, but most of you... uh, died by the time we got around to meeting."

Following the others, you step through the door, and true to Sollux's word earlier, there's a tall fence of metal poles and barbed wire, silhouetted by moonlight against the trees beyond.

You still don't believe Dave's story—even though you want to, he hasn't done anything nearly enough to prove these insane assertions he's throwing out like candy—but let's just say you're reserving judgment for now. Sburb, twelve trolls, four humans: but the pattern's becoming clear, and as impossible as it seems, it's disturbingly tempting to connect the dots.

Still, the implausibility of Dave's narrative isn't the thing setting off all sorts of alarm bells in your head. The ones on top of the physical alarm bells ravaging your auricular faculties right now, you mean.

If you understand Dave correctly, he's saying he already knew you—another version of you?—before you even caught your first glimpse of his ridiculous shades. Another Karkat Vantas, who played this ultimate game he's talking about. But then who are you? And you're not just asking if you're a reincarnation, or a genetic clone, or an amnesiac, whatever physical justification lies behind your apparently paradoxical existence.

Who are you to him?

There's been moments that you would recall as disappointment, when Dave says something and looks at you expectantly, but you're clueless what to respond with. The fleeting morph to blankness that follows, and then forced cheer as you change the subject. You wrote it down to cultural barrier at the time, but now you wonder if he was talking past you to someone that was never there.

The unpublished mixes he plays for you on his jittery headphones, the flush in his cheeks when your banter touches at little too red, the whispered memories he used to recount around the glowing screen under a warm blanket—were they meant for you, or this other Karkat?

Does he make the distinction? Is there one?

The spiralling train of thought is broken by Sollux's disgruntled observation, "Nice fairy tale, but how are we getting over this fence?"

Escape, right. That's more important right now than dwelling in your crippling self-doubt. You glance at Dave, holding his sword and looking up towards the top of the fence in a stance that you would have described as reassuringly confident just moments earlier, but now can only think of as distant.

You hope he has a plan, or else you're screwed.

He nods slightly, but doesn't otherwise acknowledge the question. "Well, what I didn't mention is that I'm also the Knight of Time."

Your breath catches.

There it is. Sburb, he said. You suspected, the numbers lined up, but you didn't dare jump to premature conclusions.
Not a fairy tale. A creation myth.

While you're still processing the human's audacious statement, you feel a hand grab the collar of your gray sweater. It's Dave, his pale knuckles digging warm against the back of your neck. You look up and his head's a foot above yours, and the dissonance stuns you for a second: he's not that tall, how— There's a tug, sweater wedging uncomfortably into your armpits as it strains upwards, weight lifting from your legs, and you squawk—

Then you're soaring skywards, climbing through the air in a smooth, silent glide as dirt and concrete recede beneath you.

Look, maybe you're moving too quickly here, you think to yourself as grass crunches under your shoes.

Your inventive slurry of curses eventually convinced Dave to finally land you guys on the other side of the fence. Or maybe his arms were just getting tired of carrying two grown trolls. Now you're running through the forested back terrace of what looks like a department plot after already having cut through a park and a closed shopping mall. All you're focusing on for now is putting more distance between yourselves and any potential pursuers, concentrating on not tripping and braining yourself on a rock as you hightail it through dense shrubbery.

There's blazing fire and police sirens back in the distance. Exactly why you're not sure, but you'd bet money on a disagreement between two or more of building management, your downed kidnapper, and an extraction team cheated of their goods.

Anyway Dave is definitely something, but a god is still up for debate. All you really know for certain is that the human is exceptionally fast, competent at armed combat and can fly, which doesn't preclude him just being some mutant human with delusions of grandeur. You've looked it up and there are deranged Sburbist cults on Earth, plus growing up with weird powers is bound to attract superstitious hogwash. You wouldn't rule it out.

Besides, to be honest, Dave doesn't really feel all that... godly. Mysterious cool guy, yeah; Secret agent you might believe; even superpowered antihero you reckon he has the presence pull off right now. Divine being? Not quite there yet.

Sollux draws closer to you and whispers between gasps of oxygen, "KK... your palemate... is bug... fuck insane."

"He can fly," you point out, just to play Devil's Advocate. You're doing better than the goldblood, but the mile of dead sprint is taking its toll, so you're a bit breathless yourself.

"I can fly."

"Yeah, with *telekinesis*, which any... wiggler's psychokinetics intro text will tell... you that wasn't."

Dave's voice rings back from somewhere in the trees before you, barely audible. "How are you two winded after, like, five minutes of walking? I have it on good authority that trolls are supposed to be the pinnacle of evolutionary engineering, hyper efficient all-terrain machines of death and destruction, you know? There's a twelve years' warranty on this thing, you can't keel over just yet or I'm returning you to mama grub for a refund."

He's leaning against a desiccated tree, waiting for the two of you to catch up. The bastard's not even the slightest bit out of breath. You attempt to resist the urge to cuss him out.
"You fail miserably.

"Fuck you. Humans... are endurance hunters, so can... your judgmental facebulge ejaculate. I could tear any earth monkey limb from limb, jerkass."

"Yeah, but that's talking about hours of running. I mean <We can't all be highbloods>, but this is weak, man. You're like a zoo animal released back into the wild all pawing around haplessly for food but slowly starving to death without anyone to feed it. Don't feed wild animals, they say, but how do you expect them to survive in their natural habitat? Hunt? Live prey? What's that? Never heard of it."

Your face flushes. True, you're out of practice from months on a planet of squishy nonviolent aliens, but your stamina's still respectable for a burgundy (which you're technically not, but you're about going to point that out). On average. When you count the ones half-starved by malnutrition, and the ones partially dismembered from highblood altercations, and the ones chained up in sinistreamer basements than haven't seen the light of day in sweeps...

Fine, your endurance is sort of terrible. Nevertheless, you know most humans would do a lot worse. Dave's just making fun of you again. Dick.

Sollux speaks up, ignoring the jab. "Where are we going? We can't just keep running forever... need shelter. A plan."

Fastidiously diverting attention from the trunkgiant in the block, you see. You suppose it's not exactly wise to question the sanity of the person that saved your life and may or may not be your ticket out of this mess, not to mention possible divinity and certainly anomalously gifted.

"Might as stop here," Dave sighs. "We've got enough distance and here we're isolated enough that we hopefully won't scare the pants off a stranger," he says, surveying the forest surrounding you.

"Wait, what are we doing?" you ask, confused.

He does that smirk, the one that shows up whenever he's up to something you know will make you want to strangle him. The one that screams "bad idea", the one that's the literal physical embodiment of "Dave, no; Dave, YES". You squint at him skeptically.

"You wanted proof, you're getting it. Stow your table and buckle your seatbelts, kids: We're dipping our feet in the timestream."

He reaches forwards and out, palms level and facing down like an operator over an invisible control panel, then in a flash of brilliant crimson, hefty red and black contraptions flash into existence under his fingers. They're the same gear-discs you saw at Dave's place earlier, but now they're spinning on their axes, gleaming and glowing and radiating invisible energy where before they looked dull and dead in comparison.

Is that...

A memory of the LOHAC transcripts stirs: machines of terrible purpose [...] teeth of blood, flesh of light, song spun from void [...] rhythm to beat in time, cycles within cycles.

Recognition clicks.

The timetables.

"What the fuck are th0'the?" Sollux says, stepping back. He wouldn't know the human myths like
you do, but the unearthly power stemming from the rotating discs is impossible not notice at this
distance. You've never felt anything like it, as if a latent sense for magic bullshit is waking up
inside you, but as a psionic precog, you wager that he's even more sensitive than you are.

"Time machines," you answer, not bothering to keep the awe from your voice. "You know the
Maid's Music Boxes? This is the humans' equivalent. They're legendary, myths gluubed straight
from Gl'bgolyb's own dry, withered nook."

"I'm going to take us three hours back in time. Also, ew, dude. I'm not willing to risk fucking up the
timeline more than we need to by going further back, and I already know I pestered myself at that
time, so we're just sealing the loop. That's plenty of time to abscond the fuck out of the city before
they find out the capture failed—before it even happens, if luck goes our way."

"Holy th'it. Are you theriouth?" Sollux mumbles. You don't know if he's talking to you or the god.

Dave's fingers are moving, pulling at invisible strings as the timetables pulse to a soundless beat.
You don't think it's just metaphorical too, with how the Knight's feet are tapping along to the
tempo, timing an eldritch song nobody else can hear. You briefly wonder what it sounds like. And
if you can even listen to it without going shithive maggots.

"Keep your arms within the ride at all times."

His eyebrows scrunch up in focus and his digits start to slow down, instead moving in more
controlled, directed gestures compared to the fleet-footed dance of seconds prior. There's a sense of
tautness permeating you—no, the physical space you occupy. Time itself held in tension. A
terrifying notion strikes you, that if it's the fundamental threads of reality those fingers are
manipulating and feeding into his temporal looms, what happens if they break?

You wonder if you're supposed to hold on to him or anything, but you're afraid to interrupt the
surreal performance unfolding before your eyes. Almost as if reading your mind, Dave answers by
himself.

"Don't worry, just stay right there and try not to move."

Compared to the cosmic fanfare of the build-up, the actual transition is surprisingly
underwhelming.

It's so instantaneous you wonder if there was actually a break in your consciousness, just a dull
whump as pitch-black night blips into orange early twilight, the crackle of crushed grass rudely
displaced by your abrupt materialization, and an unnerving sensation of space-time snapping back
to its natural pseudo-Euclidean state as Dave's knot unravels.

You hear Sollux stumble next to you, apparently ejected a few inches off the ground. Casting a
look around, you're still in the exact same place, just now illuminated by the hue of sunset. Dave's
floating a few feet off the earth, dismissing the timetables to god-knows-where in a wave and a
split-second twist of diffuse yellow.

It was night just now, and suddenly it's... not.

You reach for your palmhusk with trembling fingers before remembering that the other troll stole
it. You don't need to check the time for evidence of your temporal displacement anyway; it's not
like Dave can fake the sun.

"We time traveled," you say, not bothering to keep your voice down—there's nobody tracking you
in this time, and Jesus that's trippy to think. "We fucking time traveled. Am I dreaming? I don't think I'm dreaming."

Spinning around to face the flying human, you throw your hands in the air.

"Well, not like I could possibly not believe you after that. You're the goddamn Knight of Time. The authentic fucking article. Do I prostate myself before your divine presence now? How do I sign up to join your cult?"

You were just blabbering, trying to distract yourself an impending existential breakdown with sarcasm, but the last part makes you hesitate.

"Wait, do you have a cult?"

You wouldn't pin him as the type to start a religion, but if it's one of those power of belief deals that sustains his existence... Is he going to bring you to an underground temple to join his Sburb cabal? Does he have a secret priesthood?

"...No?" he draws out, ending with an audible question mark. "None that I started or officially endorse, if that's what you're asking. Though statistically I'd bet there's some basement weirdos dancing around an effigy of my engorged manhood or something right now, cursing their enemies to I dunno, miss the bus to work?"

He somehow manages to shuffle nervously while floating suspended mid-air. You have a feeling there's more to the story than he's letting on, but he's looking less caught out than embarrassed at this moment, so you let it slide.

You turn your attention to the psionic troll beside you, who appears to be in the throes of some form of mental bluescreen. You snap your fingers in front of his eyes, and that seems to do it for the reboot sequence. "Ugh, fuck it," he whines. "You're an ancient god, thure. Why not? What the fuck ith my life. I don't even care anymore, jutht let me reassemble my casually shattered model of reality."

That seems to be all you're getting out of him for the moment.

Moving your focus back to Dave, you find him with his feet back on solid ground, vanishing his palmhusk with a flip of his fingers and another flash of yellow. What is that? You know what, you're not even going to ask. If you question every impossible ability the time-traveling deity manifests out of thin air, you'll be here all day.

"What time is it?" you ask, almost biting your tongue as you say it. Wow, really, Karkat? The mysteries of the universe splayed at your fingertips, and what you ask is what time is it. Veritable genius going on in that think pan.

It is an relevant question, though. He said three hours, but you have no clue what time it even was before you left.

"Half past four," he responds automatically.

You're safe. For the moment. Until night falls again and the chase starts over, but you have a significant head start. And a god, don't forget that. It's a pleasant whiplash for once, being pulled out of danger in the blink of an eye instead of just into more fire.

With the immediate mortal peril gone and the legendary reality-bending artifacts tucked away, the sheer gravity Dave was commanding a minute ago—or three hours in the future, depending on
how you look at it—is draining away, leaving just the stiff, lanky teenager you know. You want to approach him, a million questions burning in your head, but while he no longer looks like he's about to smite you, something holds you back.

This whole thing feels like back to square one, all those months ago. You, fresh out of a life-threatening ordeal, still struggling to keep your shit together. The human, a stranger in an alien land, offering an olive branch too good to be true but too brazenly forward to refuse. Two worlds once misaligned, brought together, and now jarred out of place once more. Taking out the wedge of secrecy between the two of you should be bringing you closer, but all it's done is further erode that common ground you once thought you had.

What do you even say to the mythological figure you spent a semester studying?

Worse, you're worried not just of what's to come, but what there was before. How much of the Dave you know is real, and how much a persona built for the avatar of an immortal? If Dave is who he claims to be, and by now you have little doubt he is, he's existed since before the dawn of civilization—troll civilization, which is orders of magnitude older than the meager tens of thousands of sweeps humans have with their wiggler society barely clawed out of the dirt. What's your fleeting existence to a being that ancient?

As Sollux loves to point out, you've always been a special case: Dave doesn't exactly avoid people, but he's almost aggressively apathetic towards other students, refusing to engage in conversation beyond the most basic of small talk. It's not contempt, not like how a sea dweller treats a lowblood, but more that most people just fail to capture his interest. Everything else is window dressing to him, background lore to the main plot of his own life.

Maybe he knew this would happen at some point, that the past would catch up with all of you, so he didn't bother making friends he'd have to leave behind anyway. It's the alternate explanation that scares you: If you only register to the Knight of Time because you're—according to him—also a god, it makes it even more important to pin down the exact nature of your existence and how it relates to his. Without the power and memories of his Karkat, are you really a peer, or just a fond reminder of a long-lost friend? A ghost in the machine, an echo found and forgotten in the blink of an eye?

Is he going to figure that this is too much of a clusterfuck to bother with, and just ditch you, wait another couple thousand years for the next iteration of Karkat Vantas and Sollux Captor, and start over?

You slowly lower yourself onto a tree root raised out of the earth, brushing off dirt before you settle in. Dave seems content to let you take a break now that you're out of the danger zone. You guess he's got no shortage of time, since if you dally too long he can just roll you back another couple of hours. Out of the corner of your eye you watch the human (can you even call him that anymore?) pace in circles, thumb rubbing against the pommel of his spiky sword. It's a familiar tic you've seen him repeat with his stationary, his skin, with your skin, even.

Those mannerisms are so vividly human, the diametric opposite of the mastered poise and calm control you would expect from someone who's spent eons walking the world, that it reminds you that it's not clear what he is either. For all you know, the Sburbist gods are titles passed down genetic lines, and humans just keep track of their lineage better than trolls' ancestor-descendant fuckery. Or as you speculated earlier, perhaps you've all been reincarnated through the millennia over and over, and he's just awakened to his legacy earlier than you.

He explained something about timelines earlier, but anything useful you could have gleaned is long-lost in the heat of the moment and superseded by the infinitely more critical revelation of
being the Knight of fucking Time.

You suppose there's only way to find out now.

"Dave," you bark, wincing inside at how loud that came out. He looks up as you call his name. You spend a few seconds composing a question least likely to send everyone trotting off irrelevant tangents, and finally opt for something concrete to start with. "How old are you?" There, straight to the point.

The human smirks and leans on his sword, the tip digging into the ground, and wiggles his eyebrows. Groaning, you realize what he's thinking. "Old enough, sweetheart," he drawls.

You resist the urge to facepalm. The joke's laughably inappropriate for the situation, but it at least cut through the tension. It's comforting, a confirmation that Dave's still the same Dave, shitty timing and all.

"Not what I was referring to, dipshit," you grumble. You're not genuinely angry, but he knows you well enough to get that. "Get your filthy mind out of the precipitation runoff channels. Just answer the fucking question, and I don't mean biologically or whatever nonsense logic your body might work on. Mentally."

"Not absolutely certain, but I'd say probably seventeen," he replies easily.

You barely contain a sigh of relief. That strikes out "ancient immortal to whom your irrelevant lives are dust in the wind", at least. It's actually younger than you expected—don't humans typically go to college older than that? And by the mother grub's blasphemous horns, you're actually older than him. Almost nine sweeps, that's nineteen human years chronologically. Developmentally about eighteen-equivalent, though with hemospectral differences the mapping's fuzzy.

On that thought, that means it wouldn't even be legal here to... wait, hold the fuck up. Stop thinking about concupiscent compatibility, that's not the point. Where did that thought even come from?

"Skirting the 'half your age plus seven' rule there, Karkat," he purrs, exuding smug self-satisfaction. Oh god, now he's onto you. "But I know what you're thinking. I'm not a million-year-old cranky codger, don't worry."

Sollux pipes up next to you, apparently done with his impression of a tree stump. "How doeth that work? You're in our hithtory bookth, so that thould be at leathth ath old ath the Thpeaker, and thee' th goddamn anthient. What, did you time thkip through hithtory? Or were the myth'th juht thullthi all along?"

Dave hesitates before answering with a plain, "I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?" you accuse incredulously. "You're the only primary source in the entire fucking universe, who am I going to ask if not you?"

He straightens up, scrubbing his face with his hands leaving the sword wedged upright in the dirt. "I mean I don't know, okay? I don't know how I got here. I don't know where this bizarro mishmash world came from. I don't know what the hell's going on with the mythology. All I know is I was playing Sburb, fighting some stupid god dogs and trying to get to Jade, and then next thing... I..."

Dave's cartilaginous larynx bulb bobs up and down.

"...I died," he finishes quietly. "Then I was here with the rest of the First Pantheon. I don't know
how pieces of the Medium got here, or why people started worshipping us as gods, I mean technically it's not an inaccurate description of our tier, but that's not... urrgh. Why did you think I'm studying Sburbology? I'm trying to put together what happened myself."

That's... not very encouraging, if you're being completely honest.

His fists are clenched. With a flash of panic, you realize that this is stressing him out more than you thought.

"I wouldn't put it past you to study yourself just to stroke your overinflated ego," you snort, trying to lift the mood with a lighthearted jab. Dave's closing up again—if he died, no wonder—which is making you regret prodding at the topic. Seems like upending your entire worldview hasn't done a thing against your idiotic pale crush: you never thought you'd find a god pitiable, but here you are, making the feeblest attempt in history at consoling a distraught deity.

The god twists into a smile, and you jot that as a win in the nonexistent scoreboard nobody gives a grubfondling fuck about. "Heh. You know, most of the stuff chronicled in the Consort Ruins never happened. They're supposed to be quest directions, and we pretty much skipped most of the cool things they were prophesying. Too busy trying to break the game. At least we didn't do that same thing as you did and just try to kill our denizens after powerleveling all the way up the echeladder."

Given that an hour ago you thought none of the stories in Sburbist legends ever happened, you're not too bummed about some of them turning out less than completely accurate, but you take a mental note anyway. It's actually a bit of a relief knowing they might be embellished, because some of the canonical feats from the Witch of Space (Jade Harley, you peg because Rose is definitely the Seer) shoot way past impressive and deep into the abjectly terrifying.

Really, most of the things in the legends are mindfuckingly insane when interpreted literally.

"I understand half the wordth in that tententhe," Sollux grumbles. "Tell me about uth. What'th up with that?"

The goldblooded troll's taking this remarkably in stride, you note. Though it is possible he's just bottling all of his incredulity and internal crises to erupt all over you later in private like a putrefied spurt whale, just as you're been repressing all of your freakout quota overflow into silent internal screaming and slightly-louder-than-usual external shouting, and he did already had an inkling of something being up with Dave beforehand even if he was likely thinking more along the lines of slavery rings and conspiraterrorists and not literal gods.

"I think you've already guessed, but you're—were? are? The Mage of Doom," Dave says, nodding at Sollux. He turns to you. "Knight of Blood, obviously."

Of course. With only one of each caste and one hemoanon, you're not exactly overflowing with choices here. With that in mind, the rest is self-evident.

"Who are the otherth?" Sollux demands. "Do we know them? I haven't theen you thtalking anyone elthe, unlethh... fuck, don't tell me that weeb moron Tegiri'th in on thith too. I'm going to flip my shit if that'th true."

"Jesus, Sollux," you groan. How has he not figured it out yet? "It's mind-bogglingly obvious. Twelve gods, one of every color. Use that mutant cranium for something constructive for once."

The target of your ire makes a guttural huh? noise of incomprehension.

"Worse, dude. Vriska." Dave drags out the syllables of the cerulean's name with a shit-eating grin.
Sollux looks like he's gagging, expression contorted into a mix of disgust and disbelief.

"Oh." He pauses, "...Oh. Goddammit, does that mean her dumb dice are the real thing? And Eridan's Crosshairs?"

"I'm afraid so."

"No, hold up," you interrupt. "Hold off on the smarmy asshole soundbites for a second. Explain this to me. So the human gods popped in from another universe, but what about the troll gods? I sure don't remember cutting up a gigantic ugly-as-fuck carapace eel. Did you say we're alternate versions? So is there a real Knight of Blood out there? Is there a mortal Dave hanging around Earth?"

"I don't think so?" Dave says, frowning again. "I couldn't find any me duplicates. The troll gods grew up the same as you, but the events that led to you ascending—though not all of you technically reached god tier—didn't happen in this timeline, which makes no sense because without the game you'd never have been ectocloned, so this should be a doomed timeline, but it's not. Time here works completely differently, actually."

"Wow, more words I don't understand," you deadpan.

Though you say that, a picture is starting to come together. The gods, from what Dave's said, were never on ancient Alternia and Earth. The story of their apotheosis in another world somehow made it into the legends of this, and through some inexplicable turn of fate, the first human pantheon was transported here to meet versions of the trolls that never ascended. All of this apparently happened through a "game", also called Sburb? Which the field must be named after somehow?

But all of this is only creating new questions. Why are the legends medieval-setting if Dave's implying that the gods lived in the modern age? What did the Knight of Blood do to ascend that you didn't? Can you get god powers anymore at this point? Where did Sburb come from, and why does the game exist, and what is it even supposed to do?

Did they lose? And what does that mean for them? What does it mean for you?

"Look, I think it'll be better if I just start from the beginning," Dave says. "And that's going to take a really long-ass time, so why don't we get out of this city, find somewhere to hole up—I have cash, so don't worry—and then I'll fulfill my ultimate destiny as dedicated exposition fairy, okay?"

You glance at Sollux, who shrugs noncommittally, but you're certain he's itching for some answers as much as you do. Still, Dave's right: you're on a deadline here, and it's more important that you get to safety first. You'll have plenty of time to grill him for answers once you have a real room, and not to mention dinner, as your growling digestion bladder reminds you.

"So we're just leaving?" you ask, already knowing the answer. "Just skedaddling for the hills, never coming back? I don't have my documents. I don't have my phone."

Dave warps a palmhusk—your palmhusk, you realize—into his hand and tosses it at you. You hastily scramble to catch it. Oh thank god, you didn't think you'd ever see the thing again. "I picked it up from the kidnapper. Your documents..." he trails off. "We won't be needing them where we're going."

If that's not really fucking ominous, you don't know what is.

"They're justt going to keep coming," Sollux states. "If we thtay here, we're thitting dutch."
So that's it. Only been here for a month, just gotten used to the routine of university life, and now you're just going to drop everything and go. You were actually starting to genuinely like it too. The thought of saying goodbye for good sends an unexpectedly poignant twang of wistfulness down your chest for how much you used to claim to hate this planet and everything on it.

Yet you glance between Sollux and Dave, and you know they're right. Staying any longer is equivalent to signing your death warrant. Evading Imperial intelligence is a nigh-impossible task in itself without tying a hand behind your back; you can't afford any more handicaps.

At least, you reflect grudgingly, everyone you really care about in this city is coming with you.

In the end, it's not really a choice, nor your decision to make.

"Fine," you concede. "How are we doing this?"

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if anyone saw that coming, but here we go. If you fudge Terezi:
Remember a little, it's even canon-compliant! So many tags I could add, but I'll hold off on them until maybe the work's finished so newcomers aren't spoiled.
In the myths, the Knight of Blood was always a tragic character, doomed to making the same mistakes over and over, grappling for straws of validation from his peers while perpetually fighting a losing battle against the worst parts of himself. You don't know why you thought the real thing would be any different.

You're sprawled across the white sheets of tonight's room's bed, listening to the patter of Sollux's showering a door away. The three of you have checked into a bed and breakfast on the outskirts of a small town, a hefty few dozen miles from the University. It's been hours of slogging along a decrepit motorway in a coach, but right this very moment all you care is that you're safe and burying your face in the fluffiest mattress to ever grace your exhausted body. You think you finally understand why humans use these things now.

A thump interrupts your recuperatory bliss, and you roll over just in time to catch the signature whisk of warped space as a materializing Dave captchalogue his timetables. His damp hair's slicked back in clumps, but there are a few stray wisps swaying weightlessly in defiance of gravity as the boy kicks himself off the carpeted floor, rotating slowly in the air as he drifts towards you. Showoff.

"How was the future?"

"You'll find out in half an hour," he replies, arresting his momentum with his mind as he comes to a stop above you, suspended upside-down with his face just a meter from yours. "Enjoying your nap?"

You groan, grabbing a pillow from the left and smushing it into your face. "I was, until you showed up."

"Sorry to interrupt your happy fun time with the bed. Are you done deflowering her virgin sheets yet? I'm telling you, when we get deformed half-troll half-furniture wiggles erupting out of the bedsprings, you're taking responsibility."

"The slumber platform can raise them alone," you grunt. "Or, you know, actual lusii."

"Harsh, man. Single parenthood is no joke."

Spending all night crammed into tiny bus seats with the restless human has drained most of the awe and novelty out of the bizarre new reality of your life. The god popped in and out a few more times before you caught your ride, tying up loose ends and coming back with your tickets newly retroactively pre-ordered a week ago, so the casual use of temporal powers to catch a future shower when you and Sollux are hogging the bathroom in the present doesn't even faze you anymore. Your life's trained you to adapt quickly.
Unfortunately, with the shock of the cosmological revelation fading away, the menace of the Alternian Empire's targeted wrath is coming back to haunt you. God or not, you're not sure Dave can fight off an literal army of trolls if the Condesce comes knocking. Or maybe he can: the legends aren't that consistent about the gods' capabilities, in one tale able to cleave through the Dersian chain in a single swing, in another struggling to hold their own against swarms of common monsters. Now that Dave's characterized Sburb as a game, you start to wonder if that's because they come from different stages in their power progression. If this Dave's the finalized Knight of Time, he might really be able to lay waste to armies with just a sword.

But even if he can, you can't just stay on the run forever, fighting trolls off the rest of your life, which is why you're hoping he has a more substantial long-term plan than "avoid people and hope for the best". This unremarkable hiding spot is as much of a refuge in obscurity as you'll get for now, but you're still uneasy with the thought of being ambushed out of nowhere by a resourceful Laughsassin at any moment.

"We don't have enough beds. Are we taking shifts for guard duty?" you ask doubtfully. You decided not to split the party, but the only rooms they had left had just one double bed.

Or does Dave not need to sleep? No, you know for a fact he does, with how many times he's dozed off on you watching movies together on your husktop. Another fond memory from a home you've been forced to abandon, which is looking more and more like a recurring theme in your life. Though, assuming the god doesn't ditch you at the next appropriate opportunity, you'll be spending a lot of time with him for the foreseeable future, so there's still plenty of time to snuggle up in bed when you're not running for your life.

Ah, shit. Your thoughts are drifting to weird places again and the blush is back in full force. Thank troll Jesus for the pillow suffocating you right now. It's fucking infuriating the way your brain's been acting up. It's like Dave's heroic rescue toggled a switch in your pituitary gland and now you're tripping over flushed impulses everywhere you go, thankfully most of them contained to your inner thoughts.

This is every shitty action movie you've ever despised, a damsel in distress swooning heartwise the second the protagonist pulls off an audacious and torturously impractical act of righteous, gory violence at the big climax. Even worse, because you were already waxing pale towards Dave before—you like you could ever forget that embarrassing clusterfuck you handled stunningly—you're landing yourself firmly in that unapologetic wish-fulfillment redflip subgenre pandering towards the masturbatory fantasies of the 6-sweep-old Eridans of Alternia.

The worst part is that your conciliatory leanings towards Dave haven't changed, just been weirdly contaminated by specks of brighter red. Or maybe it's a silver lining, since you've established that moirallegiance is pretty much a dead end for you and him? You never finished your earlier conversation with Dave, which even accounting for the temporal jump you swear seems much longer ago than the mere hours it's been.

Fuck, dammit, time-out. Your quadrants aren't what you need to be worrying about right now. There are logistics to be handled, life-threatening problems to be solved. Important mysteries about the universe to be unravelled. Assassins to be graphically murdered by.

"...No?" Dave says, furrowing his brows as you peek above the edge of your facial shield. What were you talking about? Guard shifts, right. "I figured I would just going to take watch for the night and travel back to fit in some sleep after. Actually, scratch that, I'll sleep first. Fuck good practice, I'm tired."

"Still no space for three," you point out.
"I'll make a pile of capes and sleep in that," he shrugs. "We used to do that a lot on the meteor, leave them around for the Mayor to complain about. Good times, man."

**Capes?** You voice the question, and he gasps in mock outrage.

"You haven't seen it yet? That's a goddamn crime against humanity. I'm calling the UN, Geneva Conventions being broken here, yes sir. How are you going to bow down in deference to my glorious personage without the image of my rad cape fresh in your mind?"

He spins around as he spreads his arms in a grand flourish, and the air ripples.

Thick streams of deep red coalesce from empty nothing, vapor spinning into threads weaving into the same silky fabric making up the rest of his clothes. It forms from the neck down, the cloth rushing over his shoulders and swirling into thick falling folds behind his collar, before in one smooth cascade the liquid color floods down his back and outwards, precipitating into a sweeping cloak of shadowy crimson.

The cape billows with his spin and blocks out the ceiling lamps for a brief second, which provides the brief distraction for the miles of red fabric to splat you in the face, knocking the pillow out of your weak grip with its surprising momentum. If your horns weren't pathetic nubs the cloth might have gotten caught, but alas as they stand, all the faceful of magic cape does is drag a startled yelp out of you as you scrabble to get it out of your eyes.

When Dave finally draws away and grants you sweet liberation from the unprovoked accessorial assault, there'd not a trace of remorse to be seen. "Once a cape magnet, always a cape magnet," he mutters. You glare at him.

"Are you trying to strangle me with that rag? Golly gee, finally had enough of Karkat, time to dust off the oldest trick in the beleaguered moirail handbook! Points for creativity, I'll give you that, but try a real woolsack next time. You couldn't asphyxiate a legless wiggler with that dishcloth."

"I dunno, you seem pretty satisfied with its performance," he remarks.

You follow his line of sight and snatch your hand back once you realize you've been unconsciously pawing at the aforementioned neck blanket this whole time, which is inexplicably still flowing in the nonexistent wind. Fuck.

"Are you sure you're a troll, dude? All you've done today is fondle everything soft and fluffy. Just done ravaging the mattress and now taking the party to my poor innocent cape? Isn't that supposed to be, like, a mammalian trait or something? I'm reporting you for cultural appropriation, you imperialist bastard, just wait. The social justice police is coming knocking. Say goodbye to your slime cocoons and creepy-ass electronics, 'cuz you'll be broke out of culture after we're done with reparations."

You snort. "Sure. Take the caste warfare and clown church and fetishistic ritualized violence while you're at it. Troll culture sucks fucking bulge."

Dave pokes a tongue out in disgust, but the amusement in his eyes is evident. "I suppose you're fine if I nab your precious quadrants and romantic n-drangles, then? Think of all the shitty angst and comedic misunderstandings I'll be able to wring out of this social topology once I multiply the hate-pity polyhedrons with humanity's collective confused boner over which tabs fit in what slots."

"Touch my movies and I'll end you, Strider," you growl, a smile tugging at your mouth.

"Think of the higher dimensions of contrived relationship drama we'd be able to reach, Karkat."
Think of the new frontiers of romance just waiting to be plundered. How could you stand in the face of progress? Do you hear that, Karkat? That wailing in the distance. The hammering of despairing little fists on tear-stained soil. It's the grief-stricken weeping of all the 13-year-old girls whose grand polyshipping dreams you've ruthlessly crushed with your astonishing selfishness.”

You roll your eyes, swatting the floating cloth away as it drifts too close in its weightless meander again. Dave's cape shadows you two from the ceiling light, casting a backdrop against his dim figure and pale skin. Your eyes lock, and this time you don't break away, peering through the shades into his crimson irises as he looks back at yours. You're struck with the urge to pull him close, to close your eyes and bury your face in his neck, and you're certain he'd let you without a moment's hesitation. He's practically daring you right now, with that lazy look on his face.

You're hesitating nonetheless. There's so many things wrong with this picture right now you don't even know where to begin. The ambiguous legitimacy of your fundamental personhood, the one-sided memories underscoring and muddying your entire friendship, the laughably imbalanced power dynamic at play here. The unresolved conflict between your respective cultural preconceptions of romance, the unresolved conflict within yourself about what you even feel or want to feel or think is right to feel.

Yet despite everything, you like Dave. He makes you feel happy, dammit, and you know the converse is true too. Whatever was holding him back before is moot now that you and Sollux got yourself swamped nook-deep in mortal peril all by yourself. You're goddamn entrenched in this supernatural business already, and to add to that you're on the run from the Alternian Fleet and will all probably be dead by the end of the sweep. So fuck insecurity, fuck the social trappings of your native culture, and fuck that nagging voice of existential doubt at the back of your head.

Why not go for it? Whatever "it" is, anyway. You can find out together.

You shuffle yourself up into a better position preparing for... something. Dave tenses, sensing the subtle change in your demeanor.

So of fucking course, Sollux chooses this moment to finish his century-long shower.

The troll steps out of the bathroom, horns jutting from a head of damp hair and a towel slung around his neck. He pauses as he absorbs the scene in front of him.

"What'th with the cape?"

"Comes with my god tier pajamas," Dave says with edged cheer. His face is a convoluted mix of relief and disappointment at the interruption. To be honest, you're feeling somewhat the same. "I just don't normally manifest it since a meteor drifting through the terrifying void of the Furthest Ring is one thing, but I look silly walking around in public with that on. Also, it gets caught on stuff like you wouldn't believe. The cool factor just barely makes up for it."

He told you about his magic clothes earlier when you took a brief shopping break at the bus stop. He'd captchalogued all of the important stuff from his lair before coming to save your sorry asses, but there wasn't the temporal wiggle room to go back and nab your belongings from your room without melting down the timeline with a paradox, so all you and Sollux had was the few things you had on you when you got kidnapped, which notably did not include extra changes of clothes.

While you two were picking out university merchandise in a tourist gift shop, Dave explained that he hasn't playacting his own divine persona (only) as an extended massage of his inflamed prostate, though you wouldn't put it past him doing to for the irony anyway. He can apparently manifest free god tier clothes at will, and turns out that's more than enough to make him give up
"They're self-cleaning and self-repairing," he said gleefully. "Even if they get damaged, I can just reform the whole thing with a thought. Plus they're hella comfortable and always perfectly fitted. Why wouldn't I wear them all the time? They're literally the only clothes I own."

Then he went on an inane spiel about being human-married to it and never giving it up through toil nor triumph or something while you two ignored him entirely. You won't bother recounting it and you couldn't if you wanted. Dave's rambles are occasionally entertaining and, yes, endearing, but it's not the sort of thing you bother committing to long-term memory.

"What are you doing?" Sollux growls, his yellow eyes tracking Dave as he tugs the cape over his neck and tosses it over the side of the bed. It freewheels mid-air for half a second before remembering that gravity exists and plopping on the carpet.

"Making a pile," he says, summoning another copy with a flourish, blood-red threads swirling out of air. He repeats his previous motion, settling another sheet to the floor.

"If you two start shooshpapping each other, I'm leaving," Sollux states flatly. You groan. That's it, moment of soulful connection is officially ruined.

"It's for sleeping," you clarify. "We have three people and one bed."

The troll frowns. "I thought we'd be taking shifts."

Yes! Standard military protocol. You raise a vindicated eyebrow at Dave, grateful for the distraction. His plan is silly and he should feel bad.

"I'll just go back in time tomorrow to guard us. My sleep schedule's fucked enough already, you're not taking my full night's sleep from me. And you guys need rest too."

"Doesn't work if we get assassinated in our sleep before you go back," you point out. Is that how it works? You don't know.

Dave raises a finger. "First of all, I'm conditionally immortal, let's just get that out of the way. I can only die a heroic or just death, which it's kinda vague if it counts in some cases, but as long I haven't kicked any puppies this week an assassination is definitely not going to stick. I'll just pop back up and behead the fucker then go back, which makes a paradox, so it's impossible for that sequence of events to happen. So it won't."

So he can die, if under very specific circumstances. That's good to know. Bad news, since you generally prefer your friends not dead, but important information.

He lifts a second finger. "Second, future me will check in before we go to bed, and also send a green light back when his shift is done to confine the range of stable possibilities. So I can't get, like, sedated and kidnapped off to space or something."

"Can't you just do the second part without coming back to guard us?" Sollux asks. "Greenlight when you wake up?"

"It's easier on the timeline," he explains as he adds another cape to the pile. "By themselves transient loops can take a shit ton of iterations to decay to steady state, and that's if you don't get unstable cycles, which will seriously fuck up your mind. Think of future me as a corrective agent to accelerate convergence, prune the branching, broaden the viable solution space. I'm the time guy, trust me on this. Leaving too much to the whims of paradox space is asking for trouble, and I'm
already bending the rules taking my beauty nap first."

The goldblood huffs. "Thounds complicated. Aren't you the time god? Thhouldn't you be able to do whatever the fuck you want?"

Dave shrugs. "Used to be worse. If you didn't close the loop first try, you just straight-up died and doomed everyone in your timeline to eternal limbo and depressing irrelevance for infinity. This is easy mode in comparison: the worst you can get is a shitty headache and a few temporary cracks in paradox space."

"Whatever you say." You scowl. "We can still take shifts. Just pop us back it time and we'll take watch, it's literally the same thing. You've done enough for us already."

"Dude, it's fine, I'm used to it."

"You regularly watch uth thleep at night?" Sollux snorts.

"No! No." Dave backpedals quickly. "I mean I'm used to fucking up my sleep schedule with convoluted temporal logistics. Besides, it's a moot point anyway. Taking people with me is an order of magnitude more stressful on the timeline, so we're not doing that unless we have a damn good reason to. Need to save my time fuckery quota for serious business."

Ugh, this is going nowhere, and it's getting late. He can take guard duty if he wants, but there's more things on the agenda tonight. There are questions, so many questions, and a tale to hear.


He blinks in incomprehension. You roll your eyes, snapping your fingers impatiently. "You owe us explanations, I've haven't forgotten. Give us the full story."

"Right, I did say that," he sighs as the other troll takes the other side of the bed. "Can't it wait until tomorrow? I'm tired. We're all worn out."

"The fuck we are," Sollux snarls. You add for good measure yourself, "Just do it, Dave, or I swear to god I'll shove my hand down your protein chute and drag the answers out of you myself."

Dave lets out an annoyed grumble and lets go of flight, plummeting the few feet into the mound of fabric that's now grown to almost the level of the bed. As you peek over the edge of the platform, he rolls over to face back up, iridescent red eyes staring up at you, shades captchalogueed before he hit the pile.

"Fine. How do I start? Time isn't exactly linear in paradox space, so... might as well start with your story? You're probably the most interested in that anyway."

No, you have absolutely no interest in finding out how another version of yourself created a universe. You resist the urge to roll your eyes again.

Dave clears his throat and you roll yourself back over the edge of the slumber platform, settling in. Your quadrant musings are forgotten, displaced by nervous anticipation. You'd be lying if you said you weren't anxious: you're about to hear the secrets of creation firsthand from a seventeen-year-old lying on a pile of capes in a dingy hotel room.

This is it, the big reveal, when you'll finally understand what all of this means.
"So it all started when Aradia got led to a set of mystic ruins by the voices of the dead..."

You're curled up on your side of the bed, listening to the soft respiratory hiss of a sleeping Sollux on your left and Dave's corresponding human snore on your right. The moonlight streaming in from the windows is more than enough for clear night vision, and right now you're idly looking at the human roll around in his makeshift bed as you wonder what's going on in his head.

Does he just have regular dreams now that there isn't a Derse or dream bubbles to manifest in? Does he dream about dream bubbles? Does he "awaken" twice, once to realize the memory is a dream bubble and a second time to realize the dream bubble is just a vanilla dream?

You watch him bump his foot against the leg of the corner table and produce a sleepy grunt at the unexpected contact.

This is weird. You're being creepy.

Flopping back over to face the ceiling, you elect to keep staring at the rhombus patterns in the tiling instead. This is why you told Dave to take the bed. You knew you wouldn't be able to sleep, but he pulled some bullshit excuse about not letting you sully his precious capes and you let it drop like an idiot. You're got so much processing to do queued up after the epic saga he unloaded on you that you're not sure you'd want to fall asleep even if you were able to.

He didn't describe your grisly deaths in excruciating detail or anything, plus according to Dave he found out most of it second-hand himself, but you can see every scene drawn out in vivid detail through your mind's eye all the same. Kanaya, vaporized by raw psionic power, or with a hole blasted through her lifeless chest, or dripping violet blood down her silver chainsaw. Eridan, bisected by the same blade, splattered guts and royal ichor pooling on gray tiles. Terezi impaled on her own cane sword, Feferi bleeding in a pile of horns, Tavros' lance rammed through his chest, Nepeta battered and dead in a puddle of purple-dotted olive.

Yourself, stabbed over and over, dying once and twice and thrice, sinking into searing lava with eyes wide open. Dave, twice run through both front and back, Caledfwlch slipping from his hands as he slumps onto the Jade Harley's lifeless body.

You think about your other self, and it's like looking in a mirror and seeing another Karkat staring back at you, one irrevocably fractured by the game and glued back together bit by bit, all jagged edges and missing pieces. You don't think you envy him anymore. Dave didn't tell you outright, but you know how to read between the lines: you appointed yourself the leader and ended up with half your players dead plus a Genesis Frog so fucked up its cancer exploded out of the decomposing carcass to trash your session as well. If the current you is a mess, that other you must have been an epic disaster of guilt and self-flagellation, and worse of all, it isn't even undeserved like half the slumps you get into: extenuating circumstances can only go so far in justifying bad decisions that your closest friends paid for.

In the myths, the Knight of Blood was always a tragic character, doomed to making the same mistakes over and over, grappling for straws of validation from his peers while perpetually fighting a losing battle against the worst parts of himself. You don't know why you thought the real thing would be any different.

Were the denizens why your session was such a dysfunctional wreck? The Alternian ancients spoke of the mythical creatures as destroyers, creators, heralds, cultivators, but above all as crossroads. Living manifestations of The Choice, cosmic executioners of each god's paradoxically preordained but also willfully chosen destiny.
Apparently, most of the real gods just skipped straight to killing them for sweet loot.

Your palmhusk dings on the bedside table to your right, and you're grateful for the distraction, though you're not sure who could be messaging you. Wait, isn't having a network-enabled mobile device a security risk when you're fleeing from an interstellar empire?

Musings on liabilities are stalled by the blinking Trollian notification at the top of your screen as you unlock the screen, indicating a message from turntechGodhead.

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG]

TG: dude i can hear you rolling around down there
TG: your restless troll rump rustling the sheets
TG: whats on your mind
TG: spill to dr strider
TG: let me take out my notebook and pen
TG: tell me about your mother
TG: jk i know what youre thinking about
TG: its the game right
TG: its always the game

You prop yourself up on your elbow and lean over. Dave's still sound asleep.

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG]

CG: I'LL GO AHEAD AND ASSUME YOU'RE THE FUTURE DAVE THAT CAME BACK TO WATCH US.
CG: UNLESS YOU CAN SEND TEXT MESSAGES ACROSS TIME ON TOP OF ALL THE BULLSHIT POWERS YOU ALREADY HAVE.
CG: WAIT, SHIT. CAN YOU DO THAT?
TG: actually i cant
TG: all my trans temporal messaging is just throwing literal slips of paper and doomed selves through the time stream
TG: still stuck in the medieval ages over here
TG: but trollian could do that back in my timeline
TG: im still pissed about that by the way
TG: i mean pesterchum is great and all
TG: but
TG: custom themes isnt exactly on the same level as holding a viewport to all of time and space in your palm
TG: its not a troll technology is better than human tech thing because its obviously a function of paradox space and also you cant break time in this universes trollian which was disappointing
TG: so
TG: the only explanation is we were fucking scammed
TG: fleeced out of the nonexistent boonbucks we paid to install a chat that can't even do one simple thing like establish self contained stable time loops and transmit information back in time and let us spy on little kids from all the way across the infinite void of the furthest ring like the most incompetent transuniversal pedophiles in paradox space
CG: RIGHT, YOU TOLD ME ABOUT THAT.
AND I STILL STAND BY MY JUDGMENT THAT IT'S THE DUMBEST FUCKING THING I'VE EVER HEARD OF AND WE DID THE DUMBEST FUCKING THINGS WITH IT.
CG: ALTERNATE TIMELINE (ORIGINAL TIMELINE?) KARKAT'S BRILLIANT PLAN FOR DEALING WITH THE IMMINENT DEMISE OF EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING HE
KNEW AND LOVED WAS TO FUCKING TROLL HUMAN CHILDREN IN ANOTHER UNIVERSE THROUGH SPACE INTERNET?
CG: WHAT THE FUCK WAS HE THINKING?
CG: DID HE BASH OUT HIS THINK PAN ON A ROCK SOMEWHERE ON HIS EPIC QUEST OF TRANSCENDENT DESTINY OR WAS SIX-SWEEP-OLD ME ACTUALLY THAT UNCONSCIONABLY STUPID?
CG: I MEAN I ALWAYS KNEW I WAS AND WILL ALWAYS BE A SAD EXCUSE FOR A TROLL, BUT THIS IS NEW HEIGHTS OF MOUNT SHITSTAIN PATHETIC.
TG: oh so is that what were doing
TG: bottomless spiral of self loathing and existential despair
TG: karkats favorite bedtime activity across every iteration and timeline
TG: cant get any shuteye without the mediculler prescribed dosage of patented karkat angst tm
TG: look
TG: it wasnt your fault
TG: any of it
CG: THANKS, GENIUS. OBVIOUSLY? I WASN'T EVEN THERE.
TG: and it wasnt other timeline yous fault either so shut up and listen to me
TG: i knew you were going to do this
TG: i was just hoping you would at least put it off till tomorrow so we could hash this out when youre not falling asleep on your feet
TG: but now is fine too i guess
CG: I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO SAY.
CG: I'M NOT PERSONALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR VRISKA BEING AN OBSESSIVE CONTROLLING ASSHOLE, OR ERIKAN BEING A TRAITOROUS JACKASS, OR GAMZEE TURNING OUT JUST LIKE EVERY OTHER INSANE MURDEROUS CLOWN WHEN HE'S NOT DRUGGED TO HIS TONSILS WITH SOPOR.
CG: EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED DID BECAUSE THE ALPHA TIMELINE DEMANDED IT, AND IF OTHER ME DID ANYTHING ELSE IT WOULD HAVE JUST DOOMED US ALL, SO HE'S AUTOMATICALLY ABSOLVED OF ANY AND ALL BLAME FOR ALL OF MY SHITTY DECISIONS.
CG: HIS SHITTY DECISIONS.
CG: FUCK, PRONOUNS ARE HARD.
TG: well yeah you say that but you clearly dont believe it
TG: because in the end youre still moping under your snuggleplane feeling sorry for yourself

You stare at the red text on the screen of your palmhusk. Do you believe what you said? It's all things you've pieced together from Dave's narration, and you guess it's all more or less arguably correct, but you don't think you problem is as much with the factual validity of the statements as what they mean in the grand scheme.

You spend a few more seconds composing your thoughts. You'd really expected a bit more time to stew in your misery before having to confront it with someone.

CG: NO, I DO.
CG: IT JUST DOESN'T CHANGE ANYTHING.
CG: SO WHAT IF EVERYTHING HAD TO HAPPEN THAT WAY? SO WHAT IF I DID THE BEST I COULD?
CG: THE FACT IS THAT IT WASN'T ENOUGH. IF YOU TRACE THE CHAIN OF CAUSALITY FAR ENOUGH BACK YOU CAN JUSTIFY ANYTHING AS SOMETHING ELSE'S FAULT, AS A PREORDAINED INEVITABILITY OF A DETERMINISTIC UNIVERSE.
CG: AND MAYBE I'M DOING THE SAME THING BY PLACING THE FAULT OF OTHER
TROLLS' MURDERSPREES AND NUMEROUS LUDICROUS FUCKUPS ON MYSELF. MAYBE IF YOU PUT A MORE INTELLIGENT, EMOTIONALLY STABLE AND ACTUALLY COMPETENT TROLL IN MY PLACE THEY WOULD HAVE DONE THE EXACT SAME THING AND PAILED THE TINY BARKBEAST EQUALLY AS DRAMATICALLY.

CG: BUT IT STILL HAPPENED UNDER MY WATCH. OTHER ME'S WATCH, I MEAN. AND EVEN IF I WASN'T MUCH OF ONE FROM WHAT YOU SAID, BEING A LEADER MEANS TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE OUTCOME EVEN IF IT WAS LITERALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO AVOID.

CG: BUT THAT'S NOT WHY I FEEL LIKE SHIT.

CG: AND YES, I DO FEEL LIKE SHIT, AS YOU SO TACTFULLY OBSERVED. I'M NOT GOING TO BOTHER DENYING THAT.

CG: I'M NOT REALLY THAT KARKAT, AND MAYBE IT'S SHIRKING RESPONSIBILITY BUT I'M NOT THAT BROKEN UP ABOUT HIS TOTAL INEPTITUDE? NOT INSO FAR AS TAKING IT ON MYSELF AS A PERSONAL FAILURE. HE CAN TAKE ALL THE BLAME FOR ALL I'M CONCERNED.

TG: uh

TG: so what's the problem

CG: I'M GETTING THERE, DAVE.

CG: I JUST.

CG: FUCK.

CG: I WILL FIND YOU AND GUT YOU AS MANY TIMES AS IS NEEDED FOR YOUR DEATH TO BE CONSIDERED JUST IF YOU SO MUCH AS BLAB THIS TO ANYONE ELSE.

TG: my lips are sealed

TG: fucking superglued together

TG: doctor patient confidentiality

CG: ALSO I'M AWARE THAT HUMANS DON'T DO MOIRAILS, BUT JUST SO YOU KNOW, THAT WAS A FLAGRANT PALE SOLICITATION YOU PULLED ON ME.

CG: BUT WE'RE ALL PROBABLY GOING TO DIE SOON, SO I DON'T EVEN GIVE A FUCK ANYMORE.

TG: cool

TG: but were not going to die

TG: fuck that noise

You roll your eyes even though you know Dave can't see it. Or maybe he can—where the hell is he anyway? Future Dave just vanished after he dropped in to confirm everything will be fine, but he's clearly still around somewhere if he's pestering you right now. How did he know you weren't sleeping? Or do you tell present Dave later after he wakes up so he knows when to text you after he goes back in time?

You also notice how he completely dodged the point of your statement, but you take it as a small victory that he isn't immediately making denial noises.

CG: HA HA.

TG: but

TG: go on

CG: YEAH, FINE.

CG: IT'S HARD TO EXPLAIN EXACTLY WHY.

CG: IT'S REALLY GODDAMN MORONIC.

CG: MAYBE START WITH SOME CONTEXT.

CG: YOU KNOW HOW WHEN I WAS A KID I WANTED TO BE A THRESHECUTIONER.

CG: I DIDN'T REALLY CARE ABOUT THE JOB. MY TINY UNDERDEVELOPED BRAIN
AT THE TIME JUST THOUGHT THEY WERE REALLY BADASS.
TG: you realize youre talking about yourself from like just 5 years ago
CG: SHUT UP, I'M TALKING.
CG: TO BE COMPLETELY HONEST, BASICALLY MOST OF MY INTERESTS AROUND
THAT TIME COULD BE CHALKED UP TO "I THOUGHT IT WAS REALLY BADASS". I
USED TO MOCK MY FRIENDS FOR FLARPING, BUT I WOULD PROBABLY BE THERE
MYSELF GETTING THROWN OFF CLIFFS BY VRISKA IF I WEREN'T SO AFRAID OF
BEING EXPOSED.
CG: AND ACTUALLY I THINK MY BLOOD WAS MAYBE EVEN FEEDING MORE INTO
THAT OBSESSION?
CG: ALL TROLLS GET CONSCRIPTED INTO THE FLEET ON MATURITY, SO HALF OF
OUR JOBS INVOLVE MURDER AND VIOLENCE IN SOME WAY. IT'S NOT EXACTLY
HARD TO FIND OPPORTUNITIES TO WRECK SHIT AND KICK ASSES. CONQUEST ISN'T
SOMETHING A NORMAL TROLL NEEDS TO ASPIRE TO. IT'S JUST HAPPENS TO THEM
WHETHER THEY WANT IT OR NOT.
CG: BUT I WOULD HAVE BEEN CULLED ON SIGHT JUST STEPPING INTO A
BARRACKS. I HAD NO CHANCE OF BEING EVEN A NAMELESS FOOT SOLDIER. A
FUNDAMENTAL CORNERSTONE OF TROLLDOM, DENIED TO IMPRESSIONABLE
WIGGLER KARKAT. IT'S NO WONDER I END UP HOPELESSLY ROMANTICIZING
THE ENTIRE NOTION IN MY HEAD.
CG: HONESTLY, I THINK MY MUTATION REALLY FUCKED ME UP AS A KID. HARD
TO SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR YOURSELF WHEN YOU WON'T LIVE PAST
YOUR TENTH SWEEP.
CG: EVENTUALLY I GREW UP AND REALIZED ALTERNIA SUCKS AND THAT BEING
CANNON FODDER FOR HIC'S PET WARS ISN'T FUN OR PARTICULARLY GREAT FOR
YOUR LIFE EXPECTANCY, AND BY THE TIME I ESCAPED TO EARTH I'D MOSTLY
INTERNALIZED THAT I'D NEVER BE PART OF THAT PARTICULAR INDUSTRIAL
DEATH MACHINE. WHICH IS FINE BY ME. I LIKE LIVING.
CG: BUT I NEVER STOPPED WANTING TO BE BADASS SOMEDAY. TO BE RESPECTED.
TO BE BIGSHOT, IN CHARGE OF SOMETHING HUGE AND REALLY IMPORTANT.
CG: NOT THAT I'M NOT HAPPY TO JUST BE ALIVE, BUT THERE WERE TIMES I
WISHED I WEREN'T JUST A REFUGEE FROM AN OMNICIDAL EMPIRE WASTING
AWAY HIS BEST SWEEPS FILLING HIS THINK PAN WITH ANCIENT HISTORY.
CG: THEN YOU SHOWED UP.
CG: YOU SAID I WAS THE KNIGHT OF BLOOD, AND FOR A MOMENT I THOUGHT I
MIGHT HAVE A COSMIC DESTINY TO FULFILL, THAT ALL OF THIS WAS JUST THE
BORING PRELUDE TO MY WORLD-SHATTERING ORIGIN STORY AND MAYBE, JUST
MAYBE, I WOULD FINALLY AMOUNT TO SOMETHING USEFUL.
CG: BUT THEN I FOUND OUT THAT NO, ACTUALLY, IT'S SOME OTHER KARKAT
THAT GOT TO DO ALL THAT COOL STUFF. WHOOOPS, SORRY, YOU'RE JUST A SHITTY
CLONE THAT'S ONLY STILL SOMEHOW ALIVE BECAUSE THE ALPHA DAVE DECIDED
tO TAKE PITY ON YOU.
TG: fuck
TG: you know thats not how i think about you right
TG: youre not just like
TG: a replacement for my karkat or whatever
CG: YOU SAID IT.
CG: *YOUR* KARKAT.

Oh fuck. This isn't where you wanted to steer this at all, but you've somehow managed to drag it
into the conversation anyway. You chew your lip angrily. Not really a way to turn this around now.
CG: IF YOU COULD PRESS A BUTTON AND SWAP ME FOR THE KARKAT FROM YOUR TIMELINE, YOU'D DO IT IN A HEARTBEAT.
CG: YOU DON'T HAVE TO PRETEND OTHERWISE. I DON'T BLAME YOU AT ALL.
TG: thats not fair
TG: it doesn't work like that you're different people
TG: i like you for who you are
TG: and i also appreciate the other karkat for who he is
TG: i mean yeah there's some overlap but you shouldn't define yourself by relation to it
CG: WE ARE LITERALLY THE SAME TROLL. EXCEPT HE SPENT THREE YEARS GROWING AND DEVELOPING AS A PERSON THROUGH A MULTIVERSE-SPANNING QUEST BY YOUR SIDE, AND I SPENT THE SAME YEARS HIDING IN MY HIVE AND RUNNING FROM MY PROBLEMS.
CG: AS FUCKING USELESS HE ENDED UP BEING, HE'S STILL BETTER THAN ME IN EVERY WAY.
TG: you're wrong
TG: you're not worse than him
TG: he was still an hic fanboy
TG: he never got over terezi and still hasn't stopped freaking out over buckets after years
TG: he wouldn't know the first thing about dissecting lohacian poetry if i slapped him in the face with the original inscriptions
TG: you don't sleep with sickles under your pillow and try to stab people when they poke you awake
TG: you like baking shows but refuse to watch human romance and don't get prickly when i laugh at your pet movies
TG: you lick your fingers after eating like a quote unquote goddamn barbarian and wipe them on my clothes even though i tell you to stop it like five billion times a week
TG: i *see* you
TG: as a real person
TG: your experiences are real
TG: they're not less legitimate or less valuable and there's no linear character arc with a little progress bar telling how far along you are
TG: and you were literally just dissing sburb you for fucking up everything under the green sun so why are you the shitty one all of a sudden?
CG: BUT YOU DIDN'T DENY IT.
TG: I'M NOT GOING TO CHOOSE BECAUSE EITHER WAY IT WOULD BE A PROFOUND EMOTIONAL BETRAYAL OF SOME KARKAT AND ANY QUANTITY OF BETRAYED KARATS IS UNACCEPTABLE
TG: it doesn't imply id give you up over him
TG: and its not fair to make me choose
TG: look
TG: you're making me break out the big guns here
TG: i'm authorizing all the military-grade feels torpedoes and conciliatory artillery i can muster just for this special occasion
TG: yes dead alpha karkat is my best bro for life and i miss him so much you can't fucking imagine
TG: but three years on a meteor hurtling through the void of the furthest ring and that's all it ever was
TG: but this you
TG: with your happy throat click and cute concentration squint and the little angry annotations in the margins of our books
TG: how you get offended at jump scares because you don't like being afraid and that's why i make you watch so many of those btw
CG: GET TO THE POINT.
TG: this you is the one that made me feel the things i do
TG: as in romantic things idk
TG: i want to kiss you so fucking much
TG: you make my heart beat faster and my diamonds sparkle
TG: is that a thing trolls say i felt stupid immediately after i typed that

Oh.

Your fingers pause over the virtual keyboard as you roll responses over in your mouth. You realize your lips have twitched into an involuntary smile without you noticing, and there's a prickle of not quite tears at the edge of your eyes. You already knew he reciprocated something, yeah, and were going to do something about it too, but then he went ahead and dropped all those truth bombs on you and washed away that spurt of reckless resolve with one number.

3 years. A sweep and a half cohabitating with the other Karkat, a sweep and a half of friendship forged in the shared isolation of an infinite void.

It's been gnawing at you, whether he was just projecting feelings for his Karkat onto you, and if that's why he was so reluctant before. If you're the rebound, a close-enough copy for him to pretend that nothing happened and his dead friend/lover is still alive. Honestly, you were fine with that. It's just you and you all around, you can handle taking second place to yourself. You thought it would take some time to work up the courage to confront him about this, more as a semi-long-term project than anything after everything's calmed down a bit.

Now Dave's snatched the words out of your mouth again, and you'd be lying if you said his preemptive declaration wasn't a relief. Maybe it's a silly victory to hold over alternate you, but at the same time perhaps the most important. This is something you did, a notch in Dave Strider's heart this Karkat's uniquely responsible for chipping out. Maybe he laid some of the early foundations, but you finished the race.

TG: now that ive made a total fool of myself youre legally obliged to feel better or ill have to come down there and get a refund for my heartfelt confession
TG: im calling the cops for false advertising TG: hey are you there
TG: did you fall asleep
TG: of course you did
TG: mr i didnt sleep for 600 hours
CG: I'M DIDN'T FALL ASLEEP. THAT WAS LIKE TEN SECONDS.
CG: THAT ACTUALLY DID MAKE ME FEEL BETTER.
CG: AND I GUESS YOU ALREADY KNOW
CG: THAT I HAVE SOME VAGUELY RED-SHAPED INCLINATIONS TOWARDS YOU OF AN ILL-DEFINED NATURE, BECAUSE THE ELDRITCH GODS THAT GOVERN MY LIFE CAN EVER LET ANYTHING BE SIMPLE AND STRAIGHTFORWARD.
TG: yeah
CG: YEAH
TG: so
TG: are we like
TG: moirails?
CG: UH
TG: is that what you were going for back there before
CG: I THOUGHT YOU WERE FLUSHED TOO. AND AS FAR AS I'M AWARE, MAKING OUT IS NOT TYPICALLY CONSIDERED A CONCILIATORY ACTIVITY AMONG HUMANS.
TG: yeah but
TG: i thought id respect your culture and shit yknow
TG: and i didnt think you liked me that in that way anyway
TG: like kanaya and rose went with matesprits but were already doing the diamonds thing like right now so
TG: i mean if you changed your mind im down with that

You didn't think you were flushed for Dave, and you still don't think that's an entirely accurate characterization of the misshapen lumps of feelings in your chest. Still, there's something rearing on the concupiscent side, and you're willing to give it a try.

He at least deserves that much from you.

CG: I THOUGHT

You accidentally hit "send" before finishing, and for a few seconds you just stare at the truncated message in the chat, second thoughts flitting through your think pan. It's not anything you've considered to any meaningful extent before, not even after living with humans for so long. Do you really understand human relationships well enough to do this? Do you want to?

No, you've made up your mind. You're making this happen. You've always had trouble fitting your emotions into tidy squares anyway even before Dave, and all your poring over centuries of romantic literature hasn't made it any easier. Maybe this is what you needed, something new. Risky, perhaps—but what better time to experiment than when your entire life's been violently upended for the second time this sweep and your expected remaining lifespan is numbered in months?

CG: I THOUGHT MAYBE WE COULD TRY BEING HUMAN "BOYFRIENDS". NO POINT IN LOBOTOMIZING A PERFECTLY GOOD ROMANCE FOR THE SAKE OF MY STUPID TROLL SENSIBILITIES. GOD KNOWS YOU'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THAT.
TG: huh
TG: are you sure
CG: DID I STUTTER, FUCKHEAD?
TG: well
TG: ...
TG: yes
CG: .
CG: FUCK.
TG: you cant hear me but im laughing right now
CG: STFU

Despite your pretense of annoyance, you're laughing along with him silently, giddy with relief. You're going to make this work. It's happening.

TG: you know what this means
CG: WHAT?
TG: your fake exemption from watching human romcoms is revoked
CG: GODDAMMIT.
TG: now go to sleep
TG: its like 3 in the morning

It takes a while for you to put down your palmhusk, and even longer to finally drift off, but when you do, it's with a smile on your face.
So it finally happened. This isn't the end of their relationship arc, don't worry, though we'll be lapsing into more plot-heavy stuff the next few chapter. It's not going to be all smooth sailing; is Karkat really ready for something (partly-)flush, or has he just talked himself into it out of a misguided sense of obligation?
"What's the plan?" you ask as you seat yourself on the end of the bed. "I assume we're not just going to spend the day lounging around in awkward silence. Do we even have anything more than fucking around and running at the sight of danger? We never got around to that part yesterday since a certain somebody conked out at the end." You narrow your eyes at Sollux.

Dave pauses his eating and swallows. "Now's as good a time to start the strategy meeting, I guess? I have a plan. This motherfucker's straight-up overflowing with plans, spilling over the logistical allocation into next year. Most of them just aren't that pertinent to the immediate situation. But if you're talking about dealing with the Empire on your tail... It's simple."

He lets go of his cup to rest a finger on his chin, which sends the vessel into a slow spin from the initial momentum, its contents still somehow staying put in shameless defiance of centrifugal forces.

"The plan is regicide."

I spend an unnecessary number of words describing people eating and the exact behavior of objects under the influence of god tier flight.

But seriously, hoods and capes in Homestuck clearly experience some sort of gravity oriented "downwards" to the owner even in spaces where you might expect microgravity / gravity in other directions. This suggests that if a god tier can learn to master their perception of direction, they can perform arbitrary manipulations on their clothing. I further postulate (though without canonical evidence) that "flight" is just close-range and self-telekinesis that by default works in an intuitive flight-like manner for untrained players.

Is Sollux making his breakfast in your respiteblock again? you wonder, think pan still rebooting. Goddamn slob. He'd better clean up after himself.

Then the memories trickle back, and you remember that's not something you'll ever have to worry much about again.
Flinging off the blanket, you drag yourself into a sitting position against the headboard and give your eyes a few seconds to adjust to the sunlight streaming through the window. The smell is coming from the long wallside table opposite to the bed, an massive assortment of pastries and sandwiches lined along the surface next to three two-liter cartons of apple juice, one from which Dave's shaking the last drops into a paper cup. He chews on one of those twisty butter roll things as he nods at you.

"I got brunch," he muffles through the mouthful of masticated food.

Your eyes slide back to the excessive lineup of fresh food, trying to make sense of the scene.

"We can't finish all that," you point out. "What are we even going to do with this? Hand it out to homeless orphans?"

"I'll captchalogue what's left," Dave explains. "It stays fresh, and we'll probably need some food on the go."

Sylladexes, yeah. There you go again, forgetting you have a literal god for a friend (boyfriend, you correct yourself to no little satisfaction). Though according to him, those weren't actually specifically a Sburb thing, just something that that kind of... existed in the old universe? As in normal people could just buy personal pocket dimensions from the hardware store, for some reason.

"That's where that grubloaf came from," you realize. "I knew it was too fresh to be some microwaved sweep-old freezeloaf, you cheeky bastard. Where did you..."

Dave's expression dims as you trail off, connecting the dots.

"...did we make that?" you ask. "On the meteor?"

He tried to skim over that period of the game quickly, just oh, by the way, I lived on a space rock with you guys for three years, no biggie, but it's a whole chunk of his adolescence he spent drifting through space with just a few trolls and his sister for company. A fifth of his entire life. He probably got to know your friends just as well as you do now, with nothing much else to for those sweeps.

You've talked your hearts out about the plurality of Karkats, but Dave's also lost a Kanaya and Terezi to the bowels of paradox space. He even dated Terezi a while, for fuck's sake. He's going to have to go through this whole friendship redux thing again with people that haven't ever heard of him in their lives.

"We alchemized an oven with an imprint from a dream bubble," Dave remembers, a nostalgic wist to his voice. "We gave up on the bake-offs after we accidentally burned down the kitchen for the fourth time in a row, but I stole half of Kanaya's last batch when she wasn't looking. I don't think she ever figured out it was me. So worth it—alchemised food tastes kind of, I dunno, not bad, but formulaic? Like cake mix compared to scratch, but times a hundred."

You hear the sound of flushing through the wall, and moments later a disheveled goldblood slams his way out of the bathroom, dripping dots of water on the carpet. Dave trails to a stop, then pivots and ambles back to his pile, not even sitting on it but floating up to hover above the capes, legs crossed over nothing and the cup suspended in the air next to him. The liquid within sloshes around like it's still under gravity.

You wonder how the physics of that works—even if the container itself is weightless, wouldn't the
juice still push it down? Do god tier powers simply not give a fuck about Newtonian mechanics? Just how much time did Dave spend on the meteor just messing with stupid flight physics to be pulling this shit off so effortlessly, or does an instinctive understanding come with the package?

Sollux summons a grilled grubwurst to his hand in a sizzle of telekinesis as he takes the chair to your right, not bothering to acknowledge either of you as he scrolls through his palmhusk, another thing Dave managed to recover. The human's also fallen silent, wordlessly munching on his food.

The silent tension across the room is becoming more and more noticeable.

"What did you two cretins do while I was passed out?" you finally demand. If it were just the hacker you would chalk down to another of his sulky moods, but Dave as well? "Sollux, did you go and pick a fight with the fucking Knight of Time at five in the morning?"

"No," Dave says at the same time as the troll snarls "Yeth."

"So may I ask what the fuck your problem is?" you growl, climbing to your feet atop the double bed to highlight your simmering frustration. "Look, if Dave wanted to fuck us over he's had a plethora of prime opportunities to do so. Like, for example, by not helping us in the first place?"

Sollux scowls. "We've come to an underth'tanding."

You turn your glare to Dave, who's sipping at his apple juice, unreadably nonchalant even to your honed eye. "We're cool," he confirms. "Just a minor disagreement. Before you know it we'll be setting aside our differences and tearfully hugging it out by the third act. Can't let team drama get in the way of the action movie plot, you know."

"Ugghhh," you groan as you let yourself flop limply forward into the bed again, leaving your head and arms dangling off the foot end. "Whatever you say. I'm not your lusus."

You were joking about auspeticism, but to your dismay the gag's getting less and less funny and starting to seem like a practical necessity if this ship is to not crash and burn. You just finished finagling your way into a red quasi-space with Dave, so no way in hell you're getting sidetracked with ashen meddling. You've already made a mockery of the concept of quadrants, but that's where you draw the line.

"Oh my god, th'ut up, KK," Sollux growls at you. You rear back at the unexpected vitriol lacing his exclamation. "You're such a— goddammit."

"What now?"

He doesn't finish his thought, going back to attacking his food. Bottling up everything and refusing to communicate again, you see. Fucking typical. He's going to pretend everything's fine, but this is coming back to bite you, you know it.

Is this to do with what he was alluding to about Feferi's situation yesterday, before all the surreal shit went down? Or maybe it's whatever's going on between him and Dave? Lingering reservations about your relationship? Who knows what's bobbing around in that labyrinthine mind of his half the time.

Pulling off an awkward half-flip over the mattress edge, you thump onto the fuzzy floor and roll back onto your feet with ill grace, dusting off your clothes as you take an unsteady, half-awake step. Sceptically eying the extravagant nutritional offerings before you, you pick a salmon and cream cheese sandwich and rip open the paper-plastic packaging, sticking it between your teeth. After a brief search you also confirm with relief that Strider had the sense to buy some form of
"What's the plan?" you ask as you seat yourself on the end of the bed. "I assume we're not just going to spend the day lounging around in awkward silence. Do we even have anything more than fucking around and running at the sight of danger? We never got around to that part yesterday since a certain somebody conked out at the end." You narrow your eyes at Sollux.

Dave pauses his eating and swallows. "Now's as good a time to start the strategy meeting, I guess? I have a plan. This motherfucker's straight-up overflowing with plans, spilling over the logistical allocation into next year. Most of them just aren't that pertinent to the immediate situation. But if you're talking about dealing with the Empire on your tail... It's simple."

He lets go of his cup to rest a finger on his chin, which sends the vessel into a slow spin from the initial momentum, its contents still somehow staying put in shameless defiance of centrifugal forces.

"The plan is regicide."

It takes a second for you to parse the sentence.

"...you're going to kill the Condesce," you repeat. "Straight for the throne. Sure. I don't even have the capacity to be surprised anymore, that part of my think pan's just permanently burned out now."

Not precisely what you expected, but your life has been an endless montage of recalibrating your bullshitometer lately. You have to repeatedly remind yourself again that these are gods, not just unnaturally competent kids with superpowers. Contextualizing it as a bizarre video game cleaves through a lot of the mystique, but their canonical powers still dwarf even many classical gods of human and troll myth. What's slaying an dictator, even an immortal one, to beings who can cradle planets in the palm of their hands and wind the tapestry of time itself around a little finger? What regime can't you topple when shrinking the crownworld down to the size of a thimble and crushing it like a grape is a legitimate threat?

"You got your asses thrashed last time, though," you note nevertheless with a hint of worry. That's another data point that didn't really jibe when you last talked—the Empress is obscenely powerful, yes, but only for a troll, and while you can believe the Imperial geniterrorists figuring out how to graft jailbroken psychic powers to a fuchsia, having the telekinetic strength to move planets?

"I think she was empowered by Lord English then, and had extra centuries to hone her powers, so that her was way buffed," Dave confirms your unspoken question. "I mean, baseline Condy could probably still rip our limbs off with disturbing ease, but hopefully she shouldn't have all her broken powers this time around, and we can just smite her from a distance. I'll be like shooting genocidal fish in their FTL barrel."

"That's dangerously optimistic," Sollux points out, unimpressed. "What if this is the powered-up verthion of her, brought here the same way you were? We'll just all get killed. Again."

"I wouldn't put much stock in that," Dave says. "The batterwitch has been out there terrorizing the universe for a million years, and I refuse to believe that she waited that long dicking around conquering the galaxy with boring old mundane tech just so she can spring her secret powers on us hundreds of thousands of sweeps in the future. I don't think she has that kind of patience. Even if superfishface does show up eventually, she'll be a separate entity from the Empress we're trying to take down right now."

You frown. That's maybe a bit too optimistic for your tastes, as Sollux said, but you don't have a
counter-argument at the ready.

"Hey, look," Dave says, noticing your dubious look. "Worst comes to worst, we just beat her up like normal. Last time we were fighting not just her, but also Jane, Jade, Jack—why do we have so many four-letter J names?—the other prosopian, Gamzee, Aranea... wow, Jegus, that was such a mess in the end there. I don't think any of us actually tried to take her on except Rose? So yeah, we don't have the Second Pantheon with us this time or leveled troll players, but I still like these odds a lot more."

"I guess," you grumble, still not managing to keep the doubt out of your tone. "It's just... I thought the original Empress was pants-shittingly terrifying enough, not that I ever thought I'd ever see her except maybe as a decapitated head on a silver platter, but the one you talked about is far worse than anything my imagination could have come up with."

"I'm more worried about the potthibility that her telekinesis might not actually be magic powerth," Sollux finally speaks up again. He's levitating himself in a writhing storm of red and blue energy, a familiar exercise you've seen him perform dozens of times, but this time it seems more... calculating?

"Psionicth are pretty bullthit by themselveth. One good helmthman can drive a battlethip the thize of a thmall moon at for dayth without retht. Bethideth, the hemothspectrum'th not all bathelethh. Goldbloodth aren't conthidered the motht powerful tier becauth highbloodth are weaker, it'th becauth higher caththeth don't get psionicth at all. A futthhia telekinetic being ath abthurdly powerful ath you thaid wouldn't thurprithe me."

He hesitates for a moment, lowering himself to the floor slowly, before continuing as the sparks wink out. "You thaid me and Aradia gave the meteor the push to get to the new thetthon. And I think... I think I could do that as, you know, thith me? Agh, you know what I mean. I might burn our from the exertion , but I think it'th pothhible."

You draw in a surprised breath at the statement. You know Sollux is a powerful mutant, but how big was that meteor? Smaller than the Battleship Condescension, you guess, so definitely within the possible range of modern psionics, but that's with a biowire installation and state-of-the-art transformers.

"You fucked yourself up doing it as Mage of Doom too. Half-died or something? Karkat said you were spraying blood from every orifice, it was nasty as fuck," Dave confirms, a troubled curl to his mouth. "So that's a strike against my theory... but even if that was all the original-flavor Condescension, Jade's still waay outclasses her at juggling celestial bodies like billiard balls, and we already patched the psychic loophole that let Condy mind-control her last time."

"Look, this is going off topic," you interject. "Back to discussing the immediate future before we get stabbed by more assassins. How the bulge-throbbing fuck are we getting to Alternia with half the Empire on our tail and, you know," you spread your arms, "Two thousand light sweeps between here and there?"

Dave rolls his eyes. "First of all, we don't have half the Empire on our tail. Don't be silly. And for how, well—"

He claps his hands together.

"—we teleport, of course."

Then he explains.
The two of them are squabbling again over bus routes in front of the station billboard while you excuse yourself from their delightful presence to "keep watch", which is mostly a pretext to have a second to yourself.

Earlier, you almost wore Dave down to getting a real vehicle with his overflowing bank account instead of placing your fate in the hands of this wiggler's drunken hiveplan of a public transportation system the country calls infrastructure, but than ran into the small snag of none of you actually knowing how to drive. Even if you and Sollux had been able to afford scuttlebuggies back on Alternia, that knowledge wouldn't be compatible with Earth cars and their cumbersome mechanical controls, and as for Dave, he spent most of his adolescent years gallivanting through fantasyland, so no surprises there.

So here you are, back to bus hopping.

You survey the area as you wait. There's not much to look at at a roadside bus station in a small-town suburb, but you see... buildings, and... trees? A grocery store with a couple of ATMs, which you guess is where Dave got your breakfast, but other than that just random people's houses and that place you were just staying at.

It's not like you're ever going to come back here again, so no point in familiarizing yourself with the neighborhood. You're not ever going back to anywhere, for that matter. Not to your college, not to that familiar shitty dorm cafeteria for more bland and unfulfilling slop, not to your room with its ratty bed and cracks on the ceiling plaster you've traced with your eyes for fifty hundred times. Not even back to your old hive on Alternia, even if you find your way back to your home planet: if it hadn't been pillaged by scavengers within a week of your departure, it'd have been marked abandoned and torn down for the next cohort of pupates when the last fiscal sweep wrapped around.

(A pop behind you tells you that Dave's slipped back in time to preorder your tickets—you're not sure how well it obfuscates your trail, since anyone tracking Dave's account will see the chain of journeys no matter when he made the purchases, but better safe than sorry, you suppose—and you sigh, dropping onto the curbside bench.)

What you're trying to get at is that you're well and truly hiveless now. No documents, no roof above your head, no money apart from the couple hundred dollars Dave stuck you with. If the time god just winged it right now, absconded to another timeline—he said it doesn't work that way anymore, but the concept of doomed timelines still gives you a minor existential crisis—and left the two of you here, you'd be thoroughly fucked all the way to the Green Sun and back.

It hasn't taken you two days to realize this. It's more of an ongoing process of assimilation, and here shivering in the chilly December breeze with the divine powerhouse in this ragtag bunch of morons taking a temporary break from linear causality, you're ever so strongly reminded how entirely at the mercy of circumstance you are—and holy shit, no Dave's guarding you right this very moment, someone could just walk up and kill you right now. You're practically defenseless; Sollux can at least shoot devastating energy beams out of his eyes, but Karkat's only powers are mediocre sicklekind and angry yelling. What are you going to do against an Imperial Drone?

You're so preoccupied with contemplating your pressing mortality that you don't notice Sollux until he's right behind you.

<Hey.> he says, sending you flailing out of your spot, almost slapping him in the face in your frantic scramble to turn around.
You quickly realize it's not an assassin here to carve your intestines out and you clamp down on your panic, though your blood pusher's still beating like it's trying to leap out of your throat and escape. <Hey,> you mutter back.

There hasn't really been a chance for the two of you to talk one-on-one since all of this started. Not since you stormed out of your old respiteblock in fury that day—yesterday, you remind yourself again—and got dragged into a personal action movie hell. Another argument that seems absurd in retrospect, although perhaps not as irrelevant as you first thought at the time. He was right, wasn't he? He always is in the end, it's part of Sollux' annoying charm.

The troll is silent for a while before he speaks again. <Are you th'till mad?>

<Huh?> You blink in confusion.

He snorts. <All the thingth I thaid about Thtrider. I told you not to trutht him, but he wath the one bailing our thorry atthes out in the end. You'd uthually be all rubbing my faithe in that, all thmuq and thuperior and everythiing.>

<Oh.> You mull it over, looking down at your lap. The troll comes around the bench and sits down at the other end, leaving a seat of space between you. <No. I mean, you were essentially spot on about everything, except that Dave's hidden machinations turned out less sinister and more... benevolent? Well, you saw all the signs and drew a conclusion. I can't blame you for using your damn eyes when mine were firmly bolted shut with denial.>

He barks a humorless laugh. <Friend or foe is a pretty major thing to get wrong, don't you think?>

<You didn't know him enough to judge his character.> you sigh. You don't know why you're defending for Sollux, since he was being a fuckass about it all. Maybe it has something to do with the guilt worming away at you. <I'd say you should have trusted my judgment, but with what a shit I've been, I can't blame you for not having immense faith in the robustness of my mental faculties.>

<We thhouldn't have let it get to that in the firtht place.> He doesn't say it outright, but there's a note of silent accusation lurking in there.

You shift uncomfortably. Learning about the god versions of you wasn't as much of a bonding experience as you hoped, or really in any way constructive for your slowly fraying friendship at all. It wasn't all that fun to find out how in another history Sollux left you to your own desperate devices to fuck around with ghosts for all of eternity, or maybe you and Dave fucked off to another universe in pursuit of a doomed quest, depending on how you look at it. Even excluding the death and murder, your entire group pretty much all went to shit in that timeline.

It would be less painful if it didn't mirror how the two of you drifted apart in this world, gradually losing touch despite living every day in literally the same room. How you left Alternia behind and got so absorbed in your personal bullshit that you never noticed your friend still moored in the past, never caught wind of the silent upheaval taking its insidious course back at home.

<Are you mad?> you bounce back, lacking the courage to look him in the eye.

<What for?> he asks, but the brittle edge to his voice betrays that he knows exactly what you're referring to.

So he's going to make you say it. <For being a massive tongue-gouging idiot. For letting you down. For turning into a pansy-ass coward the second I crawled out of the wreck.>

Sollux crosses his arms, muscles in his face tightening.
<I don't understand it. How did a motherfucking attalthination attempt on the Throne thlip your notithe?>

<Why didn't you tell me?> you mutter. <I mean, just tell me, not hand out ambiguous allusions over Trollian.>

He sneers. <I was going to thee how long it'd took for you to find out by yourself. I guess we'll never know.>

The thing is, you finally found out this morning why you're being targeted by the Empire.

Only six days ago, a rogue violetblood made an attempt on the life of the Empress. It's unclear how he got on the Battleship Condescension, or where he acquired the unique weapon used in the attack, but the strike failed. Under questioning, the unnamed troll ultimately revealed that he was acting under orders of the Heir Apparent to the throne, Feferi Peixes.

Thirteen hours later, the first reports made their way to Earth. Eighteen more hours later, the news was officially verified by Imperial sources and broke through to most major outlets. It was no front-page material for the humans—some poor fucker tries to off the Condesc every few weeks, and tragically short-lived rebellions pop up now and then, but any troll worth their salt know the difference between a sugared-up clown getting himself killed over the new Faygo allocations and an Heiress making her preemptive strike.

Apart from, apparently, you. Who never watches television, or reads the papers, or browses troll forums, or really does anything other than sleep, eat, go to classes and hang out with Dave all day. Dave who, in turn, never does anything but sleep, eat, fail to turn up to classes and hang out with you all day. And also perpetrate godly shenanigans, you guess, in light of more recent revelations.

Sollux sent you a short message, read the new2, right after the first article hit the papers. You replied FUCK OFF, thinking it a generic jab at your way of sticking our head in the sand with respect to anything xenopolitical, and put it out of your mind.

He never texted back.

Which is why you only found out about Feferi's attempted coup six days after the fact, after the Condesc released a bounty on suspected associates of the Heiress, after you weathered the first of the hunters and fumbled with help to relative safety, just this very morning. Straight from the mouth of the goldblood hacker this morning after Dave's strategy briefing as a notarized summary of exactly when and where you fucked up.

And that's why the Sollux has been so passive-aggressively pissed at you lately.

<I'm sorry,> you say, swallowing guiltily. <Fuck. I don't have an excuse. None even remotely close to justifying this.>

<He was your friend,> Sollux says quietly. <I mean, I tolerated his existenthe and don't want anything too bad to happen to him, but he was your friend.>

It was reported that the assassin carried a rifle that projected a high-energy stream of blue plasma using unknown technology. A one-of-a-kind rifle you're intimately familiar with. One you've never seen the owner let anyone else touch for the sweeps he's owned it.

<He was,> you confirm, adding another sinking stone to your stomach. <He was a genocidal shitheel, but we... we had something good going on. Even if most of what we talked about was his ludicrous sham of a moirallegiance with Feferi... I miss him.>
Sollux looks at you like you're stupid.

<i>I hope he's alright, </i>you whisper.

<i>He's a thea dweller, </i>he murmurs. <i>He'll be fine.</i>

The irony is that trying to kill the Condesce is one of the less cullable crimes compared to, say, desertion. Trolls value competence over loyalty; you don't <i>inspire</i>, you <i>threaten</i>, terrorize any thoughts of betrayal out of your underlings, and then watch your back anyway. Getting ganked by your underling is incompetence showing, and means they should probably have your job anyway. Besides, acting under orders of the Alternian Heiress and de facto ruler of the homeworld is as close to a respectable an act of treason you can perform, and you think even technically legal, though of course a summary total of zero fucks will be given about that.

In other words, someone that manages to sneak on your ship to slit your throat in your recuperacoon is recruitment material, not clown fodder, especially when it's a promising young violetblood. In fact you suspect that might even be Feferi's plan, planting a spy under the Empress' nose under the guise of a credible assassination attempt. Worse ploys have been made.

<i>We're going to get him back, </i>you growl. <i>We have four gods on our side, remember? </i>

The two of you go quiet again, thoughts going back to how quickly your side of the equation's ballooned out of control—in a good way. Just two days ago, you were fully resigned to wasting the rest of your life away tucked on a backwater planet at the edge of the Empire. Now you've got a war to fight, an Empress to topple, friends to reconvene with, an infinite array of possibilities beckoning just over the horizon. It's terrifying to even try to contemplate, but at the same time exhilarating in a way you haven't felt for sweeps. It's <i>freeing</i>.

The situation is bleak, but there's hope. It's a dumpster fire, but you have every tool you need to salvage it. All you have to do is play the cards right.

Perhaps this renewed outlook on your future is what gives you the clarity to say what you say next.

<i>I was afraid, </i>you blurt out. <i>I thought that if I couldn't help them on Earth, thousands of luminal sweeps away from the action, what was the fucking point? I wanted to remember them as they were, not as dismembered corpses splashed over the infofeeds. I just... wanted to pretend. </i>

You close your eyes. <i>I was afraid every time I pulled up the news that the headlines would be 'Caltropian Brooding Caverns Collapsed by Imperial Missile Strike on Rebel Sect', or 'Sea Dwellers Flood Southern Continent Eastern Seaboard', or 'Sazarus Legislacerator Association Lynched by Furious Mob'. That's why I unsubscribed from every Alternian newsfeed. That's why I deleted my Wrathit account, not that I used it for anything before that. And even when it's not them getting hurt specifically, the daily tollcharts are still a reminder that everything's so fucking terrible on Alternia. And we left them there. Just like that. </i>

It's a feeble excuse. Not even that, just a useless explanation, an account of your weakness. But you wanted to get it out in the open.

<i>You thucctheeded a little too well at that, </i>Sollux mutters. <i>Goddammit, you think I don't know? You think I don't feel the thame thing? I just had the dethenthy to push path that and keep myself on the rotothphere. We at leatht owe that to them for what they did for uth. We have to at least remember. </i>

<i>I'm sorry, </i>you repeat.
<You'd better be.>

For too many seconds, you don't have a reply to that.

You swallow, before tentatively asking, <Are we... are we still friends?>

The pause that follows is unbearable, eventually broken by a single sentence.

<Of course, dumbass.>

You breathe a sigh of relief.

<Maybe you had the right idea anyway.> he continues on. <Getting depretthed over the thorry thtate of Alternia doethn't do anything uthefull. It juth made me and everyone around me mitherable, and I guethh I thought of that ath thome thtupid penanthe or thomething, but it really ithn't. It'hu uthelethh and thtupid and mathochithtic thelf-aggrandizing doethn't get you anywhere. Knowing about the aththathhination didn't thtop me from getting tricked and kidnapped like an orphaned wiggler.>

He's clenching his fist, digging painful-looking indents in his palm. Sollux blames himself, you realize with a shock, a moment too late. He thinks that if he hadn't been taken in the first place, the oliveblood wouldn't have been able to trick you with his Trollian, and all of you wouldn't have been only minutes away from being shipped off to the Condesce's grubby paws. He thinks that he knew and tried and failed all the same, and in his twisted-up brain that's worse than the way you slipped by in willful ignorance. He's not angry at you, he's angry at himself.

And that is so fucking stupid.

<We got away,> you say. <That's all that matters. And now we know, we're prepared. We have the Knight of Time on our side. We've a step ahead of the Empire, maybe even shaken them completely. Just wait a few more days, we'll be on the other side of the galaxy, you'll see Feferi again, we'll finally get some real food for once, and everything. Will. Be. Fucking. Awesome.>

You punctuate the words with punches to your palm.

Sollux nods.

<Talk to Aradia when you get back,> you suggest. <She'll love this whole thing. You'll get enough spooky non-insights and cryptic advice to last you sweeps.>

He snorts, this time with a tad more humor.

You stretch your arms.

It makes you feel guilty to think this when one of your friends is rotting in the brigs of the Battleship Condescension, another is fighting a losing war against the Empress, and the others have no doubt entrenched themselves in similar mortal peril befitting of the murderpit planet you came from, possibly a few in the exact same mortal peril by allying themselves with Feferi if you know them at all, but—

Despite everything, things are looking up. It's a long climb, but you'll get there.

<I'm dating Dave now,> you casually add just for the hell of it.

<I know.>
You jerk in surprise. <Wait, really?>

<He told me thith morning.> Sollux snorts. <He wath tho nervouth about it too. I'm pretty thure he thinkth I'm your luthuth. Like I could do anything to thtop him.>

You chuckle. <Sounds like Dave alright.>

<i'll jutht be thtanding over here watching the slow-motion train wreck of your fumbling interspecies romance.>

<i'm gratified by your unshakeable faith,> you inform him, relieved that this didn't have to explode into another stupid argument. A welcome anticlimax, for once.

Leaning back, you let the silence stretch on, but it's no longer fraught with tension. For a while, you just enjoy the morning air on your face, listening to the gentle birdsong you'll miss once you're back on Alternia.

<Speaking of Dave, it's been a while. Where the fuck is he?>

You unlock your palmhusk to check the time. It's been a few minutes now, and didn't he say he'd be back in a second?

You glance around.

"Sup," a voice comes from right in front of you, startling a shriek out of you as your device jumps out of your hand and clatters to the pavement. Your head whips back to the front, and there the god is, folding away timetables with flicks of yellow. "Miss me?"

"How do you know exactly when to do that?" you growl, because there's no way that wasn't intentional. You can see the insufferably satisfied pinch in his cheeks. The serenity of the moment's gone now, along with your rare cool. "Does your divinity package come with built-in dramatic timing for all your smug asshole trolling needs?"

"Don't question it, dude."

"It actually does. You have a fucking dramatic timing power."

Dave rests a hand under his chin in a faux-thoughtful pose, humming gravely. "The secrets of the Kiddy Camper Handysash are not meant for the likes of mere mortals."

"Ugh," you groan. "Goddammit, let's just get going. What bumfuck town of nowhereville are we crashing next?"

"Foxton," he says, handing you two tickets. You give one to Sollux and inspect your own. You've still got ten minutes before your ride gets here. "Two hours. Woo. Then lunch and another ride, and we're a third of the way there already."

"I can't believe we don't have a better way to do this," the goldblood grumbles. "We could make a fake airplane out of cardboard and let me fly uth there."

"We need to wait for the other three to get to Alternia anyway," Dave shrugs as he hands out more pieces of paper, a second pair tickets and a hiking trail leaflet. "We're already ahead of schedule. Getting there faster would just mean more time sitting on our asses twiddling our thumbs."

"Let's not rehash this asinine argument again," you groan. "Haven't we wasted enough time on
While the two continue bickering in utter disregard of your exasperated demand, you open the leaflet you were given, inspecting the path marked in haphazard red marker by Dave winding through the American countryside. You haven't heard of the place before, but you guess that's why the Pantheon chose it. It's certainly not for the rich biodiversity.

You flip back to the front cover and commit to memory the name of your final destination. The site of your departure. The Payette National Forest. Completely unremarkable and uninteresting unless you're a biologist, conservationist or geographer, but what you're looking for isn't the forest itself, but what lurks somewhere among its acres of trees and sands, stashed safely from prying eyes. There your true target roams the untamed wild, awaiting patiently.

Becquerel.

First guardian of Earth.

Chapter End Notes

Parts of this are strongly inspired by Persepolis.

Anyway, feel free to speculate on the game mechanics behind this plan we've unveiled.
Chapter Summary

Long story short, that's how in mid-August, humans detected the first gravitational waves in Earth's scientific history.

Chapter Notes

You thought we were finally getting to the action, but it was me all along, THOUSANDS OF WORDS OF PESTERLOG!

It is relevant and interesting, though. I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Minkowskian Riptide, one of the two known fraymotifs of Space, Breath and Light.

Its description was reconstructed from the front face of a plaque excavated 1846 from a long-destroyed LOFAF temple, still locked away in the Skaian chest that shielded it from the worst of whatever terrible fate befell the Consorts' worlds. Even so, the shattered stone fragments recovered from the sky-blue vault took the archeological community seven years to piece back together, ultimately serving as one of the cornerstones of the translation efforts that spearheaded the first explosion of Sburbology in the second half of the century.

When the phonetic derivation of the name was published two years later, it was at the time considered merely a footnote in the artifact's triumphant story. It would be nine more years before Hermann Minkowsky was even born, and almost another five decades before the dawn of relativistic mechanics and the man's contributions to the field would come to pass.

On the flip side of the plaque, however, was inscribed a prophecy speaking of a legendary weapon sealed in the voids beyond the heavens by twelve primordial sorcerers at the dawn of creation, an artifact with the terrible capacity to destroy hope, fittingly fated to only resurface when all hope is lost.

It was said that the tallest tower of the land must be reforged into a celestial beacon, and from it a blazing river of Light would flow, piercing the veil of the sky and carving radiant distributaries into the abysses beyond. On the winds of his Breath the Heir would set sail, riding the currents of an unknowable void now given form, but the twisted paths of paradox space are infamously treacherous. Only by the Witch's guiding hand, below which even jagged crevices unfold into canyons, would the heroes find passage to their destination. Or so it claimed.

"Do the side quest, unlock the fraymotif," Dave summed up. "A lot of the endgame loot is supposed to come from completing them, but we didn't have the time. I managed to bribe the crocodiles into giving me most of the good shit they were guarding anyway."

In Sburb, you read the scroll or tablet to learn a fraymotif once you've bought it from a vendor or
satisfied the prerequisites. Apparently between the three-year trek through the Furthest Ring and the annihilation of the multiverse, whatever mysterious logic overseeing the game considered the glorified fetch quest complete, and equally conveniently, the original reconstruction of the plaque has been on display at the National Archaeological Museum at Madrid for twenty years.

Minkowskian Riptide expands the players' perceptual and precognitive senses to astronomical units and grants them the ability to generate spatial flows on the same scale, facilitating nigh-instantaneous relocation of pieces across the entire Incipisphere to the users' fortuitous advantage. Supercharged by a god tier/self-prototyping/Green Sun jailbreak x3 combo, that range more than quadruples to just over 30 AU and blends offensively well with first guardian teleportation into a horrific three-person warp drive abomination.

Long story short, that's how in mid-August, humans detected the first gravitational waves in Earth's scientific history.

Nevertheless, outer space is big, and Riptide's designed for battlefield control, not interstellar travel, so its speed still falls short of military-grade psionic drives. Still, it beats rickety century-old commercial spacecraft and you get to skip the paperwork and perigees on the waiting list, which is why while Dave was ransacking libraries for information over the last couple of months, the other three members of the First Pantheon have been been blipping across the cosmos in a superluminal bundle of aether wind and space magic.

It's also why you, Sollux and Dave are huddled around his floating screen at one in the morning, watching gray chumhandles blink miserably on Pesterchum as Dave spams the refresh button on the toolbar. You and Dave are sitting on the bed, his floating gear keyboards spinning soundlessly under his hands—the gear parts are spinning, not the keyboard, that would be stupid—while Sollux hovers behind you. Figuratively, to be clear. His feet are firmly planted on the floor this time.

Dave's gnawing on his thumbnail as he fidgets, scrolling up and down his chumroll with a free hand. Disgustingly unhygienic, but you'll give him a break: this will be the first time he's talked to his friends in months, though of course to them it'll only have been measly subjective hours.

"Quit chewing your fingers," you say anyway, because does someone else see anything better to do? You didn't think so.

"Make me."

You reach up and grab Dave's hand, meeting surprisingly little resistance as you extricate it from his jaws and wipe the residue into the sheets between you, ignoring his small whine of protest. After a moment of hesitation, you thread your fingers through his, feeling his warm human digits stiffen up under your gentle touch. Out of the corner of your eye, you catch Dave lick his lips nervously at the contact. Dumbass, you think, unable to repress your smile. You give him a soft squeeze, and his limb finally reactivates, fingers reciprocating into your grip.

Sollux's theatrical gagging behind you is judiciously ignored.

It's still unsettling seeing grimAuxiliatrix and gallowsCalibrator under his list of contacts, and even moreso to know that if you clicked into one of the names, you'd find logs upon logs of capitalised prose and numeraled text nobody in this universe remembers typing.

Soon the three other humans will come back online, and what you're hoping is that whatever inscrutable forces facilitate the instantaneous communication link between the gods' Pesterchum clients, your mundane devices will be able to patch into the connection and gain access to
Alternia's Trollian subnet. If they can't, Sollux is forbidden from modding chat options into the celestial apocalypse engine, but you'll at least be able to send a message through the humans.

So you won't lie: you're freaking out inside as much as Dave, and you bet Sollux with his restless pacing is too. You didn't think you'd ever see the rest of the trolls again, but here you are, ready to piggyback on an Internet connection to the other side of the Empire to form an interstellar, interspecies alliance. Whatever fatigue you're feeling from the long day is overshadowed by the anxiety coursing through your sponge.

Finally, the computer chimes three times in rapid succession.

In the blink of an eye Dave's clicking on the Operation Regisurp 2.0 memo, already typing as the chat window expands to full size. You do the same on your palmhusk, holding your breath as Trollian finally registers the three new handles hacked into its bulletin board feature via bullshit Sburb magic.

carcinoGeneticist [CG] EIGHT HOURS AGO opened memo on board OPERATION REGISURP 2.

CG: IF YOU CAN READ THIS, CONGRATULATIONS. YOU CAN ADD CROSS-PLATFORM COMPATIBILITY TO PESTERCHUM'S ALREADY TERRIFYING HOST OF CRIMES AGAINST INFORMATION THEORY AND SOFTWARE ENGINEERING.

turntechGodhead [TG] EIGHT HOURS AGO responded to memo.

TG: test

tentacleTherapist [TT] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

TT: I have to admit that this isn't quite the reintroduction I expected to the world of the corporeal, but it is a welcome surprise.

gardenGnostic [GG] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

GG: karkat!!!
TT: I'm glad to finally hear something from you. We were starting to get worried. I presume that Dave was able to get in contact with the trolls somehow in our lengthy absence?
TT: Though I do note the conspicuous absence of the others from this memo.

ectoBiologist [EB] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

EB: wait, is this really karkat? we spent so long trying to pester you, but it never worked!
CG: OF COURSE NOT. INSTANT MESSAGING FOR THE REST OF THE FUCKING KNOWN UNIVERSE IS STILL INCONVENIENTLY CONSTRAINED BY THE LAWS OF PHYSICS AND DATA NETWORKING. WE DON'T ALL GET TO CASUALLY VIOLATE THE HYPERSPACE MANIFOLD COMMUNICATION THEOREM TO SHITPOST ACROSS HALF THE EXPLORED UNIVERSE.
CG: NOT TO MENTION THAT GIVEN THAT YOUR PRIMITIVE PLANETBOUND CIVILIZATION HAS NEITHER THE POPULATION PRESSURE NOR THE RUDIMENTARY INTELLECTUAL CAPACITY TO EMPLOY SUBNET CRYPTOKEYING, IT WAS A DOOMED ENDEAVOR FROM THE BEGINNING.
CG: EVEN IF YOUR HUMAN SOFTWARE IMPOSSIBLY CONNECTED TO THE NONEXISTENT UNIVERSAL INTERNET, DID YOU INTEND TO HAND-SIFT THROUGH
FIVE THOUSAND CARCINOGENETICISTS BETWEEN THE HUNDREDS OF BILLIONS OF TROLLIAN USERS STREWN ACROSS THE STARS?
CG: OR DID YOU IMAGINE, IN A TYPICAL DISPLAY OF HUMAN NAIVETE, THAT THE MACHINATIONS OF SKAIA WOULD INEXPLICABLY LOCATE THE CORRECT USER FOR YOU?
CG: THOUGH NOW THAT I THINK ABOUT IT, THAT SOUNDS ANNOYINGLY PLAUSIBLE.
CG: DISAPPOINTINGLY, SINCE THIS INSTANCE OF US *DOESN'T* HAVE HANDHELD LITERAL PLOT DEVICES POWERED BY DISTILLED BULLSHIT, WE WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO TEST THIS HYPOTHESIS.

turntechGodhead [TG] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

TG: ok what our favorite nubs moshouty is trying to say is
TG: the trolls dont remember anything
TG: theyre locals
TG: im not sure theyre even players
TG: properly at least because theyre definitely *something*
TG: like they dont have a grist cache but can still pick it up into torrent
GG: you mean this isnt our karkat? what, like not even an alt timeline karkat, just a separate paradox clone???
TT: We did discuss this possibility at some point. Nevertheless, whatever version of Karkat it is, it's good to know you're here with us.
GG: but i was looking forward to meeting you in person! :(  
GG: (not counting grimbark jade)
GG: sorry alt karkat..... its not quite the same! im sure well still be great friends though
EB: i'm confused, so this you never played the game? but then how did dave find you? or how did you find dave, i guess? are you on earth?
GG: and also whoever twinemageddons is......
TT: Sollux Captor, if I recall correctly. I think we would all benefit from a proper debriefing from your side, Dave. Speculation isn't going to get us anywhere.

twinArmageddons [TA] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

TA: ye2 that2 me. why am ii un2urpii2ed that nobody know2 who ii am?
CG: IF YOU WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW WHO YOU ARE, MAYBE THEN YOUR COUNTERPART SHOULDN'T HAVE ABANDONED THEM TO GO FROLICKING THROUGH THE FURTHEST RING WITH YOUR REVIVED DEAD GHOST FAIRY GIRLFRIEND IN THE PREDECESSOR TIMELINE.
EB: hehe, i guess some things never change.

You'll be honest, this is a warmer welcome than you expected. It's not that you were anticipating distant sticks in the mud—Dave's gleeful accounts of their old Internet misadventures have firmly dispelled you of that notion—but you didn't really believe they would be happy to see you specifically, despite Dave's reassurances. You imagined that Rose would be inwardly sick of your irascible company after three shared years on a desolate rock, and from what Dave said, your interactions with John and Jade essentially amounted to sweeps of hostile trolling mixed only with a few slivers of useful advice at the very end.

You were prepared for tired tolerance and a generic platitudes, maybe reluctant fondness at best. Instead, it sounds almost like they truly, genuinely missed you. It's mildly unsettling, but also... nice?
You have to take the effort to remind yourself that you're not the person they were searching for. This friendship isn't yours.

TA: i dont really know any of you so i'm just going to borrow the connection to try get the other troll iin while you talk about boring stuff and catch up i guess.
TG: long story short everything pre-sgrub happened the same and the trolls just kept going all existing and shit when the game didn't happen and glygblub didn't croak.
TG: karkat and sollux are here chilling on earth after they ran away from alternia.
TG: because the draft would get them culled and/or installed into a ship engine which is totally understandable thing to want to avoid.
TG: plus the general shittiness of alternia i guess
TG: everyone else is still on there and hopefully not dead or anything.
TG: not for any particular reason or danger just out of the general ambient lethality of trollworld
TG: except for feferi whos already trying to overthrow condy and eridan who might be captured?
TG: dunno
GG: wait what?! that hadn't happened yet when we left!
TT: Elaborate on the last part?
CG: WE DON'T KNOW IF THE OTHERS HAVE BEEN TARGETED FOR THEIR CONNECTIONS TO THE HEIRESS AS WELL. IF WE WERE TRACKED DOWN BY FEFERI'S SIGNATURE ON THE SPACE AUTHORITY PAPERWORK, THEY SHOULD BE FINE, BUT IF THE FLEET'S BROKEN HER TROLLIAN ENCRYPTION THEN ANYONE ON THE HEIRESS' CHUMPROLL IS FUCKED.
TG: oh right someone tried to kill us too
TG: or capture us the specifics aren't THAT important
EB: jesus, dave!
TG: and by us i mean karkat and sollux not me im an innocent for once in this situation
GG: dont you think you should have led with that maybe?
TG: anyway we escaped and i think we lost them for now but some backup would be cool so if you can get the portal up and running by yourself thatd be awesome
TT: I didn't think Peixes would make her move so quickly. We should have left earlier.
EB: but you're safe now, right?
GG: im trying to do the flashy thing right now but bec isn't picking up :(.
GG: i think youre going to have to get him like we planned.
TT: So to clarify:
EB: we're just kind of floating in space right now, i can see alternia but i dont know how we'll find your friends, karkat... there aren't any huge craters, at least.
TT: Dave, Karkat and Sollux are on Earth, I assume in a secure location, but being targeted by the Condesce. The rest of the trolls are on Alternia, with only Feferi and Eridan in known danger, but the others at risk due to their connections to the Heiress. They've already declared war, or whatever a succession conflict passes as on Alternia, against the throne. None of remember playing S Burb/ S grub, and had an established existence congruent with this universe's continuity prior to our arrival, but are registered in some capacity to the game.
TG: basically yeah
TG: btw were settled in outside the forest just got here 5 days ago and skipped ahead to your arrival
TT: My working hypothesis it that this is another scratched instance of the trolls' session, perhaps triggered using Aradia's scratch construct in their abandoned Incipisphere, but experiencing bleedover from our universe due to the de facto merging of our sessions.
TT: The question is, what entity triggered another second Scratch, and to what end? How and why were Jade, John, Dave and I transported here, but none of the others? How does John's denizen and temporal divergence from our timeline play into the conundrum?
TT: And if the trolls are meant to play, why hasn't the session initialized despite its players' passing of majority?
TG: also add to that list why glubglub is alternias first guardian and for that matter why theres one for each planet
TG: who tf is ectobiologizing all these meow code demons and where are they even coming from without sburb
CG: ALSO, WHY THE DEFINING EVENTS BEHIND OUR LIVES PLAYED OUT PRACTICALLY EXACTLY THE SAME WITHOUT WHITE TEXT GUY PULLING THE STRINGS.
GG: and why bec knows me! not that im complaining, but it doesnt make much sense really
TG: what shoved the stick up times ass
TG: how the players landed on alternia but the reckoning happened on earth which im pretty sure now wasn't actually any reckoning but ill save the archaeology for now
EB: why we cant find the dream bubbles or the horror terrors, what happened to lord english, what happened to jack noir...
GG: maybe the bosses got scratched away too? i dont know if thats how it works
EB: somehow i don't think we're that lucky, jade...
TG: condy definitely isnt our condy and i dont think well get two
EB: weren't there like ten jack noirs?
GG: three :(  
CG: IN CONCLUSION, WE UNDERSTAND ABSOLUTELY JACK SHIT AND PRETENDING OTHERWISE IS A USELESS WASTE OF VALUABLE TIME WE COULD BE LEVERAGING RIGHT NOW TO PRY US OUT OF THIS SHITHOLE.
CG: FOR ALL WE KNOW, THIS IS JUST AN INCREDIBLY ELABORATE DYING DREAM AND WE'RE ALL FIGMENTS OF JOHN'S DEPRESSING SELF-INFLICTED PURGATORY.
TT: I'm aware that I was the one who started this line of conversation, but I concur with Karkat. In retrospect, I maybe should have kept the speculation to a private memo.
TT: We've made an attempt at consolidating our preliminary understanding of the facts. The chief priority at present is to establish a physical link from Earth to Alternia, which means locating Bec is imperative.

You glance over at Sollux who's off to a side, hunched over the laptop Dave bought for him three days ago. Trollian's desktop client is minimized on his screen and his command shell is open, scrolling with white text.

"No hacking," you warn quietly.

He hisses. "I'm thetting up a config file, dipthhit. Dave linked us into Pethterchum by IP, but they don't have connection credenthalth Alterniathide."

"Oh," you blink. "Okay. Are you absolutely sure you don't want to get in this conversation? They're talking strategy."

"I don't give a thhit," he mutters. "I'll read back up later. We're jutht going to do what Thtrider theth anyway."

Shrugging, you turn back to your palmhusk and quickly skim through the segment of conversation that you missed.

TG: its 1am here you sick slave drivers
TG: well do it tomorrow
TG: no i think now we know the trolls are there and in possible danger you need to find them asap
TG: i just pmed jade a bunch of maps of where karkat thinks some of them might vaguely be
TG: the rest we dont know for sure
TT: The original plan was to land covertly and acquire a local device to contact our friends. As
covertly as a white-skinned hornless alien can be on a planet of trolls, at least.
TT: Fortunately, it seems that the resident tech expert on your side has that handled?
TG: well yeah we dont want to kick the anthill and send all the troll ants scurrying to fishqueen and
tipping her off for no good reason
TG: but i dunno now were intervening in the middle of a civil war instead of starting it maybe the
plans changed?
EB: we could snoop around asking shady dudes in dark alleys how to join the rebellion!
EB: wait, is feferi actually raising an army and everything or is it just like...
EB: posting angry manifestos on the internet...?
CG: SHE SENT SOMEONE TO ASSASSINATE THE CONDESCE AND HE GOT CAUGHT,
SO NOW SHE'S GONE INTO HIDING WITH WHATEVER CO-CONSPIRATORS SHE
MIGHT HAVE.
CG: WE DON'T KNOW ENOUGH TO MAKE ANY MORE DEFINITE STATEMENTS
ABOUT HER HYPOTHETICAL UNDERGROUND REVOLUTION OR LACK THEREOF.
YOUR PLANET'S NOT PRECISELY A RISING INTERSTELLAR INFOHUB, YOU KNOW. I
CAN BARELY GET THE TIME OF THE DAY ON YOUR TINY HATCHLING INTERNET.
TT: From Dave's earlier comment, would I be correct in deducing that the assassin was in fact the
one and only Eridan Ampora?
CG: WE'RE NOT SURE, BUT WHOEVER IT WAS WAS WIELDING AHAB'S CROSSHAIRS,
AND I DON'T BELIEVE FOR A SECOND THAT THE PRETENTIOUS PRICK WOULD
HAND HIS PRECIOUS LASER RIFLE OVER TO JUST ANYONE. HE'D KILL HIS LUSUS
OVER THE DUMB GUN.
GG: oh.....
GG: whats going to happen to him?
TT: My condolences. I've talked to him a few times and met in the dream bubbles. Not the most
endearing personality I've met, but he doesn't deserve this.
TT: Is there any hope of rescue, or...?
CG: RESTRAIN YOUR HOOFBEASTS AND CALM YOUR HUMAN ANGUISH BLADDERS.
CG: ONCE HE SNITCHES, THEY'LL PROBABLY TRY TO GET HIM TO SWITCH SIDES,
OR AT LEAST HOLD HIM UNTIL THE HEIRESS IS DESTROYED TO SEE IF HE CHANGES
HIS MIND.
CG: OUTRIGHT CULLING IS HIGHLY UNLIKELY.
CG: AT THE VERY WORST HE MIGHT GET SOME LIGHT TORTURE.
EB: light torture?!?
EB: is that something that happens a lot to trolls?
CG: HEY, LIKE YOUR JUDICIAL SYSTEM'S RIDICULOUS OBSESSION WITH JAILING
FOR EVERY LITTLE ACT IS ANY BETTER.
GG: whaaaaat!!!
CG: JESUS, I'M NOT HAVING THIS CONVERSATION ALL OVER AGAIN.
CG: LET'S JUST MOVE ON.
TT: Do you have an established codephrase or verification system to prove our trustworthiness if
we find them?
CG: NO.
CG: CAN'T YOU JUST SHOW OFF YOUR SBURB POWERS AND DECLARE YOURSELF
THEIR NEW GODS?
GG: having powers doesn't mean were trustworthy though
EB: i don't know, if someone flew out of the sky and told me to come with them if i want to live
that would be a pretty compelling argument.
GG: we also want to keep a low profile, remember! no flying, no hurricanes
TT: The issue is convincing them to divulge a location in the first place. Whatever demonstration
must be over Trollian, preferably without wasting valuable hours reminiscing over childhood
anecdotes.
TG: i could do a time travel mind reading schtick
TG: or would that just make them think im a troll psychic out for them
CG: IF A PSYCHIC'S READING YOUR MIND THEY KNOW YOUR LOCATION ANYWAY,
SO THAT COULD PLAUSIBLY WORK. BUT AS YOU ALREADY POINTED OUT MIND
READING ISN'T ALL THAT SPECIAL. RARE EVEN AMONG PSYCHICS, BUT IT'S A
WELL-DOCUMENTED PHENOMENON.
CG: CAN'T YOU JUST PULL THE INFORMATION FROM THIN AIR WITH TIME TRAVEL
ANYWAY?
CG: NO, DON'T TELL ME. THE SAMPLE SPACE IS TOO BIG, ISN'T IT?
TG: and verification is heavy yeah
TT: It's a bad idea anyway. If they pull something funny, like deliberately lying to prove you
wrong, you could end up in an unstable loop.
TT: I suppose that snaring someone in a temporal collapse is one way to prove time manipulation
of some sort, but that'll short you out for at least hours, which is definitely a suboptimal outcome.
GG: but doesn't karkat know where they live?
GG: can't we just go there then?
CG: I DON'T
KNOW HOW RELIABLE MY LOCATIONS ARE AT THIS POINT. TROLLS MOVE A LOT
THESE FINAL SWEEPS ON HOMEWORLD, ESPECIALLY MID- AND HIGHBLOODS. IT'S
WHEN THE PRESSURE REALLY STARTS COOKING TO CLAW OUR WAY UP THE
SOCIAL ECHELADDER SO WE CAN DRAW A LESS SHITTY JOB ON CONSCRIPTION.
CG: FUCK, I MEAN *LADDER*. NOW I'M GETTING INFECTING WITH YOUR BULLSHIT
MADE UP WORDS TOO.
CG: LAST I REMEMBER, EQUIUS AND VRISKA WERE IN ARCHONIA, TEREZI WAS
APPRENTICED IN SOME LEGISLACERATOR FIRM IN ARBALESK, KANAYA WAS
WORKING IN THE CALTROPIAN CAVERNS. NEPETA'S PROBABLY STILL FUCKING
AROUND IN THE SYLVIAN WILDLANDS, AND WHO THE FUCK KNOWS ABOUT THE
REST? BUT I DON'T HAVE ADDRESSES AND I DON'T KNOW IF ANYONE'S MOVED!
THAT'S THE POINT!
CG: AND YOU WOULD KNOW THIS IF YOU JUST READ THE GODDAMNED MAP
DAVE SENT YOU. IT'S ALL IN THERE IF YOU WOULD JUST APPLY YOUR GANDER
BULBS TO SOMETHING INTELLIGENT AND CONSTRUCTIVE FOR ONCE.
TT: So we still need a way to convince them.
TG: i can factor large numbers
TG: if any of them a cryptographer in training or digital security specialist weve got that going for
us
CG: NOW YOU'RE JUST PULLING SHIT OUT OF YOUR FECULENT ASS. WHAT THE
FUCK DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH TIME? IS COMPUTATIONAL COMPLEXITY
UNDER THE PURVIEW OF YOUR ASPECT ALL OF A SUDDEN? OR DO YOU JUST HAVE
AN ABSURDLY POWERFUL MEGAMAINFRAME LYING AROUND FROM BLENDING
SIX HUNDRED COMPUTERS IN AN ALCHEMITER?
TG: time
TG: shenanigans
TG: thats really all there is to say on the matter
CG: GODDAMMIT. I DON'T EVEN WANT TO KNOW. WHAT CAPACITY OF FUCKS I
HAVE LEFT TO GIVE HAS PLUMMETED PAST ZERO AND ABDICATED THE DOMAIN
OF THE NATURAL NUMBERS IN ITS SCREAMING TRAJECTORY DOWN REAL SPACE. I
ACTIVELY DO NOT WANT TO HEAR A SINGLE WORD ABOUT WHATEVER LAW OF
MATHEMATICS YOU'VE STRANGLLED INTO A COMA AND LOCKED UP IN YOUR
THERMAL HULL THIS TIME, BANGING ON THE DOOR WITH BLOODIED KNUCKLES
AND BEGGING TO BE LET OUT.
TT: We'll keep that as a last resort.
CG: YOU'RE ALL OVERCOMPLICATING THIS.
CG: WE'RE GOING TO GET THEM IN A MEMO, I'M GOING TO YELL AT THEM UNTIL
THEY GIVE US AN ADDRESS JUST TO SHUT ME UP, JADE CAN DO HER SPACEY
THING, AND WE'LL GET OUR MERRY BAND OF PSEUDO-DIVINE PARADOX BEING
REVOLUTIONARIES TOGETHER IN NO TIME.
CG: AND WHILE YOU'RE WHIPPING THE IDIOTS INTO SHAPE, DAVE AND SOLLUX
AND I WILL FIND AND USE THE FIRST GUARDIAN AS A GLORIFIED WIGGLENOODLE
CAVE TO FLUSH US ALL THE WAY ACROSS THE GALAXY.

Are you asserting yourself a bit too strongly? You give Dave a cautious look, but he doesn't look
any more bothered by the gray text spewing across his screen than he was at the start of the memo,
which you guess was an even more effusive rant now that you think back.

You're sure they're used to it, the Knight of Blood by all accounts presented the same pissy persona
as you do, but this you hasn't earned the respect of the Pantheon yet, not yet bludgeoned them into
grudging acceptance. You're not entitled to them tolerating your shit just because they put up with
Other Karkat.

Oh well, you can't really take it back now. You suppress a yawn.

EB: but how will you explain how you're talking to them if you're supposed to be on earth? even if
you can convince them you're not an imposter there'll still be questions.
EB: if you tell them we're mythical gods and goddesses that'll just make them think you're crazy if
we don't have some proof.
GG: you could be like, really vague about everything?
GG: just say we're here to help and we got you back to alternia after the condesce attacked you
GG: its not a secure line, i cant say too much!
GG: you know like that
TG: not gonna work
TG: its at least two weeks from earth to alternia even with the fastest ride boondollars can bribe
TG: which is technically nothing since boondollars are a fictional gaming abstraction and worth
nothing in real life but substitute that for something broadly sensible
TG: and feferi only did her thing like what
TG: twelve days ago?
TG: what you're saying is physically impossible without space magic so were back to square one
TG: which is that were literally too unbelievably awesome
TT: We could fake a transmission latency. Dave will be able to time the delays precisely enough to
spoof even electronic validation.
CG: IT'S SIX THOUSAND LUMINAL SWEEPS, LALONDE. FIFTEEN THOUSAND LIGHT
YEARS. EVEN MILITARY FTL COMMNETS NEED AT THE BAREST MINIMUM TWO
HOURS TO BOUNCE A SIGNAL THROUGH THE 2500 DESOLATE STAR SYSTEMS
FROM HERE TO ALTERNIA.
CG: AND THE RABID IDIOCY OF MESSAGING WITH A FOUR HOUR DOWNTIME
ASIDE, THERE *ARE* NO CIVILIAN COMMNETS.
CG: THEY'LL MORE HAPPILY BELIEVE IN THE METAPHYSICAL VOODOO
CHATROOM THAN A REBEL FACTION HAVING THE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR AN
KILOSWEEP INTERSTELLAR DATA RELAY, LET ALONE ONE WITH TOP-OF-THE-LINE
TRANSMISSION VELOCITIES.
TT: That is a problem.
TT: Does anyone have other suggestions to offer?

A ping sounds to your right.

twinArmageddons [TA] posted in memo the file "thing3.conf"
"I'm done," Sollux calls out. "Just get one of you godly fuckheadth to load the config with the 'create board from file' wizard."

Shit, already? You scramble to type a message telling them to hold it off. You're not ready yet. What if you fuck this up? You made it sound like a cakewalk just moments ago in the chat, but in reality you're flailing in panic at the notion of convincing ten trolls to be extraordinarily bad at Internet privacy. You have no idea what you're doing.

You've long abandoned any delusions of being a "natural-born leader" or whatever bullshit you convinced yourself of sweeps ago. Improv and you do not go well together. Maybe you should script your introduction or something. No, fuck that, that's stupid, it'll just make you sound even faker and more ridiculous than you already do all the time.

To your relief, Rose has beaten you to the punch.

TT: Hold on. We need to coordinate our narratives first.
TG: nah
TG: fuck it
TG: lets just wing it
EB: wait, what are we doing?

"Dave!" you wail.

turntechGodhead [TG] RIGHT NOW opened memo on board FRUITY RUMPUS ASSHOLE FACTORY 2: ELECTRIC BOOGALOO.

Chapter End Notes

_Finally_ some more characters appear. I'm not tagging them because while they don't play a large enough role to warrant that, but there we go.

Also, I retitled the last chapter and adjusted some tags. Probably nobody noticed.
Chapter Summary

Absolutely nothing happens.

"Is it working?" you hear Dave ask to your left.

"They're probably just not online right now," Sollux says. "We have liveth, you know. And half of them are sleeping, in case you've forgotten time zones exist."

Chapter Notes

Trolls speaking English and (bastardized) Japanese makes some sense since they created our universe, but in a universe fusion that would be a bit too weird, so in this work I'm taking the liberal interpretation that that's just a literary device, Alternian is its own language, and they're just insanely good at picking up languages after having it bred into them through millions of years of artificial selection.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

turntechGodhead [TG] RIGHT NOW opened memo on board FRUITY RUMPUS ASSHOLE FACTORY 2: ELECTRIC BOOGALOO.

Oh god.

You can't tear your eyes from the list of members on the sidebar. One by one the grayed-out trolltags pop into color as the little loading wheels spin, a hemospectrum spilling over your screen. On an impulse, you switch back to the Trollian home screen, but no luck—the tags there are still dark. Without Pesterchum hosting you still can't message anyone directly.

You log back into the chat screen, not wanting to miss anything. Your nails are practically clawing grooves in your phone's shell in nervous anticipation. Who's going to reply first? How are you going to communicate anything minutely useful over the chaos of a fifteen(fourteen?)-person memo? Who the fuck's idea was this anyway?

Seconds tick on.

Absolutely nothing happens.

"Is it working?" you hear Dave ask to your left.

"They're probably just not online right now," Sollux says. "We have liveth, you know. And half of them are sleeping, in case you've forgotten time zones exist."

Oh.

You begin to relax your shoulders. Of course. Most of those fuckers couldn't show up to their own
job interview on time, let alone mystically prognosticate the arrival of an extraterrestrial envoy to
know exactly when to check their Trollian. You used to be lucky if anyone even got back to you
within the week. Maybe you should go to sleep and tomorrow—

Your relieved internal monologue is interrupted by a chime from your device.

gallowsCalibrator [GC] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

Fuck.

GC: WH4T 1S TH1S I SM3LL?
GC: COULD 1T B3...
TG: delicious candy red?
GC: NO
GC: >:[
GC: RUD3 1MPOST3RS 1S MOR3 L1K3 1T!
GC: THOS3 4R3 MY FR13NDS TROLLT4GS, DONT W34R TH3M 4ROUND
GC: I C4NT BEL13V3 YOu P30PL3
GC: I 4LR34DY S4ID I DONT KNOW ANYTH1NG! STOP BOTH3RING M3!
GC: TH1S 1S TH3 FL1MS13ST RU2E 1V3R S33N FROM YOu Y3T

carcinoGeneticist [CG] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

CG: WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU BLABBERING ABOUT? IS SOMEONE THREATENING
YOU?
CG: GODDAMMIT. I BET THIS IS ALL FEFERI AND HER GANGRENOUS PIECE OF SHIT
COUP'S FAULT. SHE BLEW HER ONCE CHANCE AND NOW IT'S ALL FALLEN APART
AND WE'RE GOING TO CHOKE TO DEATH ON THE PUTRID SHOCK WAVE OF ITS
CATASTROPHIC IMPlosion. I CAN ALREADY SMELL THE NECROTIC STENCH IN MY
OLFACtORY TUNNELS THREATENING TO DISSOLVE THE PRECIOUS LITTLE
PULMONARY LINING LEFT AFTER BEING ACCOSTED BY THE FUMES FROM THE
BURNING CARRIAGEWHEEL SHE MUST HAVE BEEN SMOKING WHEN SHE DECIDED
to SEND AN ASSASSIN AFTER THE FUCKING CONDESCE!
CG: NEVERMIND THE CATASTROPHIC CONSEQUENCES YOU'RE INADVERTENTLY
FOISTING ON EVERYONE IN A HUNDRED-MILE RADIUS LIKE SHITTY CANDY AT
HUMAN HALLOWEEN! WHAT'S NEXT, A RECUPERACOON AMBUSH BY AN
MERCENARY CAPTASSASSIN? MY FAVORITE PASTIME, BRUTAL INTERROGATION
BY HIS TYRANNY'S ENFORSLASHERS! BUT YOU KNOW WHAT'S EVEN BETTER?
BEING KIDNAPPED BY A BORDERSPACE BOUNTY HUNTRESS IN A THEATRICALLY
OMINOUS BACK ALLEY!
CG: 6/10
GC: COLORFUL BUT NOT QU1T3 CR34T1V3 3NOUGH
CG: IF SHE DOESN'T HAVE A PHENOMENAL FUCKING EXPLANATION READY FOR
EVERYONE STAMPED AND SEALED IN ROYAL FUCHSIA BY THE TIME I FIND HER, I
AM CLOBBERING THAT GILLED MUG IN THE CHEEKY FACE, NEVER MIND THAT
I'LL PULVERIZE EVERY BONE IN MY FIST SOONER THAN DRAW A DROP OF HER
FANCY SNAIL BLOOD.
TG: oof

ectoBiologist [EB] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

EB: hi terezi! we're here to help!
EB: we're aliens from a planet called earth.
gardenGnostic [GG] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

GG: john, she knows what earth is!
GG: they sent karkat and sollux there, remember
EB: she might have thought we're mole people from underground or something.

twinArmageddons [TA] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

TA: hii tz.
GC: OH MY GOD
TA: were real
TG: yep were fucking existent as shit man
TG: take a swill of all this nonfictitious realness were packing
TA: of cour2e thi2 doe2 precii2ely nothiing for the crediibiiliity of thi2 2tupiid memo and an
imperiial shiill would 2ay the exact 2ame thing.
TA: ii dont even know why ii try.

tentacleTherapist [TT] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

TT: Let's cut to the chase: what do you need from us to prove Karkat and Sollux are who they are
and that we bear you no ill will?
TT: We'll straighten this out right here so we don't have to go through this all over again for the
other trolls coming in later.
TT: My name is Rose. GG is Jade, EB is John, TG is Dave.
GC: UGH
GC: F3111NN33, "ROS3"
GC: 1LL HUMOR THIS CH4R4D3 FOR NOW
GC: F1 LL HUMOR THIS CH4R4D3 FOR NOW
GC: ITS MOR3 FUN TH4N L1CK1NG OV3R R3NTAL CONTR4CTS 4NYW4Y
GC: SO WHY 4R3 YOU AND "K4RK4T" AND "SOLLUX" H3R3 TROLL1NG TH3 LOWLY
AND HUMBL3 T3R3Z1 PYROP3E??? :/
GC: PLOTT1NG H1GH TR34SON? ST4G1NG 4 LOWBLOOD R3VOLUT1ON? D3CL4R1NG
W4R ON THE ALT3RN14N 3MP1R3 ON B3H4LF OF OUR N3W HUM4N OV3RLORDS??????:
TT: Nothing so melodramatic.
TT: Just looking to overthrow our dearest Imperious Condescension.
GC: WH4T 4 SC4NDALOUS 4ND UN3XP3CT3D 4NSW3R!
GC: IF IT W3R3 NT TH3 TH1RD T1M3 YOU V3 TR13D TO G3T M3 TO COLLUD3 1N
SUBV3RS1V3 4CT1ON TH1S W33K
GC: SH33SH JUST 4 T3M3 YOUP3L3 WONT YOU!!!
GC: 1M NOT A R3B3L OR A TR41TOR OR WORK1NG W1TH THE H31R3SS!
GC: 4ND 1 DON'T W4NT TO B3
CG: JUST ASK ME SOMETHING ONLY I WOULD KNOW, YOU IMPERTINENT CHALK-
EATING PRICK.

A strange thought strikes you: how are you all understanding each other? Terezi doesn't know
English, and John and Jade wouldn't know any Alternian...

You take another look at your screen. You've been typing in Alternian—or at least you thought you
were—but now you notice that your palmhusk is still configured on the English keyboard, and yet
what comes out is perfectly legible. Looking over the chat log, you're parsing sentences and chunks
fine, but when you try and focus on the individual words and characters, your eyes simple slide off.
At first you think it's the tiredness getting to you, but as you concentrate and force your eyes to do
their job, you find the pixels seem to flicker and intersect in an almost existential ambiguity, occasionally resolving into a Latin character one moment and a troll glyph the next, but mostly just abstract static glitching over the lines.

When you step your visual focus back and go back to reading normally it's impossible to notice, like a psychic effect's actively averting your attention. If it wasn't for the language confusion, you don't think you'd have ever realized.

What the fuck?

You briefly press back to return to the Trollian homepage and tap into your logs with Dave. English, peppered with idiomatic fragments of your language. That's real text. You go back to Fruity Rumpus Asshole Factory 2. Flickering static. You enter Operation Regisurp 2 where you and the humans were talking earlier. Static.

So Pesterchum's translating somehow, but only where necessary?

Your attention is caught by the sudden appearance of indigo text in your notification bar.

centaurTesticle [CT] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

CT: D --> What is this
CT: D --> I have made it explicit that I will not abet further unsolicited contact from the mutant and his ilk
CT: D --> If it is even truly him that is pillaging my device with his treasonous nonsense, as the tealblood has pointed out
CT: D --> That is without mentioning the literal treason that is being plotted in this memo

Oh fuck you, it's the one person in this entire group that might be insane enough to immediately rat you out to the Empire at the first whiff of what you're planning.

"Why the bulge-curling hell did we invite Equius?" you hiss at Sollux.

"Fuck fuck fuck th'hit I don't know I can't boot him out now, he'll thtill have the logth!"

"Can you go back in time and stop us from doing this?" you ask Dave, even as you try your best not to think about being deallocated like an unused memory resource.

He shakes his head. "There's 15 people across thousands of light years entangled in this state. Even if I'd primed it properly it would be a risk, but a spontaneous retcon? My head would explode like a watermelon. And then I'd resurrect, to be fair, but that wouldn't actually achieve anything."

Fuck. Time to improvise. You are not awake enough for this shit.

CG: THE LAW CLEARLY STATES IT'S NOT TREASON IF WE'RE ASSISTING THE RIGHTFUL HEIRESS IN HER CHALLENGE OF THE THRONE.
CG: AND BY THE WAY SHE ORDERS THAT THE EXISTENCE AND CONTENTS OF THIS CONVERSATION REMAIN ABSOLUTELY CONFIDENTIAL.
CG: IF [*] HAVE TO REMIND YOU THAT THE HEIRESS' WILL HOLDS ULTIMATE AUTHORITY SO LONG AS YOU REMAIN ALTERNIABOUND, SOMETHING'S GONE DISASTROUSLY WRONG IN THIS WORLD.
CT: D --> That is only in the absence of contravening orders from Her Imperious Condescension
CT: D --> Who has revoked Feferi's command and ordered the capture of the Heiress and her allies
CT: D --> I ought to turn you in right now
GC: W41T, EQU1US!!
GC: IF YOU DO TH4T, W3 COULD B3 4RR3T3D 4ND 3X3CUT3D FOR SUSP3CT3D CONSPIR4CY
CT: D --> I will not
CG: WHAT ABOUT NEPETA? YOU'RE JUST GOING TO LET HER DIE, YOU BRAINLESS CRETIN?
CT: D --> None of our other compatriots have taken part in this
CT: D --> There is a STRONG case against their e%xecution
TT: You misunderstand the nature of our allegiances, blueblood.
TT: We are empowered by legitimate authority and nobody can say otherwise.
TT: Tell us where you are. We will prove it.
CT: D --> That makes no sense
GC: IT R34LLY DO3NT
CT: D --> You are lying
CT: D --> Do you think me a f001
TT: No.
CT: D --> Yes
TT: I order you to, blueblood filth.
CT: D --> You are an alien
CT: D --> You are not truly of the royal castes
CT: D --> I am not compelled to obey to you, regardless of the e%quisite color of your words
TT: I may not be a troll, but blood does not lie. I am your superior in all respects. You will obey my commands.
CT: D --> You could be fraud001ently hemotyping
CT: D --> It is irrelevant
TT: If we're lying, telling us where you are will not change a thing. I'm willing to wager Feferi knows where you live anyway. This is merely a more expedient way of demonstrating our goodwill.
CT: D --> I am reporting this dista%eful assembly
TT: No.
CT: D --> Yes
TT: No. I order you not to.

You hate Equius you hate Equius you hate Equius—

"Karkat, help me out," you hear Dave call out as you tear your eyes from the train wreck happening before your eyes. You look up at his monitor.

He's been pestering Terezi directly while Rose was distracting Equius. Well, at least one of you isn't sitting around like lobotomized ducks banking on her gambit to actually work, because the blueblood's an idiot but not that deficient in rudimentary critical thinking. You wordlessly reach out to grab his floating keyboard.

"Dammit, Terezi," you hiss as you rapidly skim through the short log so far. You know it's not her fault—it's 100% the right move from her perspective—but god damn if it's not annoying having to deal with all this aggressive suspicion.

You reach the bottom and start hammering away at the mechanical keys. "Holy fuck, you type fast," he mutters.

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering gallowsCalibrator [GC]
TG: terezi
TG: its dave
TG: i know that means nothing to you but i really really really need you to tell me equius address
TG: i swear we're friends
TG: actually its mostly your neck were perfectly safe
GC: OK, I'M PR3TTY C3RT41N YOUR3 NOT 3MP1R3 GOONS S3NT TO T3ST M3 NOW
GC: BUT TH4T DO3SN'T MEAN I TRUST YOU
GC: SO G1V3 M3 ON3 R34SON TO DO TH1S
GC: 4ND WH4T WOULD YOU 3V3N DO W1TH TH4T 1NF0RM4T1ON TO STOP HIM? >:?
TG: we can teleport him out of his house
GC: 1 S33
GC: SO YOUR3 TROLL1NG
GC: PR3M1S3 N33DS WORK
GC: M4YB3 SOM3TH1NG L3SS L1K3LY TO G3T YOU CULL3D?
TG: look im going to say some words and see if it pings a memory
TG: land of thought and flow
TG: cruxtruder alchemiter kernelsprite
TG: john egbert dave strider rose lalonde jade harley
TG: latula pyrope
TG: doc scratch
TG: lord english
TG: vanilla milkshake
TG: dream bubbles
TG: come on you're a fucking seer just do your mindy thing and remember already
GC: 1 H4V3 NO 1D34 WH4T YOU'RR3 TRY1NG TO DO H3R3
GC: 1S THIS 4 CULT TH1NG
TG: TEREZI, THIS IS KARKAT
TG: THAT'S BETTER.
TG: I DON'T KNOW HOW I CAN CONVINCE YOU IN SO LITTLE TIME THAT I'M THE GENUINE ARTICLE AND ALSO NOT SHACKLED TO A TORTURE PLATFORM TYPING WHILE A PSYCRUCIFIER CRUDELY RELOCATES MY NAILS INTO A METAL TRAY TOE BY TOE, BUT PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF THE TRUCULENT GODS OF THE FURTHEST RING BELIEVE ME WHEN I SAY THESE HUMANS ARE HERE TO HELP.
TG: WHATEVER IS GOING ON IN YOUR LEGISLACERATOR AMATEUR DRAMA THAT'S GOT YOU ALL WORKED UP LIKE A CAVALREAPER ON HIS LAST HORSE I HAVE NO FUCKING CLUE, BUT IT IS ABSOLUTELY BULB-SCORCHINGLY CRITICAL THAT YOU GET YOUR DISTURBINGLY CONICAL HORNS OUT OF THAT GAPING STEAMING SHITCHUTE AND *TELL US WHERE THE FUCK EQUIUS IS*.
TG: THESE PEOPLE ARE LITERALLY ELDER GODS WIELDING UNFATHOMABLE POWERS OVER TIME AND SPACE AND THEY'RE GOING TO OVERTHROW THE CONDESCE AND HER SHITTY DICTATORIAL DYSTOPIA ONE WAY OR ANOTHER.
YOU GAIN NOTHING OPPOSING THEM AND THEY *LIKE* YOU.
TG: I'M PERFECTLY AWARE IT SOUNDS LIKE I'VE PERFORMED AN SUPersonic SWAN DIVE OFF THE DEEP END OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ATLAS AND STRAIGHT INTO THE FROTHING WATERS OF DELUSIONAL ASSFUCK INSANITY, AND PROBABLY OUGHT TO CHECK MYSELF INTO THE NEAREST MENTAL INSTITUTE FOR LIVE SUBJECT PROCESSING AT MY NEAREST CONVENIENCE, BUT I SWEAR IT'S THE TRUTH.
GC: STILL SOUNDS L1K3 A CROCKLO4D OF BULLSH1T
TG: LOOK, YOU'VE ALREADY IMPLIED THAT YOU'RE ON THIN FUCKING ICE RIGHT
NOW WITH WHO KNOWS WHAT AUTHORITY YOU’VE PISSED OFF. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THEY FIND EVIDENCE OF POTENTIAL COLLUSION WITH NOT JUST ILLICIT ALIENS, NOT JUST IMPERIAL TRAITORS, NOT JUST MUTANT DESERTERS, BUT *ALL THREE* IN ONE INCESTUOUS PESTERLOG CLUSTERFUCK???

TG: EITHER YOU LET EQUIUS BLOW THIS OPEN AND GET FUCKED WITH A GARGANTUAN RUSTY SPIKED FLAIL, *OR* YOU TELL US WHERE HE IS, THE DISGUSTING SWEATY MUSCLEBEAST FETISHIST THAT NOBODY LIKED OR EVER WANTED TO TOUCH WITH A TEN-FOOT STICK BEARS THE BRUNT OF ANY STRICTLY HYPOTHEtical ALIEN PROBING-SLASH-GRAPHIC TORMENT WE MIGHT HAVE IN STORE FOR OUR ABDUCTEES, AND YOU SLEEP EASY ANOTHER NIGHT.

GC: OR I COULD TURN YOU IN FIRST AND REAP THE SPOILS FOR MYSELF?? >:|

TG: IT'S NOT GOING TO MAKE ANY FUCKING DIFFERENCE!!! WE'LL GET OFF SCOT-FREE BECAUSE I'M *NOT EVEN ON ALTERNIA* AND YOU DIG YOUR GRAVE DEEPER. THE FLEET DOESN'T TAKE RISKS AND IT DOESN'T TAKE PRISONERS. MAYBE IF YOU WERE A HIGHBLOOD YOU'D GET OFF SCOT-FREE, BUT TEAL AND FUCKING *BLIND*? YOU KNOW THIS.

GC: SURGH

GC: FIN3

GC: 4RCH8 MB27C

GC: KNOCK YOUR SAUNTERSOCKETS OFF, PERSON WHO MAY OR MAY NOT BE

Fucking finally.

"Mark it on a map and send it to Jade," Dave says over your back. "Jesus Christ, this orienteering bullshit is such a crock of garbage. Why did Space and Time get nerfed so hard?"

You comply, pulling up one of your earlier attempts at charting your friends’ locations and marking the location of the postcode.

"Boo hoo, I don't have perfect spatial awareness and teleportation powers over the entirety of the observable universe and beyond," you snark, unimpressed. "Now my godlike space powers are confined to the speed of thought, and I can only teleport across the star system, woe is me."

With the press of a key you send the updated information off to the Witch of Space. Handing the controls back over to Dave, you consult your palmhusk again to check on the conversation in FRAF2, already dreading the worst.

CT: D --> Yes
TT: No.
CT: D --> Yes
TT: No.
CT: D --> Yes
TT: No.
CT: D --> This is ridiculous
CT: D --> And a transparent stalling tactic
CT: D --> What do you hope to gain from this
TT: Surely it would be wiser to wait for the Heiress to arrive before making any hasty decisions.

Not only is she of higher blood, but she's also a personal acquaintance of yours, isn't she? I understand that you have no particular love for the Empress, merely a proper respect for the spectral hierarchy. Perhaps the Empress' word takes legal precedence, but the same blood runs through Her Imperious Condescension's and Feferi Peixes' veins. Would you refuse even a simple audience with the Heiress?
CT: D --> You claim to represent the Heiress
CT: D --> Yet you insisted you knew nothing of her plans earlier
CT: D --> Which will it be
TT: That's irrelevant. You will do nothing until further instruction.

arachnidsGrip [AG] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

AG: What the hell is going on here?
TA: oh god
TA: not you
CT: D --> This does not involve you, Vriska
AG: 8ullshit!
AG: I'm reading through this and it sure as fuck sounds like it involves me!
AG: A clandestine plot transpiring right under my nose? It would be downright criminal if this weren't brought to my attention.
AG: I need to keep track of all these things! You know what they say!
EB: all these irons in the fire? :)
AG: Exactly, blue guy that I've never met in my life!
CT: D --> You will not fraternize with these h00ligans

centaursTesticle's [CT'S] computer has lost its connection.

GC: OH WOW
GC: TH4T W4T QU1CK
Oh hell no, not fucking Vriska. Just your luck, first Equius and then her? You resist the urge to cuss her out over the chat. Priorities. What happened to Equius?

You tab back to Operation Regisurp, holding your breath.

GG: got him!
GG: wow he is
GG: really sweaty
CG: WATCH OUT, HE'S FREAKISHLY STRONG. I DON'T THINK BEING PUNCHED THROUGH THE CHEST BY A FLAILING MILKSLURPING DOUCHEBAG COUNTS AS HEROIC, BUT IT WOULDN'T BE A TERRIBLY FUN EXPERIENCE.
CG: WAIT, DID YOU TELEPORT HIM INTO ORBIT?
EB: yep, but i stole some air from your atmosphere to make a breathable pocket!
EB: he can't fly and there's no leverage so he's just kind of stuck floating in the same place? i don't think he's much of a threat.
EB: i guess he could slowly swim through the air, but he's too busy freaking out right now. heh.
CG: WHY DID WE EVER THINK PUTTING UP THIS MASSIVE MEMO WITHOUT ANY HALFWAY COMPETENT PLAN WOULD WORK?
TT: We didn't. Dave jumped the gun.
TG: oops

Growling silently, you switch back to the other group. Now that the immediate threat's defused—and to be honest, that's overstating it, Equius spilling the beans would be at most an inconvenience and the loss of a strategic advantage—the fatigue is settling back in, but the urge to bury yourself in a pillow is counterbalanced by the seething irritation bubbling in you that's only been stoked by Equius' antics and the introduction of your least favorite cerulean.

GC: VR1SK4, 4R3 YOU IN ON THIS?
AG: Nope! Just here along for the ride!

CG: JESUS FUCKING CHRIST, THIS IS THE WORST FUCKING REUNION EVER. THE CHAIN COLLISION OF EXPLOSIVELY UNSTABLE PERSONALITY CARICATURES INTO THE MALFUNCTIONING GARBAGE INCINERATOR OF UNTHINKABLE LOGISTICAL INCOMPETENCE ISN'T EVER GOING TO END, IS IT?

CG: WHAT'S NEXT, ARADIA RESTARTS HER POST-DEATH FEUD WITH VRISKA AND BLOWS UP THE NORTHERN SEABOARD? JUST AN INFERNO OF PERPETUAL SELF-PROPAGATING DISASTER BLAZING ACROSS THE PURPLE SKY, AN INFINITE STREAM OF ILLEGIBLE TYPING AND ASININE ARGUMENTS GALORE CAST INTO THE RAVENOUS MAW OF THIS APOCALYPTIC DUMPSTER FIRE. HOW THE RHETORICAL BEAST HUNGERS, OH, HOW IT HUNGERS FOR THE GOURMET FUCKING BULLSHIT BUFFET SERVED 24/7 FROM THIS CIRCLE OF BULGE-CHEWING NITWITS!

AG: Hi Karkat! Here to 8eg me for more favors?

AG: How are you even talking to us? Are you in the system? Way to waste all that effort I spent 8ooting you off to the far rims of explored space!

GC: 4H3M >:|

AG: Fiiiiiiiiine. You all get SOME of the credit.

CG: SHUT UP, VRISKA. I'M HERE TO DO *YOU* MOTHERFUCKERS A FAVOR.

CG: GIVE ME A GODDAMN SECOND.

Somewhere in the addled depths of your mind you feel gears finally click and creak, and slowly you manage to start teasing a strand of something resembling an idea out of the loose neuron soup of your think pan.

If you need to prove something over Trollian, what better to use than the medium itself?

CG: OK, YOU DIPSHITS, LISTEN UP.

CG: TELL ME WHAT THE FIRST LETTER OF THIS SENTENCE IS. ACTUALLY LOOK AT IT ON THE SCREEN WITH YOUR EYES. EYE. TONGUE. I DON'T GIVE A FUCK WHAT SENSORY ORGAN YOU USE, JUST DO IT.

GC: ...WO4H

AG: What the fuck is that?

GC: 1T T4ST3S

CG: ABSTRACT? ELDRITCH? EXISTENTIALLY HORRIFYING?

GC: CONFUS1NG

AG: Cool, but I repeat because you might not have heard me the first time:

AG: What the fuck?????????

EB: ohhhhhh!

EB: it's been so long since i got the gift of gab i forgot that was a thing.

TT: Ah, yes. Another peculiar import from Old Earth's Skaianet. It's been so many years it that slipped my mind as well. As good a demonstration as any, I suppose.

EB: heh, i can't believe we didn't think of that.

GG: when it comes to sn tech, just... dont think about it too hard :/

TG: so tldr, were gods from another reality with superpowers including magic texting and here to overthrow the condescend make friends with you guys

TG: and by you we mean specifically the 12 of you because we knew the yous in that other reality at some point

TG: most of which were ghosts and dead at the time

TG: i dont know why i added that it just felt like relevant context so you dont get the wrong idea that we were all like alive and singing kumbaya around a campfire

TG: so hi
"Karkat, did Gamzee ever say anything about Sburb?"

You reread Terezi's cryptic statement, an uneasy feeling coiling deep inside. "No," you reply honestly. "Terezi was involved in his trial. She'd know more."

After a pause, you dredge up something from your memories. Something which, based on what you've learned recently, might be worth reconsidering.

"He said... when he's sober, he hears voices. Do you think..."

"The Song?"

GG: wait, questions before we get too deep into this
GG: have any of you been attacked or in danger
GG: due to feferi related reasons or otherwise
GG: also it would be great if you could bring us up to date on that situation!
GG: because all we have is from karkat and sollux and they're on earth and not really that well informed :(
AG: W8, what if I don't want to run a re8ellion?
AG: You ever think about that? Huh?
TA: you dont have a choice
TA: we can lock you in a thermal hull for the duration if you dont feel up to it ii gue22
CG: SECONDED.
GC: UGH
GC: I TH1NK B3TW33N TH1S 4ND THOS3 TH1NGS YOU W3R3 S3ND1NG M3 IM SM3LL1NG 4 TR33ND
GC: H4V3 YOU B33N T4LK1NG TO G4MZ33 BY 4NY CH4NC3?
CG: HUH?
TG: what does this have to do with the juggalo
GC: SOLD
AG: Oh, come on, Terezi!
GC: IM IN TH3 MURD3V14N GLORY, OFF1C3 7133
GC: LOOK FOR THE B1G C1TY 4T TH3 NORTH34ST3RN P34K OF TH3 3GGY LOOK1NG CONT1N3NT
AG: This is such a sad idea!
GC: TH3 M4SS1V3 ST4TU3 OF TH3 COND3SC3!
GC: TH4TS TH4 ACTU4L BU1LD1NG
GG: one alien abduction, coming right up!
CG: WAIT, JADE.

gallowsCalibrator's [GC'S] computer has lost its connection.

CG: OH, GODDAMMIT. I WANTED TO TALK TO HER.
AG: D:::::
TT: You'll get plenty of chances later, Karkat.
AG: Now it's just me and mutant nu8s. Look what you did!
AG: rtk3jyj

arachnidsGrip's [AG'S] computer has lost its connection.

Of course Terezi would instantly snitch on Vriska.

gardenGnostic [GG] began pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG]

GG: I can help you send a message if you like!
GG: but really you'll get to meet her in person when you find bec anyway
GG: along with the rest of your friends!
GG: i have vriska here too
CG: AH, FUCK. JUST TELL HER
CG: I MISSED HER.
GG: thats it?
CG: I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY!
CG: ALSO TELL THAT TO THE OTHERS.
CG: EXCEPT VRISKA.
CG: FUCK VRISKA.
CG: BUT NOT IN AN DISMISSIVE WAY. IN A GRUDGINGLY HATEFUL KIND OF WAY.
CG: CAN YOU SOMEHOW CONVEY THE SENTIMENT OF "EXCEPT VRISKA; FUCK VRISKA" BUT IN A VAGUELY INSINCERE MANNER THAT SUGGESTS THAT IN SPITE OF HER AWFUL PERSONALITY AND GENERAL CONDUCT, I'M MOSTLY GLAD SHE'S NOT DEAD?
GG: oh my god karkat im not auspisticising for you in the middle of all this
GG: blackfliirt with her yourself
CG: WHAT? NO!
GG: also shes been reading this over my back
CG: OH FUCK YOU.
CG: PLEASE TELL ME THAT WAS A JOKE.
GG: yes it was :p

"They're going to try picking up some of the others using Terezi's info," Dave reports. "We should go to sleep. Find Bec tomorrow, get there ourselves, you can have your joyful reunion then. Don't
ruin your friendship appetite."

"That's not how friendship works. That's not how anything works," you throw back absently, still trying to process.

"Maybe not, but we're going to be up all night at this rate if I let you off the leash. We need everyone in top form tomorrow."

You grit your teeth, suppressing a traitorous yawn. "Easy for you to say—you're the one that gets to stay up all night hanging out in the chat. I haven't heard a slightest flatulent whiff from any of them in forever, dammit. Give me ten minutes to catch up. Just ten."

Just as soon as you find the words you want to say. No, you've got plenty of words you're dying to blurt out, enough apologies and admissions and questions to fill an essay, but hardly any you dare confess over the Jade Harley Telephone express. Being dead on your feet isn't helping your thinking process either.

"Yeah, I'll stay up all night and then have to go back and pass out for another 8 hours more," he points out in a beleaguered voice, jerking a thumb at his comatose body double snoring in a pile behind him. "Between that and the unpleasant surprises that I just fucking know are going to pop out of nowhere and crash our dog hunting trip tomorrow, I've still got almost twice the time you have left to wait before I'll meet the gang myself, dude. Look, we discussed this earlier. No take-backs, Karkat."

You grumble under your breath. You did, but that was in a moment of desperation to get Dave to shut his yammering and let you stay up for the big arrival. You didn't expect to have to follow through. Okay, well, you did, but you didn't expect it how hard it would be. You peek at your palmhusk.

GG: terezi said she missed you too :))
GG: vriska rolled her eyes
GG: i dont know what the horse guy is doing, johns trying to talk to him
GG: they told us getting nepeta next would help?
GG: hellowoo

"A deal's a deal, sweetums," Dave wheedles, wielding the term of endearment like a skinning knife. You cringe. How is his ironic flirting even more irritating now that you're actually dating?

"I went my entire session without sleep," you retort, knowing very well how much you sound like a petulant wiggler. You rub your eyes. "Why don't you fuck off and pester Sollux instead?"

You try to consult your device again and Dave wraps his soft arms around you, gently pinning your limbs to your sides. "That was with Circadian March. And Sollux's already passed out like a concussed baby overdosed on sleeping pills, so your argument is invalid. C'mon."

You check and curse silently: he's right. The goldblood's head is lolling back on his chair, a hint of yellow drool building at the edge of his mouth. He's going to have a crick in his neck tomorrow. Damn, now the sight of the unconscious troll is agitating your slumber glands too.

The turntop ripples and corkscrews down a spatial drain into his sylladex, emptying the room of its dull red luminescence, and you hear your palmhusk chirp confusedly as the connection blinks out. Your eyes flutter at the sudden darkness and an unexpected weight hits your gander shutters. You feel yourself sag.
The god drags you both up the bed with the gentle thrust of god tier flight and flops down into the mattress, bringing you down with him. The pillow puffs as your head smacks into it before slowly deflating under the weight of your skull, hugging your horn and cheek with sinful softness. Dave's cradle tightens as he buries his head in your neck from behind, and your exasperated groan doesn't hide how you melt into the human's pliant hold. You're more tired than you thought.

"You can't bribe me with physical intimacy, asscrack," you mumble, but you know you've lost.

"Sore loser," he mumbles back, the twitch in his lips faintly tugging against your shoulder. Fucking cheater. You can't find the strength to throw him off, but even if you could, it's not like you can contact the others without his computer interfacing. Your eyes are closing despite your best efforts, and you start to lose your grip on consciousness.

Thoughts of home and friends are still bumping around in your think pan, but the bubbles of memories and unspoken words are already dissolving into a froth of sleepy warmth and lethargy. You barely notice as Dave disentangles himself from your body and props himself back up, register neither your unconscious *mmph* as something heavy drapes itself gently over you, nor the dim light trickling through the curtains for a split second as the god flits out the window to his watch post.

You dream of a dark planet under a scorching star and of twin moons pink and green.

Chapter End Notes

What I've used here to tie it up here is kind of a deus ex machina, but let's be honest, having Karkat and everyone talk to twelve trolls would take forever, and probably would be more suited to the style used in Act 6 than a chaptered fic.

(I also don't have the confidence or literary will to study up on that many characters and construct convincing conversations and histories for the 3 sweeps since Hivebent start to the present. Sorry if you were disappointed by the lack of a genuine dozen-troll waterfall of rainbow text, but... would anyone really be invested enough to sit through chapters of characters talking about things that are both irrelevant and nonessential in the grand scheme.)

(I do plan on fleshing out interactions between specific characters where it makes sense, in particular the meteor cast *cough* Rosemary *cough* which is kind of the entire premise of interpersonal tension in this story)

(Eventually)

(Like, really eventually. There's so much plot queued up.)
He lifts the megaphone to his mouth again and you step back, preparing yourself once more.

"BEC! GET YOUR FURRY TAPERED RUMP OVER HERE, YOU SON OF A BITCH! MOMMY JADE'S WAITING FOR YOU! SHE'S GOT YOUR STUPID IRRADIATED STEAK ALL GREEN AND GLOWING AND PACKED WITH DEADLY DEPLETED ISOTOPES! NOM NOM!"

"How far does that thing's range reach?" you wonder over your bleeding eardrums. Covering your auricular sponges did not help at all. Also, you think he just called the Witch of Space a bitch, but you decide not to point that out.

In which Dave fails at (1) making correct predictions and (2) sticking to a plan.

"So here we are," you mutter, glancing over the snow-dusted landscape sprawled in front of you. Coniferous trees stretch as far as the eye can see against white and the clouded blue of the sky. You can see the droplets condensing from your breath in the early morning chill as you wrap your coat tighter around you. "National fucking forest... Just a bunch of trees."

The three of you left the boat you rented to cross the lake at the shore, trekking the remaining few kilometers to where the four dropped Bec off back in August. The rental company probably isn't getting it back, but with the hefty deposit you left, you think they'll survive.

First guardians gravitate to ancient ruins, abandoned cities, anything at the intersection of "culturally significant" and "untouched in centuries". They found the dog at Jade's island, but needed to relocate it to somewhere someone without long-distance teleportation could access, hence the forest. According to Dave there's probably an undiscovered Siburb site buried somewhere around here, but whatever the reason, when the Seer of Light tells you where to stick the immortal hellbeast, you don't ask questions.

"What now?" Sollux asks grumpily, still annoyed that Dave didn't let him fly the way over here. "We just walk around looking for thparkling barkbeathth? Even if it didn't go far, thith place is matthhive."

"I was thinking we could just try just calling him." Dave deacptchalogues a massive megaphone into his hands, and an instant of confusion later you realize it's not your eyes: those are physical JPEG artifacts fraying at the edges of the device. Fuck, just looking at it is giving you a migraine, and the headache's only compounded by the horrified expectation of what's coming next. You cringe as he raises it to his mouth and takes a deep breath.
To your relief the shout doesn't render itself in eye-hurting red Comic Sans like you were fearing—it's just an extraordinarily shitty speaking trumpet, not another SBaHJification atrocity like the camera he showed you that time. Those things are terrifying, maybe even more than the god powers and universe frogs and nonsensical gaming abstractions. What does it even mean for something to become existentially degraded like that? What's happening inside those artifacts?

The electronically amplified voice is still painfully loud, though, and even with your hands slammed over your ears in reflex it takes a while for the ringing to subside.

"What happened to thtaying dithecret?" Sollux hisses.

"Even if some random campers hear us, they'll just think we're looking for a lost dog or something. Which we are," Dave waves off, unconcerned. "And once Bec's here we'll be gone, so even if someone finds out where we are it won't matter. We're not doing anything overtly supernatural, just making loud noises, which last time I checked isn't against the law. Well okay, maybe it might be, but who's going to arrest us?"

He lifts the megaphone to his mouth again and you step back, preparing yourself once more.

"BEC! GET YOUR FURRY TAPERED RUMP OVER HERE, YOU SON OF A BITCH! MOMMY JADE'S WAITING FOR YOU! SHE'S GOT YOUR STUPID IRRADIATED STEAK ALL GREEN AND GLOWING AND PACKED WITH DEADLY DEPLETED ISO Topes! NOM NOM!"

"How far does that thing's range reach?" you wonder over your bleeding eardrums. Covering your auricular sponges did not help at all. Also, you think he just called the Witch of Space a bitch, but you decide not to point that out.

"Bec's got super-hearing with his natural canine senses jacked up to infinity by the Green Sun. The bastard probably knows we're here, he's just being an elusive shit to make our lives difficult. Like Superman, except instead of angsting over not being able to save everyone and the futility of the human condition it's just being a dick."

"Tho we just wait for the dog to th'how up? What if it'th thleeping, or dug itthelf into a hole and can't hear you? Do Earth barkbeathth hibenrate? Do firtht guardianth?"

Dave shrugs.

"Hey, if all fails, I have a picnic blanket in my sylladex."

You're tempted to ask him to phone up the team Alterniaside again while you wait, but manage to restrain yourself. You already had a short catch-up with them this morning before you set out, a precisely allocated fifteen minutes just to reassure yourself they're all fine—which they are, though they still haven't gotten ahold of Aradia or the sea dwellers—without going into a full debriefing or lapsing into paranoid hysterics. He's not going to accede to your nagging yet again, and you have to admit that at this point trolling them is a waste of time when you're so close to meeting in person already.

"If he doesn't show up in another ten or twenty minutes, I'll try tossing a branch into the sky and yelling 'catch',' Dave says.

You can't tell if he's being facetious or not.

"It's way too fucking cold to stand around like snowlusii in a sleetstorm," you settle for grumbling.
"I run too warm for this shit."

"Aww," he coos. "Is widdle Karkat shivering? Do you want a hug?"

He makes grabby motions at you with his hands as you step away, squawking while you bat off his advances, "Oh fuck no. Keep your disgusting human flesh nubs off me."

"Ugh, get a pile," Sollux grouses, backing away from you. "Don't act like you're not both thlavering to get your grubby fingerth all over each other, I'm embarrathhed jutht watching you."

"Not out here—"

You're cut off as Dave flash-steps into you, knocking the breath from your lungs and instantly snapping you up in an iron grip. Your dip your head to try and bite his shoulder to get him off you—he's a god, he'll live—but the human bonks his head against yours, stopping it in place with a smirk.

Alright, this is excessive. He's doing this just to rile Sollux up now.

As you groan exasperatedly, Dave captchalogues his shades off his face and stares up at you with his blood-red eyes. There's a playful energy in there, telegraphing a foxy irreverence that negates any flushed undertones to the act, but there's also a more literal energy simmering behind those irises that prickles your nape as you look into them, singing with the inexplicable taste of copper and time.

If the eyes are a window to the soul, you feel like you're peering into the coruscating clockwork of a god's immortal spirit. As hard as you try, you're not quite able to break your gaze away.

You shiver.

"Dave, your eyes," you mutter, pushing at him. He blinks, bemused, before realization sweeps over and he lets go. He slams his eyelids shut for a few focused seconds, and when he reopens them the smoldering undercurrent of power is gone, or at least suppressed to an undetectable concentration.

"Sorry, that happens sometimes," he says sheepishly. "I think it's a good sign, though. The god aura only gets going when something Sburby's going on."

"I kind of like it," you admit. "When it's not crammed in my face without warning, at least."

"Oh my god, are we here to find a dog or flirt?" Sollux growls.

"Multitasking is an invaluable skill, Sollux," Dave chides, turning to face him. "Hunting prey, stealing hearts—when it comes down to it, is there really that much of a difference?"

"You're the Knight of Time, not Rogue of Heart," the goldblood retorts.

The human barks in laughter. "Holy shit, I can't believe you just said that."

You sigh.

Half a minute passes in the ambient chatter of the winter woods.

"Were you joking about that, or can you just do the stupid stick thing now?" you ask, fed up with the wait.

Dave hums in contemplation. "We'd need a pretty damn big stick for it to be visible from a
distance. Sollux, do you think you can toss a tree?"

The troll gives him a flat look.

The human coughs. "I'll take that for a yes. If we uproot a tree in an absolutely shocking display of environmental vandalism and strip the branches... would Bec still recognize that as a stick? Jade says he'll catch a bullet, but... hmm..."

He coughs again.

Wait, that's not Dave.

You jerk and swing around to the source of the sound behind you.

There's a tall hornless figure shrouded with darkness in the shade of the trees with a hand raised to its mouth, looking straight at the three of you. Dave's already drawn—well, you say drawn, but "materialized directly into his hand" is a more accurate descriptor—his sword, ready for strife, and you also raise your fists a beat late into an awkward fighting stance.

The newcomer lumbers into view. It's a tan human dressed in a uniform you don't recognize, but she doesn't look military—a gun's holstered at her side, but the logo on her breast has a tree on it, so you suppose she might be a forest enforcer or some other bullshit human profession like that. Wildlife culler?

Her left hand's raised front and center in the universal gesture of pacification, but it doesn't escape anyone's notice that the other is drifting close to the firearm. Her voice is smooth and level as she says, "Woah. Put that sword down, please."

You feel Dave relax minutely next to you and Sollux' psionic lobes winding down with a static prickle. Someone from the Empire would have shot first, made a vague attempt at pacification later, so this most likely just a curious stranger, not an enemy.

Not yet, at least.

Dave waves Caledfwlch. "What, this? It's just a foam sword. For LARPing, you know."

The person blinks and realizes yes, it is very obviously a foam sword all of a sudden, what does she mean?

"What?" she mutters. "No, that's not—that wasn't what you were holding just now. How did you do that?"

"I didn't do anything," Dave says, cocking his head in faux innocence. He's enjoying this way too much. "What do you mean? What else was I holding?"

"No, like a real sword. Made of white metal, and, like, sharp. That's what you were holding." You can hear the bemusement in her words.

"What kind of metal is white?"

"I... what? I don't know! It looked metallic!"

Dave raises an eyebrow. "I dunno, maybe it was a trick of the light? Where would I be hiding this purported white metal sword? Down my pants? I appreciate the compliment, lady, but I'm a taken man."
"You..." The woman seems about to argue again for a moment, but stops herself in time, a confused frown creasing her face. "Whatever. Are you kids the ones making all that ruckus earlier?"

Her narrowing eyes have switched to you and Sollux now, focusing on the aliens now that the obvious weapon is out of the picture. Mildly speciesist and hilariously wrong to peg you and Sollux as the threat in the figurative room, but fair. Your kind has a reputation, after all. Plus, it's a bit flattering to be taken seriously for once after spending so long with these overpowered buffoons.

You glance at the other troll uncertainly, unsure how to respond.

"Yeah. We're looking for our lost dog," Dave replies with a perfectly straight face. He raises a level hand to about chest-height and affects a Texan accent for the next part. "About wee big, white as snow, ma'am. Have you seen him?"

The woman's face changes, eyes stilling in place and her mouth flattening subtly. That's not the expression of a friendly concerned forest caretaker.

That's not the expression of a friendly concerned forest caretaker.

She knows something.

"He's a feisty one," Dave continues. From the shift in his stance, he caught that as well. "Doesn't like being trapped in one place, every now and then likes to transmute himself into a portal of raging green fire? Ring a bell?"

"Who are you people?" she says levelly, any trace of cavalier humor gone. "How do you know about... the dog?"

"He's my friend's," Dave explains, still projecting guilelessness. "It sounds like you've seen Bec. Maybe you could take us to him?"

"I..." Her hand's grazing the grip of her weapon now. "I'm going to have to consult with my supervisors. About whether anyone's seen him. The dog. Yes."

That just reeks of trouble

She walks backwards slowly, before pausing to add, "Stay right here and don't move."

In a flash she's back behind a tree trunk, casting nervous looks at the three of you as she hisses into a radio transceiver under her breath.

<What do we do if she says she'll take us?> you whisper. <It might be a trap.>

<How did you idiotth not thee thith coming?> Sollux chimes in angrily. <Shouldn't the Theer have predicted thith?>

<We'll follow her.> Dave says, shrugging. <If they've found Bec it'll be a science team pointing fancy instruments around a cordoned-up perimeter, not a platoon of Navy SEALs.>

<What if they take us in for questioning? It's the first official sighting of your first guardian, that's kind of a massive fucking deal for you primitive apes? If your government's shown up->

<We don't have to follow them all the way into the den of bureaucratic horrorterrors,> Dave points out. <Look: we get close to their campsite or whatever so we know Bec's somewhere near, call him
before they can react or freeze them in time or whatever, and then get the fuck out of dodge. Clean and easy as pie.>

<That's aththuming the thing cooperateth.,> Sollux argues. <Itth a Firth Guardian. You thaid yourthelf that even the Witch can't properly control it.>

<We don't need that much control. Jade says when Bec's attacked he teleports himself and whoever he's fighting, right?. So all I have to do is try to stab him or something when holding on to the two of you, and we'll be miles away. We don't care where we end up, as long as it's somewhere else.>

<That's an insanely slim plan hinging on a fuckton of moving parts,> you object, irritated at his careless dismissal. <You might be immortal, but we die when we get pumped full of lead. All it takes is a single trigger-happy dumbfuck getting spooked when we get flashed by a teleporting dog. I can't dodge bullets, Dave.>

<Well...>

<They wouldn't even have to thhoot> Sollux point out. <Karkat'th so damn incompetent he could get pushed down a flight of thtairs and crack hith head open like a grotethque cluckbeast egg, and he's dead jutht like that.>

Dave twitches and you groan, knowing full well what's coming next. And this is not helping.

"So... are you warning me about the stairs?" He looks insufferably proud of himself, which only serves to rile you up more.

<I'm deadly serious, you turgid seedflap expellate, so shut the fuck up about your juvenile human memes for one bulge-curdling second.> you snarl. A familiar infuriation you haven't missed is bubbling up inside you, dipping into a fetid cesspool of anger branded with Strider's name for the first time in a long while. <You're putting everyone at risk here and it doesn't sound like you care! We're not disposable sidekicks, we don't have extra lives, and you think leading us into the basecamp of a potentially hostile total unknown is funny.>

The human's face falls.

<Fuck. Look, Karkat.> He raises a hand weakly, drops it after a second, and then reaches up to grip your shoulders with a renewed squeeze of apology. You attempt to shake him off to limited success. <I'm sorry. I do take you seriously, more seriously than I've taken maybe anything in my life. But I swear on my conditionally immortal life I won't let anyone turn you into swiss cheese, okay?>

<What are you even going to-->

<I'll die before that happens, and I mean that in an absolutely non-hyperbolic way. I will literally jump in front of a rocket launcher and get myself heroically permakilled while splattering you with my charred, bloody viscera. I'll rewind time until my brains are leaking out of my nose if that's what it takes.> You stare at him and swallow. He takes a deep breath. <Nothing's going to happen to you. I promise.>

Your pump biscuit's hammering away in your chest at the sudden whiplash from incandescent frustration to... this. You can't put words to what's squirming inside you right now. Gratitude? Affection? You struggle to concoct a response to the god's declaration, still unable to tear your eyes from his, but you're saved from making a fool of yourself again by the return of the human female adult.
Dave releases you at the sound of boots scuffing awkwardly on the ground, trying to catch your attention.

"The people in charge want to see you," she states carefully once you've broken apart, as the forgotten third party member rolls his eyes in the background. "They might have more information on the whereabouts of your... pet."

Sollux looks at you. You look at Dave.

Dave looks back at you, fingers fidgeting in their wooly gloves.

He's letting you make the call, you realize. You glance at Sollux, who just shrugs. Yeah, what a surprise, the guy who can flatten a tank with a blast doesn't care one way or the other.

You cast your mind back to what Dave said.

Do you trust him?

For a god he can be a dumbass, but when it comes to having you best interests in mind? There's a reason you developed that stupid pale crush on him, and it's more than a pitiable face. You think back to how he's stayed at your side through your breakdowns and bad moments, how he can calm you with a touch and a word, and something clenches. Yes, you do. Unequivocally.

That makes up your mind for you.

You have work to do, an Empire to liberate.

"Sure," you grumble. "Let's go."

"Who are you?" Sollux asks as the three of you trek after your guide. She's following an unmarked path through the trees, only differentiable from the surrounding vegetation now that you're moving along the trail of marginally more trampled grass and mush. "Who do you work for, I mean?"

That is something you should have found out before you mindlessly agreed to follow a stranger into the ominous forest like the criminally unintelligent cartoon wiggler in a cautionary cartoon that gets devoured alive by wild furbears at the end for their cullable idiocy.

"I work for the US Forest Service," she replies easily.

"So what, a forest ranger?" Dave asks.

"...Something like that."

The god nods as he jumps down from a rock, hitting the ground underneath with a thump and an accompanying spray of displaced soil and snow. "So, uh. What brings you here?"

She stops and turns to stare at him blankly. "I work here?"

"Oh. No, I mean... ah, whatever." Dave flounders. "So, you got a name?"

"No."

"..."

"Call me Lana," she sighs.
“Dave, stop chatting up the forest rangerwhatsit,” you hiss. You see the woman flinch as you garble the last few raspy syllables, right arm twitching ever so slightly towards her hip.

“I'm trying to get information! You're scaring her!” he whispers back.

“You mean like I'm already doing by having the audacity to set foot on your virgin planet and shove my offensive existence in her face?” you scoff.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk behind my back in a language I don't understand,” she says mildly as she kicks a fallen branch to the side.

"So I'm not even allowed to speak in my own language? Sounds a whole lot like xenophobia to me, shitstick,” you fire back, happily noting the rise of color in her cheeks. "Are you a xenophobe? Go on, tell me to go back to where I came from, bigot.”

"KK..." Sollux sighs.

You hmmph and cross your arms, only to instantly jerk them out in a wild flail to recover your balance as you trip over a root you didn't see.

"Fuck, this hellhole is a goddamn health hazard! They need to put warnings on these appalling frond roots. How shitty do your botanical drones have to culture the nutrition intakes aboveground? Or is it an intentional design choice to cull the population in a ludicrously roundabout way? Oh wait, you don't have botanical drones, because your primitive species has barely just figured out writing and now think flinging a few idiots to your chromatically stunted single moon with unstable chemical thrust is the crowning achievement of the millennium! Do you hear my applause? Do you?”

You won't lie, that rant was mostly just to watch the human squirm.

"She probably hasn't seen a troll in her life,” Dave says. "Or maybe she's had too much intimate experience with what your species has to offer and has developed sensible instincts.”

"We're eight thweepth old and thhe hath a gun,” Sollux points out dully.

"Hey, Lana!” Dave shouts at the other human, who's now quite a few meters ahead of you, waiting on a stone outcrop for you to catch up. "So what's up with all this cloak and dagger shit? Do you have any idea where our dog is? He's, you know, really important to us. A cherished family member, practically raised my friend all by himself, good dog, best friend, we miss him so much, you know the drill. Waterfall of tears cascading down our cheeks over here."

She shifts uncomfortably, not really sure how to answer. Trying to get information? You snort quietly to yourself. He's just trolling her himself, the smug prick.

"That's classified,” she concludes after a few seconds of deliberation.

"Of course,” you mutter. "I don't have a good feeling about this. This was supposed to be a quick job.”

"If they've really got the first guardian we don't have any other choice but to follow them, Karkat," Dave argues. "Look on the bright side: there's no way these treehuggers are from the Empire. Come on, I'll hold your hand if you're nervous. They say it reduces cortisol levels! Or who knows what alien biochemistry you have running in your bizarre polychromatic blood.”

He makes a surreptitious grab for your fingers mid-trot as Sollux yells from behind, <Thtop
making up excutheth, jutht get to the papping already!>

<You're in a disturbingly cheerful mood today,> you note, letting him hold your hand without complaint. What you're really thinking is "What the fuck are you doing? What are we, lovestruck wigglers?" but objecting would just encourage the jerk. Besides, to your annoyance, paired with his familiar voice, the contact does clamp down on some of the jitter in your anxiety vestibules.

<Dude, we're about to meet our friends on the other side of the galaxy and topple an alien dictator, what's not great? By the way, just for the record, I strongly resent the implication that I'm anything but perfectly cool and composed as a freeze-dried cucumber at all times. Do you think those vaguely phallic gourds pack and chill themselves? I put my sweat and blood into the craft, you know. No one asked, but that's where the salty tang comes from.>

You snort as he slips into a small smile.

"How far ith thith place?" Sollux shouts.

The ranger replies, "Four or five minutes?"

The goldblood grimaces, takes a look at the two of you and decides to do the only sensible thing when faced with a human and troll failing miserably at approximating basic social decorum: speedwalk ahead to join the woman at fastidiously ignoring the shameless idiots behind.

<Part of it is the whole ambience of this place, I guess,> Dave admits. <You'd think growing up in Texas I'd hate the cold, but no, snow is the shit, man. I was actually pretty bummed when Jade defrosted LOFAF with her volcano witchery. I think the meteor gave me a new appreciation for nature. Real nature, not dream bubble mishmashes of weird troll lands with bleeding trees and brains on fire—>

You raise an eyebrow as he keeps talking.

<All of your planets are so fucking bizarre, like sugar and tea? And Vriska's land is maps and treasure, what the hell's up with that? All of the lands have maps and treasure! Half the quests in the entire game start with fishing some long-dead iguana's dank papyrus scrawlings out of a rotting chest. I'm just glad us humans got cool planets, all elementally themed and everything, but still there's so many dead trolls out there that even with my Dead Dave army the dream bubbles are just Alternia and strange minerals and oceans of suspicious liquid over and over ad infinitum.>

<1 wouldn't know anything about that,> you concede. <In my uninvited opinion, the cold fucking sucks. There's no natural snow on Alternia and that's exactly how I like it. It's just tiny ice bits that fall on you and stick to your face freezing your skin off and making everything wet. I have no idea why you'd like it.>

<Yeah, you have a murdersun and acid rain instead, I know, but you've watched human movies. Don't you think this—> He waves his free arm around at the frosted vegetation around you. <—is kind of, I dunno, romantic?>

You pinch your nose.

<Dave.>

This line of inquiry isn't even worth the talking-in-another-language obfuscation effort anymore.

<...yyes?>
<Are you trying to date me while we're being escorted at gunpoint to your national government's hidden forest torture facility?>

<That is an unfair exaggeration of our current situation. But also... yes?>

You groan. <Dave.>

<Come on. We're still, you know... you haven't changed your mind or anything? I mean you can, I one hundred percent support your free will and right to self-determination, whatever your decisions may be. I don't want you to, don't get me wrong, you just don't need to make yourself do anything —>

He tries to let go of your hand, but you hold tight. He's not wriggling out of the hold that he initiated in the first place. <I'm not breaking up with you, Dave. I'm merely struggling to wrap my head around the thought process that conveyed your scrambled think pan from "we're in a potentially life-threatening situation up against an unknown adversary" to "let's fucking start putting the moves on Karkat!", because at some point we have to stop blaming the contextual rails and inspecting the conductor for debilitating cranial injury. And you're doing this right after you promised you were taking this seriously!>

Dave's arm goes limp against yours.

<I was thinking...> He swallows. >Look, we haven't had much time to ourselves apart from midnight pestering when you should really be getting sleep, and when we get to the other side there'll be even more people that we have to tearfully embrace and cry into the bosoms of, then with all the political intrigue and rescue missions and gearing up for the next big fight, there's so much on our plate I don't know when's the next time it'll be just... us.>

Oh.

The anger drains from you.

The word he used there, <us>, is another thing in Alternian that doesn't translate to English that well. It's a term typically reserved for quadrantmates, implying not only the exclusivity of the pronoun to the pair or triplet, but also connoting an emotional context pertaining to that specific quadrant. It's comparable to the human construct of a date—which trolls also have, but only as one aspect and not the central building block of courtship—but as a description of a state rather than a prescriptive event, relating to the spirit and not the formal planning and execution.

And he's right, isn't he. With Sollux third-wheeling and so much pressing work and time limits waiting for you, there hasn't been much time for anything genuinely coupley, and you're running out of time.

<Now I'm thinking maybe we shouldn't have skipped those 5 days before the Alternia landing, even if there might be people following us, because we don't really know what we're heading into, why we're here, what's going to happen once we all meet up. Even if we take down the Condesce there's so much after that to handle, all these loose ends to clean up, mysteries to solve, and who am I trying to fool? You were right from the start: there's a fair chance one or both of us will be dead by the time everything's over. I've learned my lesson about being optimistic.>

His sentences are starting to scatter, which you know is a bad sign, but you can't bring yourself to interrupt him.

<What even happens when we die? If we can't reach the dream bubbles in our sleep, how will our
ghosts? Are we just going to溶解 into nothing? Experience total oblivion of the self? Fuck, I never believed in a god before I played, but then I got used to the eternal life afterparty in the Furthest Ring and the idea that I'll be there with hundreds of versions of everyone I ever loved when I eventually keel over, but now all that's been ripped away in a blink, not even by Lord English blowing up the universe, but just by virtue of being trapped in this shitsack bound universe.>

<Dave...>

<I spent almost two years on that meteor being a huge asshole to that you, and then he went ahead and died on me trying to stab a clown we should have tossed off the ship from the start. He's probably in the dream bubbles now since he died in the Medium, but you know what? That's my greatest regret. Having so much time with the best bro I could ask for and squandering most of it away over a stupid rivalry about a girl. I thought it was boring as fuck back then, could barely wait for the 3 years to be over, but now all I wish is that we could be back on that rock with everyone still alive and the new session nothing than a distant dream.>

Your heart sinks as you listen. That curdle of jealousy that rears every time Dave talks about meteor Karkat like he's the best thing since sliced bread is unavoidable, but it's the unbridled pain in his voice that really shatters your blood pusher. You hate this.

How much have you mulled over the same thing, regretting all the times you blew off the bronzeblood you never properly sat down and got to know, avoided Nepeta for her dismally concealed red crush, ignored a needy sea dweller because he tried to genocide land trolls with another superweapon?

Except all those people are waiting for you on the other side of a dog-shaped portal, and Dave's are consigned to a dying sea of clones in the Furthest Ring, on the other side of an existential barrier.

<I'm here, Dave,> you say, almost reaching up to pap him discreetly before you remember your basic humans physiology. <I'm not going anywhere.>

<Fuck, I'm sorry, I wasn't implying that you're not real or I don't want you or anything.> That's not what you meant at all, and the exact opposite reaction you were trying to provoke, but okay. <What I was trying to say is I don't want that to happen to us. Not again. I can't decide if I want to rush through this and get everything over with already or drag these fleeting moments out as long as possible, because I want there to be something to hang on to if shit hits the fan and someone doesn't make it. We could have spent this week picnicking in the countryside or whatever, hell, Sollux could come with, I don't care. Just anything, a brief intermission before we get ourselves killed like morons again.>

He trails off and looks down at his moving feet.

<I get it,> you assure. <I've been monopolizing the depressing commentary quota lately, so don't worry, you've got a long way to go before you catch up.>

<Yeah,> Dave mutters.

You peer around the bend in the path that's now evening out to a more well-trodden dirt track, and see Sollux and your guide some way ahead of you, engaged no doubt in a fruitful and amicable conversation. Well, at least one of you is doing something productive, though if he's weaseled anything out of the human with his diplomatic acumen you'd be impressed.

<Do you want a hug?> you suggest, settling for the next best human analogue. It's kind of
awkward in the middle of a cross-country hike and this isn't a proper pile jam, but for two insufferable nook blisters with too much baggage and no time to spare, it'll have to suffice for now.

<Fuck yes,> he crows quietly.

Dave extends his arms and you wrap yourself around him, feeling heat radiate through his warm clothes. It's not gentle at all this time, he doesn't bother coyly nestling his head in the crook of your neck or anything, instead squeezing you as fiercely as his unenhanced strength allows. You can tell that the thought of your grouchy offer cheered him up more than the actual act itself.

The god pulls back slightly, fixing his red eyes on you with an quirked lip. "Damn you're so great. I love you so goddamn much, you know, Karkat?"

You flush at the casual confession, at the same time thinking isn't it slightly too early for that? and same haha kill me now. All you can do is continue staring at your boyfriend like a stunned shellbeast.

Then Dave leans in and you feel his soft human lips on your chapped mouth, warm and slick, and you do the most stupid thing conceivable at this moment.

You freeze and let go.

He stumbles back at the release of pressure, startled eyes darting to try and parse your expression. Seconds pass, you hear the footsteps of the other two pattering into the distance, and when it becomes obvious nothing's forthcoming, Dave takes another step away.

"Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. I'm sorry," you find yourself saying. Your brain's been disconnected into a dozen parts, each of them firing scrambled signals into an echoless void. "I'm sorry, you just surprised me."

"Surprised you," he repeats. "It's my fault. I shouldn't have pressured you into this, you're not even attracted—"

"Dave!" you snap. "You didn't force me to do jack shit. I... look, sometimes I feel flushed, and sometimes I feel pale, sometimes a mix of both or somewhere in between, okay? This, that just now..." You wave your hands ambiguously. "...it was just way down the lighter end of the scale. We don't flip on command like that."

"...Oh," Dave murmurs, reassembling his composure. "So it's another troll thing."

You roll your eyes. "If you want to boil one of the cornerstones of millions of years of troll sociology down to one single insultingly reductionist tagline, sure."

He flinches.

"Calm down, I'm not mad at you."

Dave looks away with a sigh that hurts your chest, but seems to accept that. You have no clue how to deal with this.

You start walking again in a feeble attempt to dispel the awkward tension now lingering between you, setting a brisk pace to get on closing that extra dozen meters of lead your companions have gained during your little freakout session.

<Thanks. For listening, and the hug. And also for not making a big deal out of... this.>
<Yeah,> you mumble back.  

The two of you lapse into another uncomfortable silence. Dammit, you should have just sucked it up and said nothing. Or maybe kissed him back, that's how it's supposed, right? Or would he be able to tell you're not feeling it and just make it more awkward? You can barely sense the cold now with the heat running up your neck and cheeks tinting them a too-bright shade of red, and you have half a mind to run up to Sollux and join his argument.  

You are such a vacillation drama cliché it's embarrassing.  

Remarkably fortunate for you, only half a minute later the path comes to an end, rescuing you and Dave from this relationship negotiation hell. Sollux and the female human have come to a stop at the edge of a medium-sized crater, the troll gesticulating wildly and whispering in a hushed voice while the ranger stands stoic, arms crossed.  

You peer over the edge, and standing in the middle of the depression you discover a partially unearthed ruin, surrounded on all sides by a two-story concrete structure that can't have been here for long if Jade didn't catch it last time. A new dig site? That would explain how they met the first guardian, since it would be hanging around Sburb relics, or maybe it's the other way round, they found the dog and dug into its stomping grounds to find this?  

Your one term of archaeology training kicks in, and you identify the meteor site from the utilitarian stone and eroded metal embedded into its dark igneous substrate. By the apparent curvature of what you can see, the meteor extends deep into the ground, what little exposed area accounting for less than a 60º sector of its surface. It's solid-sized and could take months to fully excavate and explore. Typical, according to everything you know.  

Yet there's something about what you're looking at that's putting you on edge, something you can't put your finger on it.  

Finally, it hits you.  

This isn't a crater; it's a standard conical excavation blueprint. The gray buildings aren't human architecture and concrete; it's silicate drymesh. The strange familiarity of the sight isn't only from your studies; it's from experience, memories of a faraway planet you love and hate. You've seen structures looking exactly like this hundreds of times.  

Those cylinders stacked up next to the far-off cube-looking thing?  

Imperial carpenter droids in standby.  

Don't panic. Don't do anything rash. You turn to inform Dave—you're guessing Sollux has already figured this out by his ongoing rant—but he seems to already have other plans.  

"Sollux! Get over here!" he barks.  

The aforementioned troll breaks out of his intense showdown and stalks over. The woman raises an eyebrow, projecting an air of what the fuck now, as opposed to Sollux, who verbally voices, "What the fuck now?"  

<Carpenter droids,> you interject. <The Empire's been nosing around here, or at least people with connections to the Empire. This is not good. This is the definition of not good.>  

<Oh,> Dave says, pausing. <Well, that makes what I'm going to say next even more pertinent! Karkat was right, my original plan was dumb and way too risky—>
You don't say, you mutter, low enough that you don't break his stride.

—so new plan. We shake the escort, skip ahead a day or two, and then try the sneaky route when they're not in DEFCON 1 anymore. We'll take our time, scout out the area, try and figure where Bec is, and start from there.

Oh, so now you decide to do something other than charge straight into every sticky situation you see.

Sollux frowns. <That's reasonable. We should have done that from the start.>

It does sound safer, but if these are hostiles, can you afford giving them more time to prepare? At the same time, being brought in on their terms sounds even worse. You hesitate. With the element of surprise...

<Karkat? Come on, every second we stay here makes us look more suspicious than we already are.>

Fuck it. You nod.

<Great. Glad we're all in agreement.> Dave raises his voice and switches languages. "Hey, Lana. Turns out we found our dog after all, so thanks but we're just, uh, gonna go. Sorry for all the the hassle."

She narrows her eyes, confused. "What are you-"

Dave points behind the ranger and screams, "Oh my god, look at that!"

She turns, and all you can think is I can't believe she fell for that before you feel a hand grab you.

Rotating red gears spin into existence around you, precessing on different axes as white hands tick down on a two-dimensional clockface. Everything's moving too fast, not like with the timetables when Dave teases a hole in time to slip through, but a cascade of shifting dimensional clockwork grinding through your body, discordant tolls ringing in your head as moments collide, and then before you know it you're falling through the gap between seconds.

And falling.

And falling.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this whole thing and started the second pass before I realized that the last part of this is exactly the inverse of Chapter 5, which I'm going to pretend is intentional and a very clever literary device.

Not entirely happy with the pacing of this; the whole thing feels subpar to earlier chapters of this work, but maybe it'll read better in retrospect. But I need to pack for a flight, so here you go.
"Let's go in," you finally say. "I can't take this excruciating saunterpod-dragging any longer. I'm literally going to spontaneously combust into a pillar of fire and give away our position if we don't do something."

In which I pull a Hussie and exposite briefly on the time travel mechanics which nobody cares about.

You land on your ass.

Well, technically you enter the new moment in the exact same position as before, but the disorientation sends you reeling into the snow. The icy mush squishing into your clothes and hair is bad enough, but it's the freezing cold against your sensitive horns that makes you jerk and frantically wipe the already-melting slush off the orange nubs.

Once your tender parts are de-iced, you groan and give the nausea time to pass, blinking at the nighttime stars through the sparse canopy above you.

After you've regathered your wits, you sit up and ask, "When did you take us?"

Dave's already on his feet, Caledfwlch ready in hand, checking if anyone was around too see three teenagers materializing out of nothing in the middle of the woods. "30 hours forward."

"That was a fraymotif. I didn't have time to spin up the timetables, so quick and dirty had to do. It wasn't this rough in the game, but I don't think it's very happy with this world's temporal architecture. If."

"What's that?" you interrupt lowly, raising a hand.

There's a faint hum in the background that's slowly intensifying—no, approaching you. After a second it resolves into a chopping drone, and you snap your head up just in time to catch the source passing overhead. With a lurch you recognize it for a human helicopter gliding over the treetops, and you're terrified for a moment that it saw you, but the aircraft moves past without slowing.

"Fuck," Dave mutters, the first of you to snap out of shock. "That might be bad news."

"What's the plan now, genius?" you hiss, scrambling closer to a nearby trunk where the tree cover is denser.
"If this is the place Bec was sticking around for, and they've uncovered it, then he's probably lurking somewhere around here. We could just do the megaphone trick again and hope his response time is faster than whoever's in charge of those things flying around up there, but..."

"That'll only give us one shot," you finish for him. "We'll be blowing our cover."

"Do you think they might have trapped Bec in there somehow?" Dave asks doubtfully. "That first time I called him he didn't even flicker at the edge of my vision to mock me with his elusive quasipresence. This might end up being a rescue mission."

Sollux responds, having relocated himself to the base of another tree. "Impothhible. The Empire’th been trying to do that thinthe we firtht found another planet with a Firtht Guardian. They can teleport anywhere in the thytthem and don't give a flying fuck about barrierth, we've tried thionic thieldth, thpatial wellth, exotic matter, nothing workth."

"They don't have to be forcefully imprisoning it. If it's as easy to tempt as Dave said than they could be keeping it for study with an unlimited supply of radioactive sausages and pets. Maybe it's cozied up to the uranium reactor in their basement right now, soaking in a sauna of alpha particles. Imperial design is soundproof, so it might not even be hearing you."

"Or he just doesn't want to be found," Dave sighs. "Table that for now, queue the dog treats for later. You were talking about <carpenter droids> just now. What does that mean?"

You and Sollux share a look.

"Carpenter droidth," Sollux tries to translate. You nod your head in confirmation. "Carpenter droidth, yeah. Biomechanical robotth for conthtruction work. They build our hiveth on Alternia, but there’th also military modelth for invasions and colonization."

"They don't sell or rent them to other species," you add, "Not even theoretically allied ones. So if they're here, there are trolls involved on formal business. Just our fucking luck. If that woman gave them our physical descriptions, they'll know who we are, then if the paperwork clears and they send soldiers for reinforcement? We'll be in even deeper shit than the gaper sink we're already moored up to our necks in. If it's been 30 hours they might already be here."

"The Empire has civilian research divisions that works with aliens, right?" Dave rationalizes. "If this is a new discovery it could be as simple as a joint archaeology venture. There's no reason for scientists to have the cull lists memorized, so maybe they didn't realize? I don't see any battleships floating around or armadas of rampaging trolls."

"You can't rule out it being a military team here to catalogue your firtht guardian," Sollux points out. "It's thandard protocol, they have to keep track of the omnipotent demon creatureth on your planetth. If he'th ath eathy to pathify ath you thaid..."

"Shit," the human groans. "Bec is such a fucking pain in the ass. I'm never volunteering for doggy wrangling duty again, I swear to god."

"Could you take them?" you ask.

"What?"

You roll your eyes. "You're the Knight of Time. You're always going on about how unbearably awesome you are and how you could take down the Mirthful Messiahs themselves with both arms tied behind your back. That can't be all vacant-headed self-aggrandizing bullshit, so I'm asking you: do you think you can storm a military compound and break your first guardian out if it gets down
Dave hesitates. "I... we don't want to kill anyone. They're innocent. Most of them. Probably. Come on, Karkat, what do they teach you in those schoolfeeds? Violence isn't the solution to everything."

"I'm not asking you to literally level the place and cull their families, you imbecile," you exclaim, scowling. "Sollux could blow up half the site right before getting shot full of holes if we're going all-in, fuck the consequences. I'm talking more like use your speed, dart in, break through a few walls, get the dog and leave. Don't you have... what was it? Snatch of Eternity? Slice of Eternity?"

"I don't think anyone other than Thieves can get that. I have Acciaacccatum, but it lasts only four or five seconds subjective time. I could try emulating the effect from scratch with the timetables, but buffing yourself isn't really a Knight kind of deal. Not my jam, you know? I don't like the risk."

"How much juice do you have left?" Sollux asks.

"You want me to savescum across that scope? Do you want your mind blended?"

The goldblood scoffs. "Not for the attack, of courthe. But we haven't ruled out Bec being free and jutht an avoidant dick. Athhuming if it responds to a given call it'll do tho within a few theconds..."

"I can iterate microruns until I find a command that works," Dave realizes. "And if nothing does, we can abort without alerting the enemy. Karkat?"

"I don't see why not," you say, shrugging, quietly congratulating the other troll's presence of mind. "What's the point of being god of time if you don't gratuitously abuse your obscene powers to cheat straight to the end?"

"Cheating is the lifeblood of Sburb, man," Dave agrees. "You snooze, you lose. Unless you're on your quest bed, in which case Jack Noir stabs you and you go god tier. Or if you're a Prospit dreamer, in which case you get free future visions for the small price of surrendering your free will to the whims of temporal inevitability."

"Th'hut up and do it."

The god sighs. "Fine. Here goes nothing."

The timetables pop out of his sylladex in their familiar red, white and black glory, revving up quietly under Dave's fingers and glowing deep with unearthly light. You see his eyes narrow in focus as he works the reins of reality in his fingers.

"Reception portal going up..."

Time constricts around a point in front of Dave, a spatiotemporal whirlpool dragging against your skin, and then in an instant the stress inverts, spitting a wad of paper out that bonks off Dave's face, extracting a startled yelp. He snatches the note out of the air in a blink and uncrumple the paper, squinting at his own small handwriting.

You hold your breath as he flips over to the other side, pauses, and flips back.

"That was a waste of time," Dave sighs, tossing the message to Sollux and decapchaloguing a notebook and pen. The troll reads it too, snarls, and swats it at you with a bolt of energy. You grab it out of the air.

On one side, "ABORT" written in red capitals. On the other, at least 50 lines of Dave's writing—
every row a failed attempt at summoning the first guardian from a discarded time fragment, ranging from "suck my dick, bequerel!" to "oh no jade fell in a hole help" to simply "told sollux to make a sexy dog face in the sky".

"Fuck," Sollux grumbles. "How much did that cotht?"

"Not too much," Dave reassures. "It's not your fault, it was a good idea. It would be hella embarrassing if we didn't take the time to check and came out after ransacking their fort to find Bec cantering about, wild and free as a beautiful pony in its Northern European hinterlands."

The troll mumbles something snide and vaguely self-deprecatory you don't catch.

You look back up. "So... breaking in it is?"

He sighs. "I suppose so. Battle plan?"

The thing about Dave's time powers in this continuum, he explained to you, is that nonlinearity is a bitch.

For something intersecting its own history, only a tiny fraction of the set of naively conceivable timelines are causally self-consistent. In the old universe, a finite number among the larger naive set are instantiated and branched seemingly at random, some of which prove self-inconsistent and become "doomed", while one remains self-consistent and is dubbed the "alpha". All timelines in that paradigm are able to interact by time travel along the tree, hence rendering the temporal superstructure traceable, but in this universe, paradox space appears to only instantiate one and only one singular self-consistent timeline pulled from the vast sample space spanned by players' choices and actions.

The reason the Pantheon knows this—apart from wishful thinking—is that whatever black-boxed algorithm or intelligence identifies these solutions, it's not infallible. If Dave manages to manufacture an outright paradox, or if he simply gives the universe too complex a problem to solve, what he calls a crash occurs. Time breaks out of the search and dumps its cached resources into the root of the paradox, torrenting fragmented, half-baked memories from uncountable incomplete solutions into the skulls of everyone in the blast radius, and seals everything into linear time until the afflicted events ride out.

That glimpse behind the glitching curtain is where the idea of iterations came from, modeling the mechanism as a recursive computer algorithm that plays out constrained "doomed fragments" over and over, correcting in increments until it reaches a valid solution or runs out of "memory".

(The ethics of creating billions of short-lived instances of yourself in a universal supercomputer are dubious to you, but Dave assures you they're "shallow" copies, whatever that means.)

There are tricks to reduce the load—causal decoupling, loop confinement, precommitment, fraymotifs—but the bottom line is that retroactive causality is expensive, backwards travel without interfering with the established timeline is fine, and forwards travel is almost always practically free.

"In Sburb, the winning strategy for the Time player is to use their powers as much as possible, be everywhere and do everything at the same time, hit that rewind until you get that perfect run to make your emotionally absent parents proud. Once you get the time machines there's no limit on how much you can use them, and if you make a mistake, so what if another Dead Dave hits the pile? Selves are dispensable in this game; you start with two, for fuck's sake. You could fill an
ocean with them just to watch the sunset over a horizon of rotting Daves and feel the lap of decomposing torsos at your toes. Who the fuck cares?"

You remember the sullen resentment on his face, the stilted way he tried to pass it off as nothing despite his expression telling you everything but.

"Here, you ration it out like a hypoglycemic at the height of World War II. Keep the loops simple, don't talk to yourself, leave the temporal slack for when one of us gets surprise-stabbed and we need that hard retcon up our sleeve. But hey, at least I don't have to explain all the clone bodies of myself. Man, I'd pay real money to see a jury's reaction to that. Excuse me, your honor, I'm being charged for the murder of... my 72-tuplets?"

That's the rationale for what you're doing right now—efficient expenditure of power, which means keeping things linear and choreographed. And for the assets you have on hand the plan is surprisingly simple. Far from elegant, yes, but simple.

You're set up a mile away from the front entrance of the dig site, or in other terms, the absolute middle of nowhere. Dave's cleared out a runway of sorts about ten meters long and three wide with his sword, and now he's standing on one end with Sollux at the other.

The Knight's timetables are tucked away, the sigil of Time burning in front of him in spokes and circles, spitting and flaring where his fingers sweep over the lines in precise motions. A fraymotif, not an elementary working. The Mage's glasses are off, held to his side, while his eyes flicker with pent charge. Despite the deceptive lack of visual cues you can still taste the air change, ionizing under the caress of a light psionic touch, forming a waveguide along the length of the clearing.

"Ready?" Dave asks. Sollux nods.

With a small push the sigil drifts forward an inch, and then just as quickly halts in a surge of bright red energy, curves and lines exploding in place and searing the pattern into reality—a scar carved into space-time, bleeding a sense of existential immutability, as if trying to touch it would just end with your hand swallowed by a hole in the universe.

Which is, of course, exactly what it's supposed to do.

Sollux's forehead sparks once, the bolt splitting into his irises, and twin beams erupt forwards, intense energy cones of red and blue perfectly directed and refocused back into the core of the crimson symbol. A mirage of spinning gears and ticking hands ripples out of the point of impact, spreading and solidifying as the fraymotif swallows up the psionic power like a ravenous starsunder.

Seconds glide past without a hint of the onslaught abating, the clockwork image growing and gaining substance as Dave struggles to keep his arms steady, until finally he yells, "Stop!"

The beams cut off in a wink, the last vanishes into the sigil, and then with the converging sweep of Dave's outstretched hands, the phantom designs fold in on themselves into a single red line, collapses into a glimmering point, and with a final wave winks out to nothing.

"Ten minutes," Dave reminds you, who's spent this whole time standing off to the side being useless. It's looking increasingly like a running theme in your life. "Go."

Sollux grabs you with telekinesis and zips forward, the human following behind as you weave between the trees in a wide arc around the main site, keeping your careful distance. Out here is remote enough that there's unlikely anyone to catch you on accident, and if they do, it won't matter
if they see that goldblood flying or walking with what you've got cooked up. What's more important is to get the fuck out of there in case someone caught the dim haze of the psionics against the early morning sun.

It takes three minutes to fly to the opposite side of the ruin, another four to carefully make your way to the edge of the artificial crater on foot, then you hunker down behind cover and wait.

And wait.

And three minutes later, the fraymotif springs.

In the distance, red and blue plasma roars up and out of the trees, its blinding light spilling uncontrolled into the open sky. A fraction of a second later the earth-shattering scream of the explosion hits your location, and not that far off you can see the one aircraft patrolling at this hour buffet in the shock wave of the blast and swerve to get a proper visual on the spectacle. The beam's bleeding energy all the way up, but not enough to stop it from blasting straight through the cloudy overcast and tinting the entire sky ceiling with its diffuse hue, and soon, whether it's the heat or force that kick-starts nucleation or merely a happy coincidence, rain begins to fall.

You cast a glance towards the situation in the crater. People are flocking out of the buildings in droves, shielding their eyes against the growing drizzle. Another helicopter rises from the south end of the compound and angles forward, accelerating towards the site of the explosion. It's long gone now—the blast lasted only about two or three seconds from start to finish—but everyone heard it, and enough people and cameras caught sight to confirm what the disturbance was.

It's impossible to hear what they're saying down there, but from the furtive gesticulating and pacing you can see, agitated is an gross understatement. Through the crowd and weather you glimpse quite a few orange horns poking from the sea of heads. Trolls, as you suspected.

A group of armed humans are just heading out from the front entrance when the second one activates.

This blast's another mile further out, more directed and cleaving into a steep hillside incline. It's shorter, come and gone in a moment, and to your relief the slope holds, only managing to shear dirt and vegetation from the rock bed. You don't know if all or even any of these people are active enemies, so you don't want anyone flattened by landslides if you can help it. You're already gambling with their lives as it is.

When you've glanced back over, Dave's changed his god tier clothes for a pair of work trousers and a thick winter coat, shades replaced with a pair of unassuming brown contacts. Hood up, boots on, he still looks like a teenage boy, but at least passable as a baby-faced young adult. With luck, the chaos will make up the rest of the difference.

To finish the look, he captchalogues the sword and turns to you and Sollux.

"Are you gonna be fine here? I'd hate to come back and find you halfway to hypothermia town and your toes frostbitten off." He points up at the shower that's intensifying by the second.

"We'll live," you say, nodding at Sollux. "Psionic heater right here. I have my sickles. It'll be fine."

"Alright." Dave turns towards the crater and the scattering mob, and crouches into a ready stance.

"Wish me luck."

You're two Knights and a Mage, not Seers. Defenders, not strategists. Maybe Rose could spin up an elaborate plan to guaranteed victory, but Dave's schtick isn't tactics. It's choreography but also
improvisation, blending action and reaction and making it work somehow.

Simply put, Knights do their best when shit's fucked, and if the other side happens to have all their defecatory affairs in order?

Boy, do you have just the rotary impeller to show them.

"Come back safe," you grumble.

Flashborne Acciaccatura blits the Knight of Time away a quarter of a second before a third psionic flare to the far west lights up the sky, its brilliant flash swallowing the faint scarlet afterimage of his terrestrial trajectory before it vanishes in the wind.

All that's left for you to do now is camp under a tree, keep watch and wait.

It's not supposed to take this long.

The ninth and final blast went off thirty-two minutes ago. It's been more than an hour since Dave went in, you and Sollux had to relocate once to avoid a patrolling pair, but now you're back at the mission launch point, fidgeting with your palmhusk, and your boyfriend's still nowhere in sight.

Most of the gawking onlookers in the crater have returned to their offices or labs or whatever the fuck they're doing down there. The aerial units have cleared out a bit and you saw a truck dispatched at the very beginning just come back three minutes ago, now freshly loaded up and rolling out again. The window of the distraction's closing, has closed already, and if Dave's still in there...

Even if he runs into a delay, as long as he gets out at some point in the future, he's supposed to travel back to the one-hour mark for the rendezvous. So either what he does next is too sensitive for even such a minor retroactive insertion, or you and Sollux are needed to do something.

(Or he got himself killed, a voice inside whispers, but you ignore it. There's nothing heroic or just about being taken out by a stray bullet.)

"Let's go in," you finally say. "I can't take this excruciating saunterpod-dragging any longer. I'm literally going to spontaneously combust into a pillar of fire and give away our position if we don't do something."

That was the backup plan. Dave's the only one with the speed and versatility to pull off an infiltration, by which he meant "get through the gates and then walk around like you know what you're doing while everyone's panicking over freaky space lasers", so that leaves you and Sollux in reserve to break out the big guns when he doesn't report back.

"Yeah, it's been more than long enough," he agrees, grimacing.

The goldblood rises to his feet, dusting his pants off. The grime is damp, though, so it just smears and leaves bits of wet grit on his palms. He sighs and blasts the dirt off with a ripple of telekinesis.

Grim resolutions are fine and all, but you have no idea how to do this.

"Should we..." you start hesitantly, and falter. "Do we just start blowing stuff up? Does what we do affect Dave's immortality?"

"We should to capture thomeone and quethtion them firht," Sollux says with a note of how are you
even still alive in his voice. "We're not going in without intel. That's the dumbest fucking thing you could do in this kind of thituation."

"Of course, yeah, that makes sense," you mutter. "But where are we going to get someone to interrogate if we don't make them come to us, smartass? Good luck finding a lone patrol in this massive forest."

"I'm thionic," he states flatly.

The meaning of his statement takes a moment to percolate through your brainstem.

"Your spatiotemporal senses have always been a pile of steaming garbage for as long as I've known you," you accuse.

"I've been practicing," Sollux defends with a frown.

You huff. "Fine! So why don't you go ahead and do it?"

"I would if you thopped dithtracting me!"

This is stupid.

You grab your weapons and stomp off in the direction away from the crater, then turn around once you're at a comfortable distance.

The troll's gently floating himself into the air, eyes closed to divert all focus to his mental senses. You've never seen Sollux use this technique successfully before, but it's something you're aware of in principle.

A wave ripples out from him, the immaterial graze of a psionic's mind; despite the goosebumps it's completely harmless, a rough equivalent of tactile feedback for telekinetic manipulation. For beginners it's used subconsciously, meshing with line-of-sight and other sensory cues to let them find their targets, but advanced users can use this sense to deliberately map out their surroundings without external crutches. Indeed it's what most starship helmsmen use to navigate once they're weaned off digital feeds, and the only possible way to pilot in warp where other sensors return nothing but static and a foreboding sense of cosmic terror.

"Too heavy," you caution regardless. A human might pass the sensation off as an ordinary shiver, but an experienced troll would recognize it as the prelude to a psionic attack. "Tone it down."

"Fuck off," he mumbles, but you sense the pressure wane. He's struggling more than he's letting on, from the crease in his brow. "I'm scanning at twenty meters. Nothing yet."

You could have walked twenty meters in the time you've spent. You're about to tell him that this is a waste of time when you hear, "Thhit! Get down!"

The urgency in his tone spurs you into action without a second thought. You drop to the ground, cursing silently as your knee slams against an exposed root, just in time to hear the thwip of something passing only inches from your head and thunking into bark.

Hostiles.

Sparing no time for whoever's shooting at you to take aim again, you roll off to your left and take cover behind a jutting stump. From the edge of your vision you see Sollux throw himself aside with telekinesis, banking on speed to pull him through. Another slew of darts embeds itself in the
earth next to your foot which you slip closer to yourself. Earth doesn't have flesh-melting injection projectiles, so tranquilizer guns?

You're not sure what to think about that. On one hand, you won't be dead if you get hit. On the other, if they're not shooting to kill, they want you for something that's probably not going to be terribly enjoyable, if not worse.

Or maybe you're overthinking it and these are the animal tranqs they happened to have on hand.

"Put your hands in the air!" you hear a male human voice yell.

This is bad. Your sickles are lying where you dropped them earlier in your haste to get out of the line of fire, and you can't get to them without exposing yourself. Even if you could, you're not confident in your ability to deflect arrows with your rusty reflexes, let alone dart fire.

You're saved from your predicament by a loud scream as a red and blue flares faintly from behind your shelter, followed by the sound of a heavy body hitting the ground and another strangled yell.

Peeking your head out, you find to your relief Sollux standing next to a downed human, the black dart gun lying in the dirt a few meters away. You scamper to retrieve your weapons before warily approaching the two, noting how the human's arms and legs are pinned to the ground by flickering psionic auras. This one's dressed differently from the one you met before, wearing dark blue utilitarian wear with no sign or symbol to be seen.

"Hold him down for me," Sollux instructs.

You crouch and press a sickle against your prisoner's throat, the blade fitting against the curve of his neck. Your knee pins down one hand, and the second sickle the other. It's probably overkill, but your life expectancy is short enough without taking unnecessary chances. The energy holding him down vanishes, and instead a number of items begin sliding themselves out of the man's pockets and belt: a phone, a pocket knife, a wallet, a worn dagger... a small packet of lightly salted peanuts that Sollux tucks away in his inner coat pocket, a small folded-up map and compass.

"Clean," he confirms, and you lift yourself away. The captive hesitates, glancing between the two of you, before cautiously climbing to his feet at the jerk of your head.

"No need to go looking, as it turns out," you mutter.

"Who are you?" the human demands. "Why are you... those explosions, were those you?"

You bare your teeth slightly and flick your blade in what you hope is a vaguely threatening way. "We're the ones asking questions here," you growl. "Shut the fuck up and listen."

You feel stupid already trying to intimidate someone twice your size, but he seems to buy your act, eyes wide and darting from side to side. You ignore Sollux trying not to snort next to you.

"Have you theen a human boy with white hair enter the building?" your partner starts off. "He wath carrying a thord."

"I'm not telling you anything," he insists.

You scrutinize the man. You're still not that good at telling human ages, but you think he's in his mid-twenties to thirties? You don't know if he'll respond well to threats, but...

"Do we have a blowtorch?" you turn to ask Sollux. "We wouldn't want the mammal to bleed out
"W...w...wait, don't do that!" He breaks nigh-instantly. Oh thank god, you really don't know what you'd have done if he called your bluff. All you're going off is outdated action movies, and watching it on screen is one thing, doing it yourself another. "Please, I'll talk. I'll talk."

"Well?" the goldblood asks, raising a hand and letting blue lightning crackle between a thumb and forefinger.

The human cringes. "They caught someone matching your description breaking into the labs. Um, do you know him?"

Caught, not sighted. Fuck, you're going to murder that reckless asshole.

"Is he okay?" you demand. "Where is he now?"

"He's not dead!" he splutters hastily. "Lost a bunch of blood, but he's in holding and, well, sedated. Since he kept trying to escape."

Goddammit. That's the worst-case scenario discounting permadeath: if Dave dies he resurrects healthy, and breaking out of a cell is trivial with his powers, but if he's kept under he can't even kill himself for a body reset. Eventually when they wake him for questioning he'll get another chance at breaking out, but who knows when that'll be, and where?

"Where is he?" Sollux echoes your second question.

"Uh..."

The human clams up again. It doesn't take a doctorate to realize at this point that you're going to try and break Dave out, so it might take some more prodding to get him to cough that tidbit up. You take a deep breath.

"Which is your least favorite finger?" you ask conversationally.

"I don't know where he is!" Shit. He's either telling the truth or an actor part-timing as security guard, judging by the raw panic on his face. "We aren't briefed on these things, I only know what I do because my friend told me! I'll show you the conversation on my phone, and you can, uh, message her yourself?"

You and Sollux exchange a dubious look.

"Tell me the pathcode," the goldblood orders, summoning the mobile device to his hand.

"Six seven four eight."

It goes through, and you move over to look as well, making sure not to take both eyes off the captive. Sollux has to try a few apps before he finds the client hosting the human's work communications, but he wasn't lying. There's no information there he hasn't already spilled.

"Ask where he is," you whisper.

Sollux types in hey, do you know where they're keeping the kid and taps the send button. You're probably not getting a response any time soon, but there's no harm in trying. That done, the two of you return your full attention to the human, contemplating your next steps.

At least you know now Dave's not in any immediate danger, but this is still a serious problem: you
and Sollux can't camp out here for days waiting for the god to wake up, but you don't have a way to get in and slap him awake yourselves. On top of that you now have to deal with a stray human whose knowledge you can't let slip into enemy hands, but you can't bring yourself to execute a helpless prisoner in good conscience. Not when you might have other options.

A long-overdue thought occurs to you, and you immediately feel the urge to slap yourself.

"Why did you shoot at us?" you query.

He answers quickly, "You're the primary suspects for all the explosions, and the Alternian Empire has a live or dead extradition request out on your head, and also before that there was also the incident Petros called in about you asking about the... ah..."

The First Guardian.

So they know the Empire wants you, but not why, and they're not actively collaborating with a military branch for your capture. As far as this guy knows, at least. In any case, you have a target on your head now, and that makes the next question especially important, even if you already have an unpleasant sense about the response.

"Did you call it in when you identified us?" you ask, fearing the worst.

The silence is all the answer you need.

An answer unnecessarily reiterated by the deafening warning shot that rings out from the trees to your right, behind the copious vegetation inhibiting any meaningful visibility from your vantage point. You do your best to maintain your composure, but Sollux jerks at the sound and drops the human phone, sending it tumbling into the damp grass.

If this were a class on situational awareness, you've just failed five times over.

"Hands in the air!" an amplified voice blares. "Step away from the hostage!"

Humans and trolls inch out of the foliage, most of them armed, the rest of them sending profoundly unfriendly looks at the two of you. Your stomach sinks. Those don't look like harmless dart guns either, and two against a dozen? You don't fancy your odds.

There's nothing for you to do but comply.

Chapter End Notes

Remember that the models discussed in Karkat's internal narration is all they are: models. I'm not saying the universe literally runs on a computer and crashes with an out-of-memory error then goes into recovery mode, nor am I saying it doesn't.

Stepping away from that... our protagonists are really not tactical masterminds. There's a reason John needed to retcon Vriska into the meteor crew. :P
"Hey," you hear someone say from outside your cell. "Whatcha doing?"

You're seated in a featureless gray room behind a droidfab metal table, hands cuffed in front. The person interrogating you is a troll, a rare adult male jadeblood with short, curled horns and a discolored streak in his right iris. Which you know because he's been staring you down for five minutes already.

"Where's Dave?" you retort.

You don't know if they chose a troll to put you at ease or the opposite. Leveraging your species' social instincts as an intimidation tactic? Or were the trolls just that eager to call dibs on their own?

He purses his lips in displeasure. "You are referring to the human that broke in a while ago?"

"What do you think, genius?"

You wince at your own words. What the fuck are you doing? Don't mouth off at the interrogator! That's just asking to get yourself culled, as if you're not in deep enough shit already. You have no idea how much they're allowed to do to you, and you don't want to find out. He doesn't look angry at your lip, though, only mildly irritated.

Crossing his arms, he says, "If you answer our questions satisfactorily we will consider taking you to him."

You take a deep breath. "How about this: you let me see him, and then I'll tell you everything you want."

You have no negotiating power in this room, both of you know it, but you need to stall. Project confidence. Who knows? If you're uncooperative enough they might tap Dave for information instead, and once your resident god is back in the running you're all set. All you have to do is not
get killed in the process.

"You will answer our questions, and after that we can discuss further arrangements," he repeats, inspecting a black-painted nail.

Silence stretches on. You eye the camera in the corner. This is Earth government land, so there are limits to the degrees of bodily harm he can inflict, right?

"The first guardian. What do you want with it?"

You refuse to react.

"How did you know it was here?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Your guy shot at me without provocation," you point out. "You turds kidnapped me. I have rights, you assholes! If I wanted to be abducted off the streets and locked up in a dark room for fabricated crimes I didn't commit I'd have moved to a Formic smuggler den instead of this waterlogged dirtball! Let me go right now, or... or I'll..."

You trail off as the jadeblood's eyes darken. That may have been a mistake. The outburst has left you breathing heavily, mostly due to the incipient terror inching down your spine rather than any real respiratory fatigue, and as you curse your impulsive nerves, all you can think is this is it. I'm going to die.

The troll slams his hands onto the table, rattling your cuffs. "Look, Vantas." You knew they're aware who you are, but you flinch at the sound of your name anyway. "Imperial High Command is very interested in you. As the situation stands, your capture will be reported in our division's upcoming perigee report and you will be transferred over to Imperial Investigation once we receive the order. The humans will throw up a fuss, no doubt, but the Empire will not be denied. They will stop complaining once they see the anonymous donation their foundation will be receiving for your heads."

Your stomach does a flip. Shit. They are official Empire, then. If you get lost in the system before Dave wakes up, you have no clue when you'll get found, if ever.

"Are portentous allusions to my inevitable demise supposed to make me talk?" you snort, doing your best to conceal your apprehension. "Whoop de doo, I'm fucking dead already, so might as well do my best to accelerate my brakeless tumble-slide into the gaping waste chute of Her Imperious Condescension, am I right?"

You've already dug your grave. Might as well keep going and hope you pop out the other side.

The jadeblood fixed a silencing eye on you and continues, "But my team runs an academic operation. I have no interest the Condesce's politics—that is what got me assigned to this dump in the first place. What we are interested in is information. If you make yourself useful, we may be able to reach an... arrangement."

"By which you mean you'll put my think pan through a psychic blender and then hang me out to dry anyway once you're done," you state flatly.

The troll's isn't even trying to hide the derision in his green eyes as he leans in towards you. "You get to live slightly longer. Is that not enough? And we do have the power to make your stay marginally more comfortable if you cooperate. Visitation rights, let us say. Besides, the humans get squeamish about torture, but we have other ways to disincentivize certain behaviors. It has been a while since Sarcel has had a chance to practice his craft."
You shudder in revulsion at his leer. As much as you want to shove this "offer" up his ass, you can't say it's not tempting, if only to stave off your imminent deportation and buy time.

"What do you say?"

He takes your silence as tacit acceptance, and smiles.

"Let us start with something simple. Your human friend with the sword. What is he? We have not detected cybernetic enhancements, but the speed and strength he demonstrated far exceeded ordinary human bounds. Genetic engineering? Performance enhancers?"

The problem is that while you have a wealth of information pertaining to the first guardian, to Sburbology, to Dave, all of which you know for certain a disillusioned academic would be dying to learn, you can't actually tell him any of it. Putting aside the sheer unbelievability of most of it, there's the fact that letting that knowledge fall into enemy hands would be stupidity of the highest caliber. They'll never let you or Sollux get near Dave or Bec once they know what they are.

"Let me see Dave and I'll talk," you repeat. "Please. I just need to know he's okay, I..."

Yeah, angling for sympathy isn't going to work on this guy. The intensity of the scathing look he's shooting you is enough to make you shirk back in your seat.

"You do not make demands," he growls, a dangerous tremor to his voice, and oh shit, that's not a good sound he's making. You've seen enough highbloods snap to know what it means.

He raises his hand and you try to lean back, but it's in vain. The force of the blow snaps your head to the side and smashes your jaw against the steel back of the chair. You loll, dazed. Your mouth tastes of blood. Something warm trickles from the corner of your mouth. When you gingerly lift yourself to look at the jadeblood his head is cocked, gaze trained on the too-vibrant red dripping down your chin. You can see the revulsion warring with macabre fascination in his eyes.

What he does not look is surprised.

Your head is still swimming too much to make any sense of that fact.

"You do not make demands," he reiterates, collecting himself primly. "You have no power. You have no rights. The humans will not offer you a legislacerator because right now this place does not exist. You do not exist, are presumed missing, and will stay so. Now let me ask you again: what do you know?"

You spit a glob of saliva and blood onto the table. "I know you're a soulless bastard. I know I'm not going to say a single word to you or anyone in this godforsaken ditch until I see my friend alive and breathing."

The troll stands there, chest rising and falling slowly, just looking at you with thinly concealed contempt.

"Suit yourself," he hisses. For a moment you brace yourself, thinking he's going to strike you again, but the jadeblood simply turns and stalks towards the door.

He's just going to leave?

"Wait, please—"

"Enjoy being vivisected by the biomasacrers, mutant. I think I have a report to write."

"Fuck you!" you yell, knowing very well it's a bad idea, but you don't have much left to lose. "Fine,
snitch to your boss, what do I care? That's all you'll ever be, you demented shit-screaming tortoise. This is it for your miserable career, do you hear me? Dusting rocks at a primitive dump waiting for a magic dog to show up and get you your big break, but guess what? Even the mutt is done with your pus-oozing musclebeast crotch masquerading as—"

The remarkably calm click of the door closing shut cuts you off, leaving you breathing heavily alone in an empty room.

Great.

_________

Beat.

Beat.

Beat.

"Hey," you hear someone say from outside your cell. "Whatcha doing?"

You open your eyes and remove the finger from your wrist, looking up to find a young-looking human man outside your cell. He's looking in at you through the bars with an expression of neutral curiosity. Huh, you didn't even notice the guard change. How long has he been standing there? The man's leaning against the bars of the opposite cell, not apparently hostile, but you've learned not to judge potential enemies by their cover.

Sighing, you slump against the solid wall behind your back. You've been sitting cross-legged on the floor of your cell, since in their magnanimous hospitality your hosts didn't perceive the necessity to outfit you with any furniture.

"Trying to unlock my latent superpowers," you answer honestly.

He chuckles. You sigh. It was a long shot anyway—you're not a real player, and Karkat never got any special innate powers apart from game-dispensed fraymotifs anyway, so you don't think half an hour of meditation in a jail cell will get you further than years in the game did for him.

"So what's your deal?" He gestures around. "They built a whole new wing for you. Must be important."

It turns out research bases don't typically have prisoner holding cells, so they booted up a few carpenter droids to speedprint a block. That's the only reason you're not more annoyed at the lack of seating arrangements: you think your clothes might be dirtier than the freshly extruded flooring and walls you're rubbing them all over. You can even still feel the warmth from the construction forges tickling your skin when you touch the ground.

"We're interstellar fugitives. Boo. Fear me," you mutter dully. "Got caught plotting a break-in, what did you think?"

The guy pushes off his side of the corridor and walks closer to your bars. "Word is you're getting extradited. What'd you do to piss off your Empress?"

"Are you supposed to be chatting up your prisoners?" you snort.

"Dude, I'm bored. They didn't let me bring my book—distraction from the job, bluh—so I'm resorting to extreme measures. What are they going to do, fire me for fraternizing with violent criminals?" He grins.
Oh troll Jesus, it's another one of them.

"Do you know where the other troll is? The goldblood that got caught with me?"

If you have to be pestered by a moron who's pathologically incapable of knowing when to shut up, and it can't even be the one you're smooching, you might as well get something out of it.

"Ooh. I don't know if I'm allowed to tell you. Who's he anyway? Your boyfriend?"

Oh, great. So you're stuck with an asshole opsec-illiterate enough to strike up an inane conversation with the captive, but not so stupid as to reveal anything legitimately useful. You level an unimpressed glare at the human.

"No."

He nods, unperturbed. "Wait, let me guess, that would be the human boy that came in earlier, right?"

You stare at the human, not bothering to hide your incredulity. Is this that good-cop-bad-cop thing you hear so much about? First they lure your guard down with a classic smack-and-threaten routine, then lunge in for the kill with invasive personal questions precisely calibrated to irritate you to death? You're not even going to glorify that question with an answer.

"Aw man, I knew it. What's a spy flick without a good romance subplot? Sweet. Red or black? Pale?" He wiggles his eyebrows in an outrageously unprofessional manner.

Fuck, are you that transparent? You bury your head between your knees and elucidate the deformed lovechild of a yell and moan of suffering. This is hell. You are literally in the designated afterlife for the damned right now, doomed to languish forever in eternal psychological torment. This is your punishment for every one of Nepeta's ships you've verbally annihilated.

"What the fuck do you know about quadrants?" you hiss.

No, stop, you're supposed to be denying it, dammit.

He snorts. "Come on, it's not that hard to understand. I think they're kinda cool, actually."

"Tell that to the rest of your intellectually stunted species," you growl. "Every time the topic of troll romance is broached, even at just the slightest suggestion of there existing more than just the one depressingly limited relationship archetype in the entire goddamn universe, your sparing human intellects seem to immediately find a way to assume the most ingratiating posture of surrender imaginable."

"Dude, tell me about it."

"Don't get me started on the ignoramuses that base their entire understanding of the quadrant system on shitty pop science blogs, cultivate infestations of ignorant misconceptions in their addled think pans like carnivorous mold on sweeps-stale grubloaf, and then proceed to argue between equally asinine interpretations on the Internet when just a trivial Google search would instantly put an end to to their incestuous shitstorm of rampant idiocy."

"Yeah, so-"

"Then there's the fetishization of kismesissitude on certain parts of the human web that will not be named to rationalize all kinds of harmful abuse perpetrated in flushed relationships among all
species, and how that backlashes on the entire concept of black romance, and by extension troll society itself. Then you have the audacity to blame your species' rape fantasies on the aliens like we're the dimorphic K-strategists!"

"Uh, you seem really-"

"Not to mention the unhealthy overemphasis of pale codependency in your fictionalizations and how humans yet again appropriate the idea to justify their own neuroses while somehow simultaneously ignoring both its biological pacifying function and the emotional essence of the romance-"

"Holy mother of god, chill out, dude!"

You suddenly realize that you're on your feet and shouting.

The human's backed off from the bars of your cell, hands raised in surrender. Despite that he's smiling faintly, apparently amused by your outburst. You feel a flush of embarrassment rise inside you, but you shove it down and maintain your facade of righteous anger.

"Sorry," you mutter grudgingly. Shit. You're more rattled than you thought if you've regressed to proselytizing at strangers. "I'm stressed."

His grin widens, but it's not cruel or mocking, and you think that might be even more disconcerting. You guess he's found the distraction he was looking for. Little caged troll ranting about romance: what a fucking riot. Ugh.

Then, as you glare at his infuriatingly cheerful face, you're struck by a brilliant new plan:

You are going to entertain this motherfucker, befriend the acrid pity juices out of his joy bladders, until... well, he probably won't let you out of the cell, but you might tease some more information out of him. Or at least get him to slip you some food. You need something, anything, dammit. A crack in this fortress you can exploit.

"So... what quadrant?" he asks.

You groan. After all that, he still wants to talk about your love life? You have to suppress the urge to tell him to fuck out of your business. You need to make a good impression. Just keep it curt, don't devolve into moaning about your relationship woes again, and you'll be fine.

"None," you admit. "He's just my boyfriend. It's vaguely red, but we're making it up as we go. It's... working. Somewhat."

He whistles. "Woah. How'd you meet? Industrial espionage school? Swordfighting class?"

"College." He opens his mouth and you cut him off, adding, "Ordinary human college, not murder ninja college or who knows what atrocity against the institution of education was going to exit your mouth."

The human blinks. "Uh, how old are you?"

It's obvious what he's actually trying to ask. "All three of us are freshmen. We're skipping school to invade your military base, yes."

"So you just met a few months ago and you've already decided to join up to blow up a forest and break into a top-secret research facility?"
A snort makes its way out of your nose. "When you put it like that..."

"You are legitimately a YA novel protagonist," he muses, raising an eyebrow. "Does that make me the bad guy? I don't wanna be the bad guy. Hang on, you still haven't answered my first question. What'd you do to piss the Empire off? The trolls won't tell anyone, though to be fair I'm not sure most of them they know either. The whole thing's just incredibly dodgy."

You bite your lip. You don't know how he'd respond to the Heiress thing, and you definitely don't want to explain your ancestor, especially since you're not all that clear on the details of either yourself. Besides, as uncharacteristically amiable your guard is, he could be a reverse plant to fish for information, and you don't want to reveal more than is absolutely necessary.

Thankfully, you have a ready-made excuse that from the earlier interrogation the Empire goons already know about.

Steeling yourself, you bring your thumb to your mouth, clamp it between a pair of sharp incisors, and bite down just hard enough to prick through the skin. You don't stop quick enough and punch deeper than you intended, but you wince through the pain and hold the finger out.

Brilliant red blood wells from the tip as you squeeze the surrounding pad.

The look on his face shifts from confusion to realization to horror in the span of seconds.

"From that expression, I trust I don't have to give another patronizing lecture on what that means," you say drily. He nods slowly. Mutant rights are one of the hot button alien issues on Earth, especially with the ambiguous political situation between the Empire and the UN.

"That's messed up, man. They'd kill you just for that?" There's a genuine sympathy in his words that's mildly off-putting coming from your jailer, but that means that it's working. You can work with this.

You decide to feed him another crumb. "The last known troll to have this mutation..."

"The Signless," he blurts out. You blink, surprised. "I read about it on the web," he clarifies. "Some obscure troll blogs talk about it, but I always thought it was a conspiracy theory, you know? No one ever has any evidence for it, so..."

What the fuck? You only learned about the Sufferer when Dave told you about your bizarre cross-scratch ancestry, but apparently it's been up there floating around in the Earth Internet this entire time? Did Sollux know? He'd tell you if he did, right?

"But apparently he's real, then? Do you think you're his descendant?" the human asks excitedly. How is he more hyped about your ancestral legacy than you yourself? The guy's not even trying keeping his voice down. There are no cameras in here since speedprinting doesn't do wiring or plumbing, but someone could walk in on this highly illegal conversation at any time.

"How the pungent whipping fuck would I know?" you grumble. You do in reality, of course, but only because of ectobiological shenanigans, not anything you can cite authoritatively. "All that matters is highbloods are superstitious, and as long as there's a chance..."

You're not even entirely lying. The succession thing was likely the inciting factor, of course, but since you found out about your ancestry you've been suspecting that your blood also contributed to the capture order. After Feferi botched her assassination and drew attention to your name, the Empire would have tracked down your Earth immigration paperwork and seen the blood spectrograph Immigration Services took. The troll interrogator's lack of reaction only confirms that
"That sucks ass," he says, once again massively understating the obvious. "So they're going to ship you off and..."

"If I'm lucky, I get a grotesque public execution. If I'm unlucky, I get the same grotesque public execution but dragged out as long and painfully as physiologically possible."

"Fuck," he mumbles. "Sorry, man. That's not right. You seem like a cool kid. Even if you did threaten to cut off Mason's fingers."

"I wouldn't really have cut off his fingers," you defend. "I mean, most trolls would do it without blinking an eye, that's why it's a credible threat, but I wouldn't. I'm not the most representative sample of my species, if you haven't noticed."

He emits a restrained chuckle. You're not sure if he believes you.

"Why'd you come here?" he asks after a pause, grasping for something less depressing. "How does that relate to that whole... Sufferer thing? How did you know to come here?"

Good. Step one, convince him of your innocent victimhood, complete. Now all you have to do is fill in the plot holes, which is harder than it sounds, even if this guy isn't the sharpest tool in the machinery closet. Time to deploy your carefully concocted cover story for "your planet's first guardian was a friend's pet dog slash sprite co-fusee in a past life". You choose your words carefully.

"I said we were college students, right?" You wait for his nod, and continue. "Me and Dave study Sburbology."

He snorts. "Of course."

"We were working with a professor on a research project to triangulate the location of the first guardian based on Surbian archaeology and data she requested off the Palassian servers."

"No way," he Breathes. Ah, he's catching your gist.

"Hey, you can read the paper yourself when it comes out in January. She was going to try and put some field expeditions together, but I suppose you guys beat her to the chase." You smile weakly. "Long story short, we picked the closest of the four top predictions and hauled ass when a troll tried to kidnap me from my dorm building."

"But would you come looking in the first place?"

"There are legends," you say with a sigh. "Obviously not on Earth, since you needed literal extraterrestrials to inform you you've been sharing the planet with an omnipotent immortal beast for all of recorded human history, but on other planets there's always legends about people finding them and being granted... I suppose you'd call them boons? Rewards, wishes, advice..."

His eyes widen. You're making all of this up, of course—everyone knows first guardians don't do anything but fuck around and blow up alien invaders if they feel like it—but he seems to be buying it. "So you wanted to ask it for help?"

You shrug, praying that his suspension of disbelief holds. "First guardians are documented to teleport, so even sticking strictly to their empirically proven capabilities, it would at the very least be able to dump us on the other side of the globe and lose us the assassins."
"Damn," he mutters.

You can see him being pulled into the flow of your narrative against his better instincts, much faster than you expected for someone supposed to be keeping you under lock and key. Perhaps it's your blood, unfalsifiable proof of your inheritance to anyone who's heard the legend, or maybe it's Blood for once, the subtle Aspect-encoded knack for bringing people together finally showing itself.

Or he's just astonishingly gullible? It's hard to tell, not being on the receiving end. Either way, you're pretty sure you lucked out here.

The funniest thing about all of this is that the truth is even more insane than this action movie plot you fabricated from thin air.

"Well, sorry to disappoint you, dude. The dog doesn't listen to anyone, and we're not sure it even understands English, though the trolls say it's supposed to? And it's not even here anym- wait shit I shouldn't have said that."

Score.

And also that's incredibly bad news holy shit fuck fuck fuckity fuck what are you going to do. If he's telling the truth then you'll have to track Bec down yourselves, probably hidden in some secure bunker or the Alaskan wilderness or something, and that's only if you get out of here in the first place. Everything's not just set back, the entire plan is fucked.

Concealing your internal panic—you still have a human to bring around with your mediocre acting skills and messianic reputation—you exhale tiredly and say, "What does it matter now? We're all captured. I'm going to be tortured to death. Sollux gets to be a sentient ship engine for the rest of his extensible biological lifespan. Dave will... something will happen to him. Goddammit, I shouldn't have dragged them into this. This is my fault."

Channeling miserable despondence comes easy to you. These are all real thoughts that have graced your mind in one form or another, after all. Very little of what you're saying is outright untrue, just... embellished. Reframed.

"Your friends must really love you," he says quietly.

Your breath hitches.

"Yeah," you whisper. "They do."

More than he could ever imagine. You're not just talking about Dave or Sollux either: the bonds of your stillborn pantheon have outlived universes, spanned the void between worlds, survived death and tragedy in countless more lives than one. You'd be dead three times over if not for every last of those nook sniffing imbeciles, horsecock fuckers and all.

Which is why it's imperative that you get the hell out of this death trap before it comes snapping shut around you.

You give him a minute to wallow before you speak again.

"I don't suppose I could convince you to... just... unlatch the door, and go to the washroom for a minute?" you ask, letting a sliver of fragile hope slip into your voice.

The human gapes, gears turning for several seconds in his head. You see his laryngeal cartilage
bob up and down as he tries to formulate a response. "I... god, I..."

You look down, not trusting yourself to not say the wrong thing and fuck this up.

"I can't do that. You wouldn't get past the rim without being shot to pieces anyway, and... I'm sorry. You don't deserve any of this, but they'd kill me, and this is... Oh my god, I'm a terrible person. Fuck. I can't. I'm sorry. I..."

"It's okay," you interrupt, feeling a pinch of shame for guilt-tripping the poor guy like this. "I'd do the same in your position. It's a whole fucking lot to ask."

You can't say you're not disappointed, but you didn't really expect that to work anyway. The way the human refused gives you a hint to how amenable to suggestion he is, though, and now that he's turned you down once you've gained an ounce of leverage. He hasn't fallen back to suspicion, which is what's important.

What throws you off is what he says next.

"But..." he hesitates. "My shift ends in twenty minutes. Temtos is up after me, and she... I'll call her and ask if she can come in and start early."

You're produce an sound of confusion. "What the fuck is that going to do?"

"Just-" he looks around surreptitiously. "-when she comes by, show her what you showed me, alright?"

Show what? Your blood? Is this person a troll? That didn't sound like a human name. He's typing on his phone now; you can hear the faint blings of the incoming messages from whoever he's talking with.

"What are you blabbering about?" you growl.

"Gimme a second," he mutters as he continues his digital conversation. You walk up to the bars and crane your neck, not like it's possible to see his screen from five meters away and the wrong angle. "Alright, she's agreed. Fuck, I'd better appreciate this? She'd better appreciate this. I am so fired."

Is this "Temtos" a sympathizer? What can she do that he can't? What kind of sloppy operation do they have running here where you can just text message someone to take your shift without clearing it with your superiors?

He puts the device away and looks back up, vibrating with tension. "Talk to her when she gets here," he says simply. With that thoroughly unhelpful statement the human turns and scuttles off, fleeing down the corridor like his commanding officer is about to pop out of the ceiling with a machine gun and mow him down for conspiracy.

Is he leaving?

"Wait!" you shout, lurching forward and pressing your face against the bars. He ignores you without breaking stride. "Don't you have to guard me until she gets here?"

He stumbles and stops.

For a few moments he's just standing there, frozen awkwardly mid-step.
Finally the man pivots and slowly makes his way back towards your cell, the mortified blush on his face coming in view as he approaches. He mumbles something inaudible as he shuffles back to his spot against the wall and, after a second of hesitation, pulls out his phone.

Jesus fucking Christ.

You bury your face in your hands and sigh deeply.

Chapter End Notes

Let's face it: given that the Homestuck fandom will ship black, pale and even ashen, there's no way there aren't quadrant shippers in a world with trolls living on Earth and a ginormous body of troll media far dwarfing human's meager few millennia of fiction.

Also, yeah. Karkat's ancestor being the Sufferer never stopped being a thing.
You're going to murder that human if the blueblood goes mad and tear you limb to limb in the glorious name of the hemospectrum. Digging a nail just below the puncture on your thumb from earlier, you squeeze out another bead of fresh blood.

I wonder if anyone's going to recognize the cameo.

You know that the human guy, whose name you discover is John (you ask him if his last name's "Egbert", by any chance, but no, it's Swanson, so that's a Chekov's bullet dodged), told you to talk to this Temtos person, but what he failed to mention is that she's indigo.

After he exchanged a few words with your new guard and left, she's been glaring at you with what you're mostly sure is a generic "don't you dare try anything funny" look rather than anything personal, while you sat in the corner of your cell trying to be as unthreatening as possible. She doesn't seem much for conversation nor mutantblood sympathy, but... you don't think John has any motive to set you up like that.

At least now you know why he was so interested in your interspecies romance hijinks, from the way the human was stammering and falling over his words talking to Temtos.

After two minutes of agonizing deliberation, you finally decide to trust the one semi-ally you've made in this godforsaken place and gather the courage to speak up.

"Hey—"

"Don't talk to me," she interrupts. "I don't want to be fired."

Her piercing stare isn't making you feel any better about this plan of action, but you forge on.

"John said I should talk to you," you blurt.

She snorts viciously and you wince. "What do I have to discuss with Imperial traitors?"

"I'm supposed to show you..." You're going to murder that human if the blueblood goes mad and tear you limb to limb in the glorious name of the hemospectrum. Digging a nail just below the puncture on your thumb from earlier, you squeeze out another bead of fresh blood. "This," you finish.

You move forward slowly, careful not to spook her, and hold the offending digit up to the gap in the bars.
Temtos stares at the speck of bright crimson.

She's not going for a weapon, which is an excellent sign.

"You're..." she starts, then stops. The troll looks both way down the corridor, and then leans in.

"What was your lusus?" she hisses, grabbing your finger through the bars and smearing blood across the back of her palm. She frantically sniffs it and holds it up to the ceiling light, inspecting the drying fluid as she turns her hand side to side.

"Crabdad?" you answer hesitantly.

"Not the species, the blood!"

"...same as mine?"

It was always a mystery why you got a matching mutantblood lusus. Even if it just happened mutated in the exact same way, what were the odds it would manage to find the one matching wiggler to raise? You've thought about chalking it up to "Surb", but now suspect you might be about to find another answer.

"Oh no..." she's pacing around the corridor now. "...the next convoy's in three days, I can't..."

"Is this about me being the second coming of the Signless?" you cut in.

She swings around and juts a finger accusingly at you. "Yes! You should be on Alternia! You're supposed to be the new leader! Why are you here?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" you demand. "The Cult? Of the Sufferer? Are you part of it? What new leader? Why haven't I heard anything about this?"

"The Cult of the Signless!" she growls. "We stole you from the brooding caverns. We created your lusus. You wouldn't be alive if not for them."

You're feeling increasingly lost.

Gritting your teeth, you start again, "Do I know you?"

"No! I was just... it doesn't matter. I left the Cult. I'm not involved anymore." She sounds torn up at how to approach this. "But why aren't you on the motherworld?"

"What, you thought I was just going to sit there like a lame quackbird to get culled when the Ordeals come barrelling?" you growl.

"They were supposed to have contacted you on your eighth wriggling day, that was the plan! They must have been wiped in the Jupkavat raid? But I thought there was an active cell in Spitscorn..."

You're reeling too much to absorb what she's blabbering. So has there been this massive conspiracy all along to groom you into the leader of a revolution? A conspiracy that was apparently destroyed or disbanded at some point, leaving you to fend for yourself? How much of your wigglerhood was engineered by strangers? You don't have any memories of designing your hive, but a lot of regular trolls don't remember that far back anyway. Mutation aside, would you have even passed the caverns' trials on your own? Is that why you're such a shit troll?

And what's an indigoblood doing with an egalitarian cult?
"Hey!" You bang on the bars. "So are you going to break me out of this shithole?"

She pauses her fretting, gaze sharpening. "Oh. I... I want to, I would, but where are you going to go? If there aren't any more Alternia cells... I'm not even a member anymore. I have no way to contact anyone. I don't even know how to get you out of this complex. Will you fit in a suitcase? No, they search those. Ugh."

"If you get Dave and Sollux they have enough firepower to brute-force our way out," you say. "And we have a way off-planet, we just need the first guardian. You..." If she breaks you out, you can trust her, right? "You can come with us to Alternia. If you want. I'm making the assumption your superiors won't be terribly happy if you do help us escape."

She frowns skeptically. "The human and the goldblood? Can they take Class 8 Imperial pyrolancer squads? Energy aircraft? I don't know what the human can do, but we have blast shields against psionic attacks."

"They can handle it. Dave... you'll find out about his impossible bullshit when you meet him. And I guarantee your shields won't slow Sollux for more than a second—he's mutant too, and, uh, the descendant of the Ψioniic."

You're half blowing hot air here: you're not certain they actually have the power to fight a small army, but between flight and time powers, you're confident you can at least escape, which is what you're banking on.

Temptos cocks an eyebrow of disbelief at you, checking the hallways again. "The Ψioniic? Helmsman of the Battleship Condescension?"

"Yes, that fucking Ψioniic. The one that boiled the Unsown Lake. The one the entire class of psychics was named after."

"Uh... well," she swallows. "Pardon. He's in the East Medicastigation Wing, along with 'Dave'."

"Well?" you ask incredulously. "What are we waiting for?"

She shifts uncomfortably. "Now? Don't you need time to plan, or anything?"

"Do you want to stick around for the psychic interrogaterrorizers to arrive? You're already incriminated if they start digging around in my mind. Look, Dave can take anything your people can throw at him no problem, and I know of a way to wake him up from whatever you're pumping into his bloodstream."

You think. Mostly you don't want to see what else this place has to inflict on you. You really don't want to know what "disincentives" that jadeblood was talking about, so the quicker you get out of here the better.

"We captured him before," she recoils, vaguely offended at your insinuation.

"He was holding back, and I'll guess you tranqed him right off the bat?" you speculate. If they're in the dark about his supernatural powers, he can't have been using any Knight of Time abilities or even his full range of physical skill. Blowing through reinforced walls with a single slice is not in any universe attributable to simply "enhanced strength".

Temptos presses her lips together in a tight line.

"Fine. But if I help you, you have to promise not to hurt anyone too badly."
You want to object that they're the ones holding you against your will, but you hold your tongue. You're asking a lot already from a stranger that you literally just met minutes ago, whose only reason to betray her team for you is your freakish mutant heritage. These are her friends, you remind yourself. She's entitled to a few concessions. Besides, to be fair, *Dave's* the one that broke in in the first place.

"Alright," you agree after a pause. "No promises, but we'll do our best" You're not lying. "Anyone in particular you want me to look out for?"

Her eyes widen, caught off. It's somewhat of a scummy thing to ask, but allies are hard to come by and you don't want to accidentally gank her moirail and set her off if it comes down to it.

"John," she says. "He's the guy that was watching you just now. Caitlin, black woman with green hair, uses knives. Malron, oliveblood, asymmetric bipronged horns. Marjane, she's white, and... doesn't really have any identifying features. Um."

Christ. "That guy, black woman green hair, olive asymmetric horns, woman without any identifying features," you repeat back. "Got it. Now do you have the key?"

She exhales, resigned. "Don't need one."

Temtos flips something up on the other side of your door. You hear the scrape and clanks of disengaging metal, then the screech of a heavy bolt sliding out of its socket, and with a tug the door swings open.

Right, speedfab architecture. Parts smaller than a thimble are practically a luxury around here.

You step out into the hallway tentatively, glancing around to appraise your surroundings.

"No security cameras here, but once you leave the building the guards will catch on. We're going to have to make it quick," she informs you. She pulls up a floor plan on her phone and turns it to you, pointing as she speaks. "Your friends are being held here. Sentries are here, here and here, so you're going to want to go around this building, enter this fire exit and go into this room."

You stare at the route she's indicating.

"How likely are we to get into a fight through all that?" you raise with a note of queasiness.

She frowns. "Almost certainly."

You swallow and raise a finger. "Problem with that: I am not a combat specialist. And to be absolutely clear, by that I mean I suck pungent trunkbeast balls at anything remotely resembling violent confrontation and will go down like a sack of toddlers against a well-trained human, let alone professional guardshuntresses."

"Ah," she notes, disapproval pinching the corners of her eyes. Well fuck her, it's not like you had trolls to spar with other than you lusus who's been going senile for sweeps, which on second thought is probably their fault as well. How long did they have your dad fossilizing in cryosleep before they defrosted him for you?

Change of plans, then. "Here's an idea. How about I fuck back into the cell, and *you* go and wake Dave up."

Temtos crosses her arms. "And how do I do that?"
"Just-

A loud clank sounds from the end of the hallway, cutting you off.

"What the hell is he doing out of his cell?" a gruff voice growls.

You snap around. There's a burly human standing at the bottom of the entrance stairway wearing glasses and a shirt and tie, pointing a pistol in your direction. The two of you freeze.

The troll next to you reacts first. "This mutant freak mouthed off at me," she growls. "I was going to teach him a lesson."

The human raises a radio to his mouth, keeping his firearm trained on you. "Prisoner is escaping. I repeat, prisoner is escape-.

Temptos draws and fires in a flash.

Pain erupts in your eardrums. Red blossoms on the newcomer's shoulder as his gun clatters to the floor. To his credit, he doesn't immediately crumple to the ground in shock, but the ragged scream and the way he's clutching the limp arm with the other shaking hand tells you he won't be in a state to stop you any time soon.

Unfortunately, his mouth and radio are working fine.

"Lamort is compromised! Lamort-" you hear through the ringing.

She lunges across the ten meters separating you from him and knocks the device out of his hand, crashing the human to the ground, but the damage is done.

You curse and begin running as your ally retrieves the weapon from the floor. Grabbing it from her outstretched hand as you catch up, the two of you sprint for the stairs, dodging the human's leg that kicks out to try and trip you. The sun's facing away from the entrance, so its glare isn't burning directly into your retinas, but you still have to squint and give time for your pupils to adjust as you scale the steps to the top and survey the situation outside.

You wouldn't go as far as to call it chaos, but people are scattering and swiveling around in confusion as a voice blares through the PA system, "Prisoner escaping from temp holding block. Guards on alert. Do not approach, return indoors and seek shelter in sublevels." A knife flies at you and you barely duck in time to avoid decapitation.

"Do you remember the route? I'll cover you," Temtos shouts over her return fire. Ignoring the ringing in your auricular sponge clots, you scan the buildings in sight, trying to match it to what you remember of her map, but the entire facility consists of featureless gray cuboids gridded out in a smooth stone basin. You don't even know where you are.

"No!" you scream back.

"Ugh," she groans. "Follow me."

The troll that was lobbing those knives has taken cover behind a crate—you think he wasn't actually a security guy, just armed for no reason, because trolls—and the few humans out in casual wear running away from you, so when Temtos makes a dash for it you obey.

Five seconds to cross the open stretch ahead of you, praying you don't get caught by the pepper of automated sentry fire from the distant western rampart, and next thing you're diving behind the
partial cover of the building, pushing your back against the wall. Temtos moves forward, craning around the corner to scout the way forward while you watch your back, firing warning shots at the odd stab-happy imbecile sticking their head out to contemplate rushing you.

Something taps your shoulder and you jump, but when you whip around it's just your ally. She's beckoning you.

"Sigma Team's blocking the door," she whispers. "We're going to have to get past them or we'll be surrounded in no time."

"How? I don't suppose you can punch through this wall with your bare fists?"

"No!" she hisses.

"So what can we do? Take a hostage?"

"Where are we going to get one?"

You think. At first you consider ordering one of the cowering civilians to get over, but that's a little too villainous for your tastes, and probably not great for the metaphysical justice meter too.

"You?" you suggest.

"They know I'm working with you."

"I'll say I'm psychically controlling you. I'm a spooky mutant, I can have whatever secret powers I goddamn like. Do you think they'd shoot?"

"Well..." She hesitates. "Sigma's a bunch of pansies. It'll stall them long enough. Fine."

She hands you her gun reluctantly as heavy footsteps approach from around the corner. You fumblingly flick the safety on and stow it in your coat pocket. God, if this doesn't work you're so fucked. Your hands are clammy from nerves as you grip her shoulder and press your pistol to the back of her head, the troll flinching at the warm contact.

You step out into view, squinting against the sun.

The first thing you register is that they're all human. Sigma Team is a quartet of males in body armor, all of them wielding heavy-duty energy rifles currently trained directly at your head, Alternian make. The one in the front is wearing a dark visor with the diffuse corner glow indicating a holographic HUD, marking him as the leader. All of them freeze to a stop at the sight of you.

That's good. Humans would more squeamish about shooting through live barriers, you think.

"Get back!" you shout, hand trembling. "I'll shoot!"

"We know you're working with him, Temtos," the leader growls, finger not straying from the trigger. "Drop the act and surrender. I don't know why you're doing this, but we can-"

"Haven't you teat-suckling buffoons heard of mind control?" you roar. Your pump biscuit's beating at the speed of light. Those rifles will shred you like you're wet cardboard. A bullet you might survive, but one of those blasts? No amount of medical attention will make a difference.

The soldiers exchange doubtful looks.

"Back off," you repeat, walking closer. You hope Temtos is making a convincing show of being
terrified for her life right now.

"Please. Dan," she chokes, as if reading your mind. You really are getting a lot of mileage out of shitty acting today.

They don't take their guns off you, but they do backtrack slowly as you advance. It makes tactical sense from their perspective: with you outnumbered and ranged options heavily weighted in their favor, they'd be stupid to let a troll into melee range. Besides, they think they can drag this out until reinforcements arrive.

"Don't come any closer!" the head human warns, but you ignore him.

It's a tense couple of seconds as you inch forward, stiffly aware that more hostiles are gathering as you speak, perhaps even on the other side of the doorway you're shuffling towards. All you can hear is the crunch of gravel underfoot and faint shouting and footsteps in the distance, approaching by the moment. Nevertheless, you eventually come to a stop next to the fire exit you're meant to go through.

With a foot you attempt to push it open, but the door's latched. You kick it harder. It stays stubbornly put.

"Stop that!" he demands again. "Don't move!"

This is awkward. You hope it's not locked.

You finally remove your left hand from Temtos' shoulder and try the knob, hoping desperately that that doesn't too obviously give away the ruse, and it works. The door swings slowly open with a click.

"Stay right where you-"

You stumble sideways into the entrance with your hostage/assistant in tow and slam it shut, cutting off the second half of the human's frantic order. The lock slides in place right as you hear something impact the other side of the door, the bolt rattling under the force. Only after it holds through a few more slams and renewed human mumbling begins trickling through from the outside again do you let go of the breath trapped in your air bladders, glancing back at Temtos who's already sizing up your new surroundings. You hand her her gun back.

The interior of the structure is stark and lifeless, almost resembling an untextured low-quality model of a real building, the doors and their inset placards the only things breaking up the uniform gray. Even then they're hinged directly into the walls without as much as a frame, sealing flush with the surrounding material when closed. The hallway's deserted, presumably from the ordered lockdown, but you're not naive enough to think that there won't be guards on the prisoners.

It doesn't matter. All you need is a clear line to Dave.

Temptos jerks a thumb and you follow. The sound of shoes against the cold floor echoes down the corridor, probably warning everyone of your approach, but there's not much you can do about that without slowing your pace to a crawl.

You pass two closed doors and an out-of-service washroom, scare a balding man in a suit into a panicked flight when you pass the junction he's down, and finally halt as the other troll slows to a stop just before a double door and holds up a hand. There's a wide sign up above the doorway phosphorescing dimly, indicating "MEDICAL" in obnoxiously wide Latin lettering.
This is it. You've made it this far. Now there's only one thing left.

"Can you do your wake up thing from here?" Temtos whispers.

You considering explaining how god tier works, but decide it's not worth it. Instead you mutter, "I need line of sight and some time."

A faint sound of scuffling filters through from inside.

"Won't they just shoot him dead once he gets up?"

You shake your head. "He's unkillable. He'll deal with them when he wakes up."

You're sincerely praying that your faith in Dave's capabilities isn't misplaced.

"I'm putting a whole lot of trust in you here," she growls quietly. "This had better be worth it."

"Plan?" you whisper. "Do we just kick the door in and rush?"

"No! That's stupid!" she hisses back. She considers it for a second. "Why don't I surrender myself as a distraction, and you do your thing."

That's not bad, actually. You nod.

She sighs. "Go in three. Two. One."

The troll leaves her weapon on the floor, straightens up and raps sharply on the door twice.

"This is Temtos Lamort. I'm surrendering. Unarmed. Don't shoot," she calls.

A pause of silence elapses before another female voice speaks back from inside.

"Do come ~in," someone sings, dragging out the "i". "Hold your fire," the same voice says in a harder voice to somebody else in the room.

You see Temtos push the door open slowly and step forward, but from your position you don't have a good view of what's inside. You know there are at least two armed hostiles, but probably more for the speaker to act so confident. You flatten yourself against the ground and edge closer, gun at the ready.

"What are you doing?" the unknown female snaps. "And where's Vantas?"

The angle of the light from the room isn't optimal. Moving any closer is going to place you in the cone of illumination, but from where you are you still can't see or do anything. You're just going to have to go for it and hope you finish the job before anyone catches on.

"Carmia," Temtos states, a hint of contempt worming into her deferential tone.

You take a deep breath and scoot forward the final few inches to get your head in the doorway proper.

The sudden harsh light stabs your eyes, but you resist the urge to blink it away. There are five trolls in there at the back of the room: four are in unmarked soldier gear holding an assortment of melee weapons and one of them a kinetic shotgun, but the fifth is an eye-mutate cerulean in a personal black and cobalt overcoat, weaponless. From the way she's holding herself and the general air of condescension about her, she's the one calling the shots.
In front of Temtos in the bed closest to you there's Dave in his bloodied and torn disguise, hooked up to an IV bag of faintly luminescent pink liquid. Further in you see a large machine with what looks like vacuum tubes fizzing with red and blue lightning, likely psionic suppression, but your boyfriend's bed is occluding where you assume Sollux is lying.

You observe all of this in the half second it takes you to identify your target and take aim, steadying your pistol to the best of your limited marksmanship.

Everything's in place, your finger poised over the trigger, but you hesitate.

It's the worst time for second thoughts, but now that you're here you find yourself reconsidering your assumptions, wondering if Dave might have hurt one too many people, if you've shot anyone and broken the rules, whether perhaps breaking into a place without direct provocation casts you automatically as the villain... if immortality even still applies here at all.

If you shoot and he doesn't get back up, how will you ever live with yourself knowing that you pulled the trigger?

That second of hesitation proves a critical mistake.

Your arm seizes up abruptly, followed by the rest of your body. You can't move your finger, you can't do anything, you try to wriggle yourself back behind cover but only manage to twitch a toe, and then the next moment that control is gone as well. Even your gander bulbs are fixed in place, anguish bladders stinging as your brain tries to blink and nothing happens.

The troll in cerulean smirks.

You've been controlled by Vriska before, unarguably one of the strongest psychics of your cohort, but even she could only manage some rough puppeteering over your body, nothing of such finesse. This person's locking every muscle in place with no apparent mental exertion as her three eyes glide from you to Temtos' stoic face and back.

(Of course. She's an adult, a blueblood, probably five times the age of anyone on Alternia. She's trained. What did you expect?)

You find yourself climbing to your feet, gun still in hand. The psychic even bothers with the charade of making you fix up your rumpled clothing as you step forward and take a place next to Temtos. Out of the corner of your eye you catch your new friend's fists clench.

Well, this is an unmitigated catastrophe.

"I suppose the profile wasn't lying," your controller sneers. "Midblood resistance, though I'd place you just under olive myself. A shame about your little rescue mission."

I have a bomb on me that's going to go off in forty seconds, you think. I'm willing to negotiate.

"Anything to say for yourself, Lamort?" she continues, fixing her gaze on your partner in crime.

Okay, she can't read your mind. Good. You thought not, since typically only yellow and below are susceptible to that, but it doesn't hurt to be sure.

Temptos stares this Carmia down with a steady glare.

"Idiots one and two, put her in a cell," Carmia orders. Seythe guy and sword dude file forward and grab Temtos by the biceps, roughly towing her out of the room. It looks a little silly since the
blueblood's clearly heavier and stronger than her escorts, but they're the ones holding the weapons, so you're not laughing. "Varaxt, inform command that we have Vantas."

And there goes your last ally, ushered down the corridor.

Once the three are gone, the psychic steps forward and takes a moment to appraise you. You tense as she reaches up and pinches your chin, turning your head from side to side, prodding the bruising jaw and inspecting the graze on your cheek from a sentry shot you didn't register earlier. Her fingers are pressing with just a little too much force. Not enough to break skin or bone, but you're pretty sure it'll leave marks.

"I'm sure there's an absolutely fascinating story here," she purrs, stepping back.

She falls silent, shooting you a meaningful look, and you realize your tongue and jaw are at your command again. Is she expecting you to entertain her maniacal power fantasies with a story? What does she want, your dramatized autobiography? Or only how you broke out?

Tough luck, bulgewipe.

"Fuck off-" you start snarling, but she raises a hand and you bite your tongue. Hard. You can taste the sharp metallic tinge of blood in your mouth, but even the muscle control to grimace evades you. The only thing you manage to do is swallow.

The next thing you know, the barrel of your pistol has turned to point at your chest. You didn't even notice your own hand moving. Your breath hitches in your throat.

"Oh dear!" she cackles, daintily raising the back of her right palm to her mouth. What the fuck even is this lady? "That was incredibly rude."

She smiles, a terrifying malicious glint looming in her cobalt eyes. "Luckily for you, I am a magnanimous master. So."

Your wrist rotates, and the gun returns to its forward position. You almost breathe a sigh of relief, but then your arm snaps degrees to the side.

You only realize it's pointing straight at Sollux when your head and eyes move to focus on your target. It's the first proper look you've had of him, and fuck: he's of a sickly pallor, unconscious and manacled to the bed he's lying on, psionic energy pumping from a hemispherical helmet into the quietly sputtering machine.

She can't do this, right? They want you alive, she wouldn't-

"I understand these are your friends, no? Why don't I let you choose?" she simpers.

Your arm moves to the right and down, followed by your gander bulbs again after a disconcerting delay. Now you're looking down the barrel at Dave's prone body.

"Ma'am," the shotgun-holding troll behind mumbles. "I don't think-"

"Oh, shut it, Gammen," she snorts, fixing a piercing glare on her subordinate. They shrink into their corner.

The psychopath turns her attention back on you. "Ah, a classic," she declares. "What do you say?"

Holy shit. What the actual grubfucking hell is wrong with this person? Classic what? Sinistreamer
game show feature?

You feel muscles in your arm release. You test your limb and find that you're only able to swing it between two positions, from Dave to Sollux and back again. If you weren't overwhelmed by the simultaneous horror and twisted hilarity of this situation you'd be impressed with the psychic skill needed to do this, the sheer number of muscle impulses she has to be coupling to confine motion to an arbitrary axis like that.

Since you don't have the luxury of contemplating applied psychophysiology, all that's going through your mind is the psychotic bitch is getting off on this. She wants you to kill one of them?

"Well?" she cackles again. Who cackles in real life?

You take a deep breath.

Well, you're not going to question your luck. You almost want to laugh at the irony: the real dramatic kind, not Dave's absurdist humor. Just like that, you've won.

You point the gun at Dave's gently rising torso and squeeze. No hesitation this time. The trigger starts to depress, and-

Your finger freezes.

"Oh," the crazy psychic huffs. She sounds almost disappointed. "Ahahahaha! Haha! Ha. You didn't really think I'd make you kill one, did you? We need you all alive, idiot."

Fuck.

"I guess you weren't with the human boy after all. Well! Command will be pleased with my discovery," she reasons, tapping her chin.

Okay. It's not over yet. You have some psychic resistance. She's strong, but she's distracted, and most importantly she's not expecting this. All you need is to move your finger half an inch more. One twitch. You can do this. You need to. People are depending on you to pull this off. It's your ticket out of this extended daymare of a hiking trip-turned-prison stint. All you have to do is concentrate.

Funnel every drop of willpower you have into one single burst of mental effort.

Just

focus

and

pull.

Your finger jerks.

The explosive gunshot rings through the enclosed space. The other three trolls flinch at the sound, their gazes snapping to your quivering hand in disbelief. Fresh wet red sluices over the darker shade of Dave's shirt, gushing out of his chest in fitful spurts. He heaves a rattling breath, chokes on the inhale, drowning in his own fluids.

"What did you do?" the ceruleanblood screams, fists in her hair. The other two have lifted their weapons, disbelieving eyes flitting between the flatlining human and you.
With a dying gurgle, the Knight of Time breathes his last.

It's the blood that goes first, its crimson draining back into the chest wound in impossible reverse, leaving behind an inky void of absolute black, a hole in reality shaped like dribbling fluid. Then the body goes, consumed by a flood of nothingness, its silhouette opening to a blank abyss.

You can't grin with your facial muscles locked up, but in your mind you're whooping in vengeful glee.

A supernova of color erupts under Dave's skin, and he rises.

Chapter End Notes

The canonical panels of god tier neutral resurrection are different from each other: John's sprite appears to turn transparent and become surrounded with wisps of rainbow stuff, while Jake's body actually itself *turns* into rainbow stuff. In both the blood goes rainbow. So I'm interpreting it as different classes, aspects or players resurrect with different aesthetics.

Anyway, we're finally getting our powerhouses back. I'm sure the rest of this will go perfectly smoothly and nothing bad will happen. Ever.

Edit: onLyoko has kindly created some [fanart](#) for the end of this chapter!
Rage

Chapter Summary

Oh thank god. Specifically this god, Dave Strider, Knight of Time.

Chapter Notes

This work is now re-estimated to be 19 chapters long! To be honest, I expected it to be shorter: 20 was just a nice round number I settled on when I first posted.

Every color of the spectrum erupts inside Dave's chest, cascading through the abyss of his body in great surges and lashes. The ichor spilling over the platform ignites on contact into a dazzling cacophony of light that blazes unabated even as the ethereal energy blasting through the Knight's body floods down and collects in two curling fists, leaving a shifting nebula in its wake.

There it builds and builds until the blinding concentration of divine power rips through, breaching the invisible boundary of the microcosmos contained within the god's flesh. Tongues of spectral fire roar from between fingers up slender arms and engulf him whole.

The reinforced steel manacles encircling Dave's wrists glow reddish-white for a brief second, then discorporate into sand and then dust between licks of godly energy, aging centuries and millennia in the blink of an eye. The intravenous needle has long been incinerated, the tube left hanging limp and dribbling quietly onto the floor.

The cerulean blood snaps out of her stupefied daze and draws a sleek revolver from her coat.

She fires, but between one instant and the next you glimpse a whirl of dancing red and white, Caledfwlch deflecting a bullet amidst motifs of ticking clockwork. A tick later Dave is behind the psychic, decapitating her in a single stroke as he steps through another phantom astrolabe, knocking the other two trolls out with his hilt before they have time to react.

Above the bed the original Knight of Time is still ascending, wreathed in a thousand bleeding rainbows. His flashing blood streams up and down, playing and rewinding through its own timeline as the unseen forces buoying the body lift him upright. A wave of force pours forth from Dave's hanging frame, stoking the inferno into a frenzy, then shudders, reverses and implodes back towards his core in a terrifying surge of gravity. The corona of liquid energy slaps back against his skin and binds with a searing explosion of light.

When you lift the shielding hand from your eyes, the reborn god is hovering there in the flesh: red suit, flowing cloak, snug hood, ruby gear in their full glory. The air sings with thrumming power, raw god tier presence slamming against your mind with almost oppressive weight, calling to something deep inside you.

Wait, snug hood?
The future Dave next to you snickers as the one that just revived scowls and tugs the hood off his head, tousled white hair popping from under its squished prison. Caledfwlch and his signature shades pop in place as he tilts forward, nods at you and glides into a spinning fraymotif sigil, leaving you in a hospital room with the other Knight of Time, a headless cerulean and quite a few passed-out trolls.

"So I'm confused why I had to kill that chick," Future Dave comments. Present Dave now, you guess, since the other's hopped off. "Paradox space was straight demanding me lop her head off like she's space Hitler and I've got to stop the Trollocaust from happening. Which is patently absurd since we already know who space Hitler is, so this has got to be, like, space Mussolini at best."

"Mind-controller," you sigh, watching blue blood pool over the floor tiles. Dave nods, accepting the explanation because fuck psychics, and glances at Sollux, who's still wired up to the soulsucking machine.

"How... do we get him out of that?"

"Why don't we fucking find out instead of standing here and squawking like decapitated cluckbeasts?" you mutter as you stride over to the door, lock it, and then make your way to Sollux's bedside.

He's unconscious as you expected, but the controls look fairly intuitive. You thumb the off switch on the vibrating machine, wait for everything to visibly power down, then unbuckle the straps on his headgear and lift the suppressor helmet off. There's a sting of static discharge as the gelled sockets decouple with a wet squelch. Carefully, you draw the hypodermic needle out of his arm and toss it to the side.

Leaning over his head, slightly nervous he's going to snap awake and blow your head off automatically, you pry a set of eyelids apart and wave a hand above the gander bulb.

"He's not awake," you report. "But he's fine. I think."

"Is it safe to fast forward him until he wakes up?" Dave asks, dismissing his sword for a pair of timetables.

"I... don't see why not?" you hazard.

One of the black discs spins into motion, the other following a moment later in the opposite direction. The god's brow furrows in concentration, and then a red glow traces around the prone psionic. A jerk of his finger arrests the second timetable and sends it in reverse. Sollux's breath starts rising and falling in sync with every successively shorter rotation until his chest's convulsing in place like a possessed puppet, and then he finally jerks up, the spell breaking with the jarring sound of a record scratch.

While the goldblood's groaning and coughing himself awake, clearing his chakras or whatever the fuck psionics do, you chance a look at Dave. He's oddly calm for someone you literally just slaughtered, though you suppose that from his perspective he just went directly from being knocked out to waking in a spiffy new body, conveniently skipping the entire dying part of the experience. You catch a glimpse of his eyes behind his shades as he turns, and he's... he's looking at you. With a look of concern.

It occurs to you that between the semi-violent interrogation earlier and the various scrapes from your crawling and running and stint as live target practice, you have to look like shit right now.
You have no grubfucking clue what's going through your mind when you make the decision, maybe it's a hamfisted attempt to reassure your matesprit, or maybe some pattern-matching sector of your ancestral hindbrain triggering the rote reaction drilled in by too many movies, but you take Dave's hand, step up and press your lips to his.

Your nose clacks against his shades.

A second of shock later he tilts his head and kisses you back, completing the cliché two idiots slobbering over each other in the middle of a life-or-death prison break, and now you can't blame impulse anymore. You don't break away. You want this. It's a little late for the post-murder adrenaline make-outs, but you're not a fictional character. If you're about to head out to risk your life against squadrons of furious trolls and humans again, you're making your last minutes count.

There's no tongue because you possess a modicum of shame even if Dave lacks the mental capacity for such higher brain functions, but when you finally break away both of you are out of breath, cheeks tinted with rosy fluster. He tastes like acid and metal.

"Thanks," he lets slip.

You give him an incredulous stare.

"...I mean, cool... mouth. Ing technique. Mouthing technique."

You give him another kiss to shut him up. Also because it feels good and you want to.

"Fuuuuuck," Sollux groans from the side, reminding you that there are more pressing issues at hand here. He's pushed himself up to a sitting position. "Thetop tonguefucking and get uth out of here."

"How are you feeling?" you ask, feeling a stab of guilt for ignoring your friend.

"Thirsty," he rasps. "I'll live."

Your frown. "The first guardian isn't here. We need to get out, but-"

A rap on the door cuts you off and all three of you.

"Shit," Dave swears quietly, turning around. "Which way's the closest to the rim?"

"I don't know!" you whisper back. There aren't any windows in the room, and your sense of direction isn't good enough to keep track of all the turns you've been making. "We're at the bottom of a crater! They're all basically the same anyway!"

Another two knocks come.

Dave dashes to the far side of the room opposite the door and switches Caledfwlch for a broken Caledscratch. He holds it up to the wall and twists the mini turntable on the hilt sharply, projecting the unbroken blade into the solid drymesh. Repeating the process two more times at 120° angles in quick sequence, he slices out a triangular chunk that he captchalogues with a touch.

"We need to get the indigo that helped me get here," you say, backing away from the door. "Temtos Lamort. She was taken away, one, two minutes ago? No fucking clue where she is."

"Who? Do we have the time for that?" Sollux hisses. "Not to be an athole, but we're already nook-deep in trouble without more thide quests to deal with."

You can hear a knob rattling on the other side of the door.
Dave stoops down to peer through the hole he made, and waves you closer. Apparently finding whatever he's seeing satisfactory, he steps back, switches back to Caledfwlch again, and in three smooth strokes decouples a massive slab of wall from the surrounding material, which he also vanishes into his sylladex, ejecting the previous smaller fragment to a side and opening a gaping hole to the outside.

The sound of the outdoors slaps, distant vehicle rumbling mixed in with the quiet rustle of wind and even fainter chirp of the forest. It's your first glimpse of the situation out there after you entered this building, and the place is more deserted than you expected five minutes after a reported breakout. The ground level, at least: half of the rooftops in sight, on the other hand, are crawling with newly set up automated turrets and armed contingents keeping watch.

It's a sparse defense force, but you guess that there is a lot of open land to cover compared to the small built area, especially with most of the population in supposed noncombat roles. Nevertheless, what they're lacking in manpower they're more than making up in equipment. By the technology they're slinging around, this place is most definitely neck-deep in the Empire's pockets.

It doesn't take long for the sentries to take notice the sudden structural disaggregation of their adjacent building, but Dave's a step ahead, darting forward and decaptchaloguing the gigantic wall chunk upright back on the ground with a earth-shaking slam. The bullets pinging against the other side of your makeshift shield are audible as you pointlessly duck on reflex.

Something crashes against the door behind, but the lock holds. They're catching on.

"She might know where Bec is," you argue. As much as you hate it, though, you can't put away the sick feeling that Sollux is probably right in all his typical depressing pragmatism. You can't spare the time to look for a near-stranger when you don't know where she is, if she's even still alive. Not on a clock and under live fire. "She's also a contact to the Sufferer's cult," you suggest. "Which it turns out is something that exists and nobody thought was pertinent to inform me about!"

Still, you can't just leave behind someone who risked her life and nuked her career to help you. She'll be flayed alive if you abandon her to the same crew she betrayed. The blueblood did her part perfectly; you were the one that fucked up and got you two separated. You're not letting someone else pay for your mistakes.

You're wondering why Dave isn't saying anything when he flash-steps away in a burst of Acciaccatura, the cape's sizzling red afterimage singeing your face, but before your distress makes it out your mouth in verbal form the god's already back, a bead of sweat on his forehead the only sign he was ever gone.

"I found your troll," he barks. Oh thank god. Specifically this god, Dave Strider, Knight of Time. "Follow me. Sollux, can you shield us with that?" He points at the wall segment he relocated. "Also, try and keep your head down and do not look at anything if you can help it. Definitely don't check out any future mes if you think you see one. I know, I'm irresistibly attractive, but you're going to have to keep it in your pants just this once."

"I'll do you one better," Sollux mutters, and with a telekinetic wave tears three more sizeable hunks of structural material extending off the hole Dave made. Are those load-bearing? Raising his arm in a theatric and wholly unnecessary gesture, he lifts them along with the original sword-cut slab in swathes of red and blue to form an floating enclosure of defiled architecture around your exit hole.

The three of you step forward just as the lock finally splinters and the door blows open. A furious sea dweller stumbles through, other reinforcements filing in behind him.
"Go!" you yell, but Sollux is already acting.

The smoothed stone beneath your feet cracks, sending you stumbling, and breaks away from the underlying crust in crunches and snaps as psionic discharges flare through the gaps. The ground rises with you on top, and right as the violetblood leaps, Sollux tosses everything violently sideways. The opening slides away from you, replaced by the flat building exterior, the frustrated yell of a slighted highblood fading into the distance.

"Follow the wall! Open the front!" Dave shouts over grinding rock and intensifying gunfire.

Telekinesis braces you against the dizzying centripetal thrust as your entourage pivots around the corner. Platforms and barriers reconfigure around you, daylight streaming in from the fore as the goldblood opens an aperture to the outside. Dave darts through, accelerating with flight past the good dozen meters a second you're already clocking, deflecting bullets and you think you glimpse one grenade without looking.

Right ahead is the main entrance to the building, with its double doors and nameplate carved into the faux-concrete.

Gear teeth spin, red lightning flashes and a startled troll careens into the present before the entrance, immediately snatched out of the air by the caped teenager in a tangle of heavy limbs. He rolls with the collision, riding the residual spin and slowing just enough for the shelter construct to catch up and slam into them. Dave rolls his rescuee off onto the rock platform.

You flash Temtos a relieved thumbs-up as she picks herself off the unstable floor, visibly disoriented.

Then you hear a massive explosion, all of a sudden it's blunt and sharp and digging everywhere, an unimaginable scouring heat hits, and then there's only pain.

You're alive.

When you've recouped enough of your wits to stumble to your feet, the rubble's already lifting away and assembling into a new, thicker shield. Someone's taken coarse sandpaper to your entire body and your entire left side is peeling into one huge burn now, but you're reasonably sure you'll survive.

Casting a glance around, Sollux looks fine, barely a scratch on him, presumably having deflected the worst of it by psionic reflex alone. Temtos' few wounds are obviously superficial—she's a highblood, after all. Dave's... dead, but already wreathed in his resurrection aura, since "crushed by rocket explosion" probably isn't particularly heroic on its own. Humans are fragile, as they say, though you do think he caught the brunt of that blast: the steel beam levering itself out of his chest does not look fun.

"That's the pyrolancers," Temtos grunts as larger masses of stone explode out of the ground and shuffle into the orbiting debris around you. She catches sight of Dave and stops to stare. "What... what's..."

You spit a dusty glob of red on the ground. "He resurrects. And also time travels."

Another explosion rocks through the shield and you brace for impact, but Sollux has enough loose material built up by now to absorb most of the shock wave, muffling it to a teeth-rattling quake.

The divine lightshow seethes and snaps back, the tone of healthy flesh and blood sweeping over
void black, and then the Knight bursts to life once more. Dropping out of the air into a defensive crouch and sweeping his eyes around, he asks, "What did I miss? Please don't tell me someone died."

"We got fucking dronestriked," you growl.

"They figured out where they stashed the pyrolances," Temtos corrects. "Atlassian War era tech. Penetrating energy explosions with no shrapnel."

The rubble under your feet rocks and shifts again from another detonation.

"I've got thith!" Sollux yells to the side.

You look over at where he is, blazing at the center of a full-body energy halo. A glowing mosaic of fused superheated rock sifts out of the flying mess and is ingloriously discarded to a side, replaced by freshly excavated matter. How thick is it now? One meter? Two? Several more strikes hit, shaking the ground, and now the entire front face of your barrier is cracking ember red, searing hot air flushing through the gaps.

"Uh-" you start, but you're interrupted by a crash from above.

A humanoid shape blows through the large slab above in a spray of splinters and dust. You recognize who it is just in time to hold out your hand and stop the indigoblood from leaping into a reactionary attack. She blinks in confusion as the air clears and the figure steps forward.

"Start flying!" Future Dave coughs, waving the Scarlet Ribbitar in a very unsafe way.

With that, he turns and leaps out the hole he just created. Present Dave steps forward, adds, "You heard me, I guess," and follows out the opening.

Temtos gapes.

Sollux grumbles something, but complies, eyes burning with power as everything shakes. The cobblestone piecemeal under you ripples as its crevices shine with red and blue once more. The untouched building wall to your back shudders, floods with bichromatic light, and next thing the entire section rips out of the structure it originally belonged to, sending bits and pebbles skittering everywhere. Finally, with a sickening lurch, all of it launches upwards.

This isn't a platform and a few shields anymore. You have no idea how much mass Sollux is lifting at this point, but the psychic noise from sheer quantity of psionic channeling is starting to hurt your brain, and you're not even sensitive.

"What is the human doing?" Temtos screams as she stumbles, trying to keep her balance on the shifting floor.

"Probably deflecting missiles with his sword," you shout back. You can still hear the sound of explosions filtering through the walls over the loud energy crackling everywhere and over your feet, but you think they're not actually landing direct strikes anymore. This interior is still a fucking oven, but at least it's not getting any hotter.

"What about the bullets?"

"He's probably deflecting them too," you state casually.

"He can time travel?"
"Yeah, I said that already."

You won't lie, you're drawing no small amount of guilty pleasure from her stunned shock, but amusing reactions aside, you're not out of the woods yet. Or into the woods, given where you're literally trying to abscond to. It's impossible to judge how fast you're moving, only that the sense of acceleration's beginning to fade into the background vibration, but from the continuous weapons fire you're still hearing, the answer is "not fast enough".

"Sollux!" you yell. He rotates in his floating hunch to face you, eyes arcing white electricity into the walls. You're unsure how coherent he is, but you ask anyway. "Can't we go faster?"

He did claim he could project an entire Sburbian meteor to light speed, right?

"Atmosphere," he rasps, the sound coming from all around you.

Fuck, right. Not a closed system.

"Lose weight!" you shout.

He cocks his head slowly, the strange lightning coiling and snapping into new paths with the motion. You're about to repeat your statement, perhaps this time in a less easily misunderstood way, when the psychic pressure plummets.

The flashing plasma lapping over everything fizzes and vanishes. Compacted debris cracks and crumbles. The floor's falling, breaking up—*you're* falling, you flail but there's nothing to hold on to—then fizzing color washes over your vision, and you're not dropping anymore, but everything else is.

Tons of rock and concrete tumble away from you, a veritable aerial landslide of destroyed government property, replaced by blinding pastel blue and white that you quickly realize is the sky. He didn't just lose some weight; he shed everything, leaving the three of you floating out in the open in a raw telekinetic grip.

"This is not what I meant!" you yell.

You twist, and now that there's no meters of solid wreckage in the way you can see three Daves weaving through the air, dodging your falling junk while parrying what looks like bizarre crosses between laser bolts and rocket projectiles. That must be what Temtos was talking about.

Behind them you can see the dig site in the distance. You're quite a bit away from where you started, out of the way of the buildings proper but still well within the crater bounds, and the lack of potential collateral damage appears to have only encouraged their enthusiastic application of high-grade munitions. They haven't deployed any combat aircraft, though, for some reason.

One of the Daves swings around, takes a look at you, then turns to tackle another out of your moment in a twist of folded time, which sends a strange twitch down your spine. The last one tanks an explosion to the face without a blink—wait, how does he survive that now but get killed by the rubble earlier?—and flashes a thumbs up to you without turning around.

Apparently Sollux understands that as a signal, and the grip of psionic light spills over Dave as well. With a flick of the goldblood's hand, space screams, and you finally move.

Air friction scourcs your abused exterior surface as the power-drunk goldblood jettisons the four of you at ridiculous velocity across the sky. You can barely hear yourself screaming. Well, you asked, and you received: this is faster, way faster, multiple times your previous speed. The conical curve
of the crater swings close before dipping away again as Sollux remembers to keep angling upwards. It takes mere seconds to shoot past the rim and just over the tree tops, and before you know it it's forest and sky and snow again under you.

Elation and relief fills you. You never thought you'd be happy to see this frigid frond nub wasteland, but here you are, cheering inside.

You celebrated too early.

The energy engulfing you flares brilliantly blue, bifurcating into cyan and rich cobalt for a split second, then just as quickly as it erupts, the light around you snuffs out like a lone candle in a flash hurricane.

Or perhaps, to take a more apt analogy, like a dinky cell phone in a solar storm.

Propulsion shorted out, there's nothing to guide your tumbling arc through open air. What few sparks Sollux manages to eke out again do nothing to alter your breakneck sideways plummet. Your panicked flailing sends you into an uncontrolled spin. Just when it couldn't get worse, you notice a massive shadow cloak over the landscape, and as your angular velocity takes you head over heels, you lay eyes on the source too late.

Looming over the facility, length practically the diameter of the entire excavated crater:

A gigantic battleship in white and blue, emblazoned with the trident of the Condesce.

Something smacks into your back. Arms wrap around your waist from behind as your legs chock against something soft. They tug up, and your trajectory smooths and levels.

"Gotcha," Dave says in your ear, but you can hear his strained grimace.

The god flips your entangled bodies around as you crash through the canopy, shielding you with his back from the protruding branches and twigs that snap on contact under your combined weight. They barely slow your fall. He keeps dragging upwards on the descent, but it's the lateral speed that fucks you over as the two of you plow into the underbrush. You bounce off your bony human cushion and go flying, rusty self-training kicking in just in time to twist your second landing into a poorly-executed roll. Your beaten body skids off the ground and crunches painfully into a bush.

You groan and right yourself just in time to see the other boy rocket back into the sky. Sollux plummets through the treetops very much the same way as you did, in the hold of a Dave, carving a trench into the muddy slush. Temtos in contrast seems to have a handle on things, dropping down from a tree and landing with a thump on her hands and feet while a bemused and reluctantly impressed Dave descends behind her.

Sollux's Dave takes a look at the rest of you and shoots away through the trees into a temporal portal, vanishing with a pop that gives off another ripple of that something, a strange aphysical tension that seems to constrict around your figurative throat.

...If that's what you think it is, that doesn't bode well for you.

Nevertheless, dozens of fresh minor lacerations and prior standing injuries aside, everybody seems mostly in one piece. Of course, there's currently no shortage of other things to flip your everloving shit about.

"What the fuck is that?" you shout, shaking an accusing finger at the gargantuan warship above.
It's slowed to a hover above the facility, technically not vertically overlooking your position, but the vessel is large enough to cast its blanketing shadow over you at this angle.

You converge on Sollux, who's picking himself off the ground and still trying to respark his powers. Hyper-functioning mutant or not, you don't think he's going to achieve much against the raw psionic might of a spaceship the size of a small town.

"That's the Glacier," Temtos fills in. "Imperial Diplomatic Warship. But this doesn't make sense: it's supposed to be in Neptune orbit. This can't be big enough to call it in, not even for Class-S escapees."

"Well, fuck," the human sighs, bringing out the timetables. "Our timeline constitution is so far down the drain it's chatting up crocodile consorts in the lava sewers, but given the circumstan--"

A thunderous boom interrupts mid-word, accompanied by a blast of wind that almost knocks you off your feet and rustles the trees into angry renewed susurrations. You turn your head skyward.

Fuck.

The ship is right on top of you all of a sudden, the base of its hull only a hundred or so meters from grazing the tallest branches, which sounds like a lot but really isn't considering its enormous girth. The hum of its engines is drowning out the sounds of leaves and agitated wildlife, at this distance being more of a roar drilling a hole through your auriculars directly into your sensory lobes.

They've found you.

Panels slide open on the vessel's smooth underplating. Cannons emerge, rotating on motorized bearings to lock on where you're stood boggling vacantly. From other side openings Imperial drones begin streaming out in droves, rocketing down through the foliage on biochemical thrust. A high-pitched whine fills the air: ship-mounted cannons charging, you realize.

You look to your allies for direction. Sollux is still putting up a futile fight against the Glacier's helmsblock. Temtos is unclipping her left earring and expanding it into a sleek white rapier. Dave's recaptchalogueing his timetables, evidently deeming them too slow for this current crisis, yet you can sense in your gut, more viscerally than you ever have before, that he's doing something to the fabric of time.

"Please don't fuck up the past!" Dave yells over the rising scream of drone cores. As the first beam gouges its jagged furrow into the ground at your feet, he throws out his hands and Time sigils blaze under all of you.

Red fills your vision, your perception tips, and time slips in reverse.

It's a subjective eternity of falling. When you emerge from the temporal slipstream you barely have time to register the shift in daylight before you flop forward into a thicker snowbank, suppressing the urge to hurl. You grapple for purchase on the white mush to get up amidst the groans of the others, but the next thing you know, a lone gunshot rings out.

A sharp pain stabs into your chest. Your hand claps over in reflex, jabbing another bolt of pain through you, and it comes away drenched in candy red blood. You look up, trembling, to find a stunned human pointing a smoking gun at you.

Consciousness slips from your grip, and...
It's a subjective eternity of falling. When you emerge from the temporal slipstream you barely have time to register the shift in daylight before you flop forward into a thicker snowbank, suppressing the urge to hurl. When try to you heave yourself up, Dave shoves you down—another Dave, you realize, the original one's still kneeling where he fired off the fraymotif—and darts out to bisect the gun a human just lifted at the teleporting interlopers.

It's a subjective eternity of falling. When you emerge from the temporal slipstream you barely have time to register the sudden night before you flop backward into a pile of snow. You hear Dave cussing while you try not to vomit, and red patterns glow around you again. You're blown forward into day. As you roll over and actually puke, a lone gunshot rings out. You raise your head to find Sollux missing half of his head, the other half splattered in grotesque yellow and pink, and you retch again.

Dave pops up and cuts the human's hand off. His blood stains the snow a horrible red.

No, you emerge from the timestream early morning and Temtos charges the gunman, knocking the weapon out of his hand.

You go back, take a wrong turn and bump into your past selves.

You emerge and Dave pesters himself. Everyone gets confused.


Nothing happens.

You finally figure out what's going on. Centering yourself, you push the maelstrom of revoked futures out of your mind. Leave picking meaning from the debris of a total temporal breakdown to Dave; just focus on your senses. Your real ones, right here, right now.

You're still under the Imperial warship, drone fire raining down on your position, hull cannons ticking towards full charge. Around you the two other trolls are recovering from the crash too, but Dave's already bounced back and hurled himself into the fray. He is the Time god, after all. The drones don't appear to have been affected, and you can't tell about anyone in that flying fortress above you, but either way, the onslaught hasn't slowed down the slightest while you were taking an existential sledgehammer to the think pan.

Dave's flash-stepping everywhere, cutting down drones left and right, but there's only one of him now. This is a bigger problem than battle power: with time travel barred for the immediate future, any outcome of this fight is unconditionally stable and therefore valid. No predestination plot armor, no invisible recons closing themselves to ensure survival, if not victory... it might not have felt like it, but this is the most danger you've been in since you woke Dave.

You want to ask the god for a pair of sickles, but it's pointless. You're dead weight here. One on one in close quarters you could probably take a drone, but here, up against a mob that's keeping its distance? Maybe eccheccapped Karkat could, but this you is physically incapable of moving fast enough to get into striking range before being turned to mist.
There's a reason heiresses used to be able to rule Alternia with just the Mother Grub's favor and a voice.

"You're not going to kill them all!" Temtos shouts. "The Glacier's droneholds number eight thousand!"

"What are we going to do, run?" Sollux bites back. "They have eyeth on uth. Without thkiping to another time they can track uth anywhere we go."

"Why can't we? What happened there?"

"No time to explain," you growl. "In case you haven't noticed, we're shit-moored dead fucking center of Armageddon Central! We need a plan!"

In fact, the only reason you're not cauterized Swiss cheese right now is that Dave's drawing all the drone fire. Even so, the reflections off Caledfwlch are tearing up the ground around you. The ones that graze you here and there are diffuse and weakened, but still extract a hiss as they add to your already not-unimpressive coterie of burns.

"So we wait for Dave Thtrider to thave the day as alwayth!" Sollux huffs. "What' th he going to pull out of hith athe thith time?" The sarcasm isn't enough to mask the undercurrent of worry in his voice.

A low, sonorous throbbing assaults your ears from above, and the three of you look up once again, resigned to yet more bad news.

You are not disappointed.

One of the giant cannons is glowing red hot and gripping a sphere of solid white energy between its three claws. The others are also sporting building charge cores, but this one's ball of death is starting to push against its prongs and pulsing dangerously bright. Of course it's pointing at you. Suddenly, in one slick motion, the containment claws click apart and retract into the cannon barrel.

"Fuck," you summarize.

A blinding channel of destruction the width of a hivestem erupts from the sphere, bearing down on you in a slim fraction of a second.

The Knight blinks to intercept.

The beam splits against the sword a hundredth its size, dividing into brilliant twin streams that drive onward to disintegrate anything and everything in their angled paths, trees, drones and earth alike reduced to constituent dust in an instant.

As Dave turns in the air, the axis of the split rotates with him, carving opposing trails of annihilation across the natural geography, in their wake leaving molten canyons extending down past bedrock. The ground under your feet shakes.

"Fuck," Temtos swears for the first time since you met her.

The collateral damage of the ginormous laser has destroyed more drones in two seconds than Dave cut up in all the time before, but with him caught up in human beam splitter duty, the remaining drones are redirecting their attention to you.

You're not going to try something stupid like trick them into shooting each other or play lethal
keep-away in the middle of a conveniently cinematographic clearing. They're unintelligent, but not movie drones with the aim and spatial awareness of febrile human toddlers. It's a forest, there's cover and a healthy injection of chaos, so the three of you do the only sane thing conceivable.

You make a run for it.

Chapter End Notes

Karkat's lost a lot of agency in this chapter since Sollux is ridiculously OP, and a god tier Knight of Time even moreso despite being nerfed. In other news, that Chekov's gun finally fired, balancing the playing field a little.

We're nearing the end! (ish. *cough* billion unresolved plot threads *cough* sequel *cough*)
Chapter Summary

The forest is silent. The putter of drone lasers has faded into the background engine hum, waves of artificial heat diffracting over your skin denatured into common but no less stifling ambient warmth. You can see it clearer now, the red-hot fringes of metal sheared clean through by a sword, hanging distant in the sky. It's physically impossible, but you're seeing it with your own two eyes.

Chapter Notes

I spent way too much time reading ancient liveblogs of Homestuck, but I eked this out in the end. There's some [S] Descend feel to this, which I really only noticed in revision. Unintentional, but an interesting coincidence.

It's the dust that saves you.

All the earth torn out of the landscape by the giant doom laser didn't just disappear—conservation of mass. Billowing plumes of heated soot and sand sweep through the trees, and briefly it's almost like you're back on Alternia, trudging through toxic smogstorms back to your hive after staying out too long at twilight. All of a sudden the muffled drone fire doesn't sound that out of place.

The blanket of angry dust is stinging your eyes and scraping the lining from your vascular bladders, but more importantly it's scattering the laser onslaught hounding you and the others. Piercing bolts diffuse into scorching but superficial wide-angle blasts, and at enough range eventually into glowing radiation. For once you're thankful that this state is buttfuck freezing in the middle of winter, because if not for all your thermal layers shielding you you wouldn't be alive right now.

Make no mistake: the drones shots are landing home. Your coat's literally on fire, you've lost a third of your scraggy hair to ash, your right leg's had a chunk of skin and muscle scoured off, and that's only the major things that come to mind. You're not limping, because that would imply you still have conscious will over your movements. No, you're running on autopilot at this point, in the same rabid fight-or-flight headspace that drives battle trolls fighting and laughing on through perforation and dismemberment. But even that heady rush, the endocrine cocktail coursing through your veins perfected through eons of culling and artificial selection, has its limits.

What you're saying is that it's not looking good.

The trees before you open up, and just in time your feet skid to a stop before you topple into the chasm of molten rock and sulfurous fumes cleaving the terrain in two. It's a hovercraft's wingspan to the closest outcrop of solid land on the other side.

"How the fuck am I supposed to jump that?" you cough hysterically.

It doesn't matter; if you don't, you die. The abrupt heat of a grazing shot singes your shoulder
blade, reminding you of the imminent threat. Drones are converging from behind, left and right, leaving only one way to go. This is ground zero of the duststorms, so the laser beams are more or less overcharged heat lamps, but that's only at a distance. Once they catch up you'll be done for.

Crouching and wincing at the stretch of your cracked skin and abused muscle fibers, you prepare to leap.

...

This isn't going to work. You're barely going to make it halfway—you're just going to plummet to your death and be immolated alive. Yet it's that or being shot full of holes. Fuck that, this can't be it. An ignoble death pincered between lava and a mob of furious drones?

Right when you begin resigning yourself to the inevitable, a hand grabs your neck. Crusts of soot fused to your burnt, peeling skin dig into tender flesh, your feet lift off the ground, and with a breathtaking heave you're hurled into the air up and across the trench. You flail and scream for the couple of airborne seconds it takes to cross the gap and smash shoulder-first into the dirt at the opposite side, crumpling immediately into a throbbing heap of excruciating pain.

Feet thump into the ground next to you, slipping momentarily on the loose soil before regaining balance. You crane your head up to find Temtos' battered hand extended at you.

Holy fuck, thank the Mother Grub for highbloods.

"Thank you," you rasp, taking the outstretched appendage and heaving yourself up. No time to waste

You spare a glance upwards through the particulate mist. The beam of destruction's cutting out, narrowing and beginning to power down for the next recharge. The other cannons are still charging, several of them creeping towards completion, but the god's still floating there, his figure impossible to miss even through the haze. How is he going to handle multiple of them firing simultaneously? Can he intercept more than one at the same time?

Temptos taps your shoulder, reminding you to get moving, but something catches your eye up in the sky. A flash of light, a ripple in space. What's-

An earth-shaking boom rips through the forest, the accompanying shock wave buffeting the thick smog and almost throwing you off your feet. You stumble back.

A line of light trickles through the darkness looming far above.

Clouds parting? That can't be it, there's not enough altitude for those to form. Fog?

...The battleship itself?

The gap widens, a mile-long slash of sky cutting across the massive shadow, its two edges drifting apart tortuously slowly.

"That's..." You don't realize you've opened your mouth until the words are coming out. "Did he..."

The forest is silent. The putter of drone lasers has faded into the background engine hum, waves of artificial heat diffracting over your skin denatured into common but no less stifling ambient warmth. You can see it clearer now, the red-hot fringes of metal sheared clean through by a sword, hanging distant in the sky. It's physically impossible, but you're seeing it with your own two eyes.
The neatly bisected warship shudders, the world's ceiling vibrating with it, then without warning, the half of the spacecraft farther away from you falls.

There's no slow-motion descent and incendiary halo. Slightly less than nine point eight one meters per second squared, it falls, taking only takes a moment to cross the air gap and snap through the trees, and then its cataclysmic bulk is flattening the vast tracts of forest underneath. Unpowered hull crumples under its own weight, the snapping and screaming of failing superalloys scoring the calamitous impact wave that quakes through the ground and choked air.

Half of you is stunned at the display of raw power, wondering why Dave didn't do this from the very start.

The other half is frozen in horror, knowing perfectly well why he didn't, running the numbers on how many trolls in that now-smoldering wreckage were slain in one fell swoop.

"Go!" Temtos screams, breaking you out of your reverie.

Fuck, right.

You lurch into a run for the starboard edge of the remaining half of the Glacier. It's probably the half with the helmsblock, hence why it's not succumbed to the inexorable pull of Terran gravity yet, but it's not going to stay up there forever. You're still under its shadow, and you'll have to be out of that and quite a bit more to not get caught in the crash zone. You lost track of Sollux quite a way back and who knows where the hell Dave is now, but looking for them will have to wait. You trust them to take care of themselves.

With any luck the drone broadcast has cut out, which means they'll be defaulting to their individual programming. You have no idea how much of their orders they retain, but even if you're still shoot-on-sight, at least the ship isn't streaming your location real-time to every single of those carapaced fuckers.

As you make your way through unfamiliar countryside, tripping and limping over untended roots and rocks, you find yourself encountering surprisingly little resistance. Most of the drones must have deployed near you and congregated on your last known position, so now that you've fled that immediate vicinity and the mothership's out of commission, all you have to look out for is the perimeter scouts and stray wanderers.

But your luck doesn't last long. All things considered, you actually make it farther than you expect before you run into trouble.

The drone is hanging in the penumbra of the ship's shadow, a recon/seeker subspecies dropped from the starboard ports if you had to guess. You duck behind one of the larger trunks as soon as you catch the glimpse of ugly condescending red between the trees and hold up a warning hand at the blueblood on your tail, stopping her in her tracks. She's been hanging behind watching your back all along, which you do appreciate, but fuck if it doesn't weird you out suddenly being Very Important to a bunch of freaky cultists.

Peeking a head around the tree, you inspect the predator's movements. It's plodding around on low motor, so that indicates patrol mode, not hunt and cull. You wonder if you can just go around, avoid it altogether, and-

The bioengineered monstrosity screams in agitation, joints scraping as it swivels towards you. Heavy footsteps plod closer—it's found you, or it's tracking you somehow. Damnit, it's your blood, isn't it? They can smell the pheromone balance in your bleeding. It's not even anything to do with
their mission business; this happened back on Alternia too, enforcement going crazy at the first whiff of hemomutation. It's their evolutionary function, after all, culling the gene pool and all that hyperselectionist bullshit.

Back then you kept a spray bottle of burgundy grubblood concentrate handy to throw them off the scent, but that's not an option here. You don't even have water to wash yourself off.

...Slather yourself in Temtos' blood?

No, you blathering idiot. You hate yourself a little more for even considering that. It's here already. You're not going to outrun a killing machine: either you spin up a distraction, or you'll have to fight. Or Temtos will have to, since you don't have a weapon or psychic cheats to abuse.

You lunge forward, by which you of course mean away from the murderdrone and towards your ally. The crunch of leaves under your feet seem to be the last piece it needs to pinpoint your location, because that's when it decides to fuck subtlety and charge, burning chemical propellant from its rear jets to blast off straight at you.

Without any other way to fend off the attack, you dart behind yet another tree. The indigo rolls out of the way just in time as the drone barrels into your temporary cover, sending bark and wood chips flying. While the drone's dazed, Temtos takes the opportunity to tackle it, body slamming it into the muddy slush. You step out from hiding to see her draw her rapier back and plunge it into its eye, under the bionic bulb into the socket, but it catches on something, leaving the blade speared halfway in.

The creature doesn't seem to have even noticed.

Now it's flailing, trying to toss its assailant off while its chest beam charges. Fuck, that thing's instantly lethal at this range. Do something to help instead of standing there like an imbecile!

Withdrawing from your coat a shard of basalt that you pocketed while you were cowering on the ground just now, you jump forward and wedge it under the other eye, bracing against the bone socket to try to pry it out. The drone intensifies its struggle, the cybernetic vision sphere twitching and dilating as you hear optic fibers snap. Good, if you can blind the thing your chances of survival rise exponentially.

...Or Temtos could simply lever the impact-damaged chestplate off with her fingers and start ripping cables out. That works too. Foul-smelling lubricant and gel splatter her jacket while you help hold down the arms.

Before you have time to smug, the back thrusters fire again, propelling the drone upright and throwing both of you off. You manage to roll back to your feet, but so has the drone resumed its offense.

Shit. Underestimating these assholes is a mistake.

Both of you dodge as energy blasts at you from its core lens, nipping your right hand with the diffraction edge and missing the other troll altogether. What is this, Slow-Cook Karkat Day? Fucking lasers. You don't have the advantage of range and dust-clogged air here, though, so you really can't tank a full-on shot if you want to keep your limbs intact. The drone angles its torso towards you and you have to hit the ground to avoid being bisected by the crimson beam, almost dislocating your shoulder in the impact. You grimace.

To your relief, the laser putters out with a sad burp after a mere few seconds. Glad to know those
wires did do something after all, but unfortunately, all losing its primary beam does is prompt the resilient bastard to bring out its auxiliary weapons.

The drone unsheathes its inbuilt clawblades and takes a swipe at you directly.

There's no time to get out of the way.

A howl tears itself from your throat as pain explodes across your flank, and you almost black out in shock. Your elbows give out, slumping your face into the dirt, but your attention is too occupied with being violently skewered to care.

Something crunches loudly behind you, followed by the sound of tearing carapace and metal. You try to power through the torture and roll over, but something's pinning you down. Pinned through you. Every shift of your body sends new waves of agony down your side, sharp chitinous edges digging into places nothing should ever be touching. Everything's fogging over. Fuck, you can't do this. You can't.

"Oh Jesus," you here Temtos' hiss. Did she kill the drone? You're too overwhelmed to think straight. "Don't move."

Hard blades glide out of you with a wet squelch. You can feel blood soaking into your clothes. Something soft wraps around your back and abdomen, every touch and tug extracting pained grunts from you. You're being lifted up by the armpits.

"Are you okay?" she questions. "Can you walk?"

Your head's still spinning, but your legs get the message somehow. The blueblood cautiously lets go, and you manage to stay on your feet. Okay, you can do this. What's some copious internal bleeding and imminent organ failure? Trolls have been crowned war heroes under worse conditions. You stumble a step forward, and immediately crumple.

"Stupid question," she mutters, hands darting out to catch you. The troll heaves you up and slings you over her shoulder, making sure to keep pressure on the wound in your side with one hand. Your head lolls, staring woozily at the muddy tracks in the ground.

Why aren't you moving?

"Oh, fuck."

Scrabbling weakly at Temtos' back, you awkwardly shift your head up to face the sky. It takes too long for your ocular lenses to adjust.

The airborne half of the battleship is tilting.

And you're still under it.

She breaks into a sprint, needles stabbing into your guts with every jolt of her feet against the ground. The air's burning with an acrid, ozonous taste. You're practically motion sick at the superhuman pace she's racing forward at, but even in your pain-addled haze, you know you're not going fast enough.

Something snaps.

Wind roars. Your ears pop. You twist your throbbing head to meet the terrifying sight of half a defunct ex-warship bearing down on you, your surroundings dimming with its worryingly rapid
approach, and it's not slowing down. A pinprick figure is flitting around the sky, searching
frantically, but you're too far and too weak to call out with any hope of him hearing. Somewhere in
the not-as-far distance, red and blue is erupting from a treetop and splashing against a descending
wall of hull plating to little effect.

You're hauled down from Temtos' shoulder roughly, and for a second you're struck with an
irrational panic that she's tossing the dead weight, but as her grips shift to your ankles you realize
what she's doing.

"Wait-" you wheeze, but she's not listening.

Bruised arms swing you around once, twice, centrifugal force wreaking hell on your hemorrhaging
injuries, and then hurl you with one final grunt into the air.

Your scrawny body goes flying, up and past the thinning foliage in your most undignified and
uncontrolled tumble yet. But the half-ship's still sinking towards you, and highblood strength isn't
the same as Equius strength or Sburb combat physics. It was a last-ditch shot in the dark, chances
of getting you past the blast radius astronomically slim even if most of that launch force hadn't
gone upwards.

You're not going to make it.

Your grip on consciousness loosens, eyes drifting closer shut. You're losing blood by the second:
you can literally see a trail of mutant red flinging through the air in your wake. That hasty attempt
at bandaging the gaping holes in your torso could win prizes for medical negligence, not that
you're blaming her field work considering the circumstances. With all this pain and floaty
wooziness together with the weightless free-fall, it's too tempting to just allow yourself to pass out.
It'd be painless, you could just let go... and...

Psionic energy shocks you back awake, electric crackle driving pins into your torn flesh. Your
eyelids jerk apart involuntarily and an onslaught of familiar spectral hues spikes into your retinas.
Your burnt skin crawls with the lick of hot and cold plasma.

*Oh*, you think dimly. So that's why she threw you up.

You accelerate in a wash of color.

A thunderous crash and cascading explosions echo behind. Heat sears your back.

You pass out.

...  

Voices. They're arguing about... something.

You crack an eye open. It's too bright.

Trees.

Everything hurts. Moving figures, but you can't discern what they are.

<Dad,> you croak. "Dave."

Indistinct bodies turn to you. They're trying to say something, but you don't have the cognizance to
parse the sounds. You don't have the cognizance to do much of anything, really, but amidst the
haze there's one thing that filters through, one grain of irrefutable instinct:

You're not doing too well.

They're sticking something in your mouth. It's slimy and rubbery, foul and tasteless with a hint of salt. Dave's cradling your jaw, chewing down for you, and as whatever it is ruptures, gelatinous liquid bursts onto your tongue. You get a faint idea that it's supposed to do something. Somehow. Maybe.

It doesn't.

A hand's papping your cheek, lips whispering to you urgently. The voices are fading away. You strain to listen, to hold on, but you...

...can't...

...Fire burns through your innards.

Soft sheets under you.

Something nudging against your nose and mouth.

White walls...

You can't feel anything.

Blurry shapes swim through your vision.

"...wake..."

They're agitated about something. The red shape is making sounds at the white one. The dark blob moves towards you, it's too close, but you can't muster the energy to shoo it away. It's waving an appendage in front of you.

"He's... handling..."

The sounds are familiar. Should you be recognizing them?

Something's in your arm.

The world crumbles away again.

...A psychic feeler grazes your mind.

It pokes and prods.

The probe withdraws...

...

Shouting again. The pounding blood in your ears isn't drowning out the noise.

There's red at the edge of your sight. The bad red, flashing red. Not the good kind. You think the
angry beeping in the background has something to do with it.

You want to yell at them to shut up, but your voice fails you.

Two cold and slick weights press against your chest, and a second later a tidal wave of agony crashes over you. You choke and shudder. The alarmed human sounds grow louder, scurrying around like insects around their overturned hive.

Your eyes manage to focus on the moving blurs through the pain. White coats, human skin, clear glasses. You hear Sollux's shouting voice but don't see him. Dave's mixed somewhere in there too. You attempt to lift your arm, but it's not responding, and trying to move is worse than swimming through broken glass. Meaning it hurts.

You're dizzy. Drained.

You can barely hear the beat of your pump biscuit anymore.

Everything is too sharp. They're getting more and more agitated.

You're clinging on with all you have, but it's not enough.

You slip away.
End

Chapter Summary

Only one thing left to do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The opening creak of the door behind Dave alerts him to an intruder. He's too exhausted to acknowledge the newcomer, blank gaze fixed on a still Karkat in front of him, fingers gripping small dents into the rails on the bed. Whoever it is takes their time walking up to Dave, hands shoved deep into pockets. They sigh.

"Would it kill you to at least act upset?" Dave says, posture rigid and tense.

Sollux growls, his glasses flashing with the barest spike of psionic energy. "Don't you dare pull that on me, Thrtider. Don't pretend I didn't tell you. The voitheth never lie. I thaw thith coming hourht ago—we both did, tho don't give me your denial bullcrap."

Dave's head snaps around, eyes burning with anger for a split second, but the fury drains away as quickly as it rose. He slumps, fingers slipping off the bar. His fists clench.

Only one thing left to do.

The god leans down, closing his eyes, and locks his mouth to Karkat's. The troll's lips are sickeningly cold, bitter and ashy from the battlefield and crusted with dried blood, but the stillness of his nonexistent breath is what gives it away. Dave suppresses the urge to gag and lingers in the kiss, waiting for the requisite seconds to pass before he slowly straightens up and swallows, wiping the residual taste from his mouth with the back of a hand.

Sollux is aware how that particular admittedly unnerving mechanism of revival works, so it doesn't catch him particularly by surprise. The dubious effectiveness of the technique for an unconfirmed demi-player, though, he's not that sure about.

The two of them stand there for an awkward moment, staring at the dead body, waiting for a reaction that will never arrive.

"I just realized there's no way to tell if that worked," Dave says dully. He sinks down to the cold hospital floor slowly, crossing his legs under himself and burying his head in trembling hands. Lifting his shades, he rubs away the beginnings of tears pricking the corners of his eyes. "Fuck."

The goldblood curses loudly and turns to Dave, viciously booting him in the side. The human goes sprawling across the floor, grunting in pain, but he's rolling back to his feet in a second, fists instantly lifted in a defensive stance. Sollux hisses and stomps forward, eyes sparking with color.

"Thith ith your fault," he snarls. "He warned you! He warned you and you went ahead with it anyway, and we followed like imbeciles. What the fuck ith wrong with you? I hate you. I hate you and your thhit human pantheon. Why couldn't you have just left uth alone, you narthithithtic doucebag?" The god twitches as if to throw a punch, but manages to hold himself back. Sollux
continues, "Go on, hit me. You know you want to. That's all you're good for, hitting this with swordth and making a dithguthting maggoty methh of everything you touch. Might ath well kill me while you're at it, right?"

Dave sneers, Caledscrach flickering in and out of his hand. "Hey, asshole, don't forget who bailed you out of your own self-excavated shit creek back in the start. You'd be a chopped-up brain in a jar strung up in the Condesce's brigs right now if it weren't for me, you ungrateful bucketfuck. You're welcome."

"And look what that got uth!" Sollux scoffs, folding his arms. "My beth friend dead and all of uth wanted criminalth on both our thitty planetth! What a goddamn delight! Look at all thith unbridled gratitude I'm raining down on you! Thhould I thacrifithe a mountain bleatbeast to my new god ath well? Prothtate mythelf before your divine magnifithenthe?"

The human bristles. "No one's making you stay with me. If you're so eager to get fucked up the ear by the Empire's mindrape brainprobes, go ahead! Do you see anyone stopping you? Nobody gives a shit. Here, I'll lend you an electron microscope to check to be sure. Zilch. Nada. Not one molecule of shit, not a single carbon atom in the national shitvault allocated for your esteemed perusal."

"I get it," the troll laughs. "You don't care about anything except getting into KK'th panth, huh? I'm juth the rear appendix on the compound grub you can't wait to amputate when the opportunity prethenth ithelf. If only the pithblood wath the one thtabbed to death inththead! How convenient would that be? Hell, I can tell when I'm not wanted. I thould just fly away up to the thun like the fucking piece of garbage I am and burn to death. You'd be ecthtatic over that, wouldn't you?"

Dave flinches. "Goddammit, that's not what I meant and you know it. Jesus, I can't deal with your self-loathing bull right now. Just... don't touch me and shut the fuck up."

"Likely to happen," Sollux spits, but he turns away, curling his fists and digging sharp nails into calloused palms. "We're screwed. This is all screwed."

He's already regretting throwing that first blow, and not just because he's got no hope of surviving past this week without Strider. No, it's his own hypocrisy that's needling him. Everything that happened is just as much the troll's own fault, isn't it? Same old story: too slow, too weak, too late. He had one job and still managed to spill the recuperacoon.

"Look, we can still salvage this."

Sollux whirls around, his face a rictus of fury and frustration. "KK's dead, Dave. We're juth going to pretend nothing happened and keep going? How, even? We lotth all our leadth, and the other- do they even know about this?"

"I'll contact them once we're back linear," Dave says quietly. "Can't splinter the timeline more. We're already skirting the crash."

"Look at you!" he shouts. "Do you even care about what happened? No, I know you do, I thaw how dithguthtingly in love with him you were. How are you so calm?"

The god looks down.

"I'm working on... a plan. An idea. The bones of one, at least."

Sollux narrows his eyes apprehensively at the human. Dave walks over to the foot of Karkat's bed, keeping his eyes averted from the macabre sight. He reaches out, and with a limp snapping sound
and a slurp of yellow, the cadaver slots into his sylladex.

"And it involves walking around with KK's dead carcath? I have so much faith in your genius ideath after how that latht one ended up, let me tell you. You won't believe how ecthited I am right now to hear your next plan to get uth all killed. If it'th not going to bring him back-

"If it works, it will."

Sollux pauses, diatribe derailed. He blinks mutely.

"Why the fuck wouldn't you lead with that?" he huffs. The troll's mind is racing at a hundred miles an hour now. 'How? If you tell me you have a rethurrection thcroll thtashed in your thylladex and you waited this long to pipe up, I thwear to god, I'll thtrangle you with your own intethtineth."

"I don't know if it'll work," Dave clarifies. "But we have to get out of here first. I don't know if they've called the cops-

"Gee, I wonder," Sollux scoffs. "After you bathically threatened thothe humanth with a giant thord and uthed your timestop powerth, what, five times?"

"-but the ginormous sinkhole we punched in the timeline is creeping closer and I don't want to find out what oblivion amid the horrorterrors we'll be consigned to for all of eternity if we retroactively intersect the crash," Dave finishes.

The troll scowls, saying, "They won't let uth juth thtroll out the front door."

The god grimaces: Sollux is right. Wrangling the staff into an empty ward for the resuscitation already used up most of their goodwill from having honest-to-god superpowers, and the emphatic "if you don't get the fuck out right this instant I am going to stab something" earlier to clear the room emptied the last of it. They're not leaving without a confrontation.

He supposes they could trivially bust through the wall and fly away, but that might fuck up the utilities, and patients could be depending on those. On the other hand, the window... Before Dave can speak up Sollux is already one step ahead, telekinetically unscrewing metal bits from the frame until the entire panel pops out and slowly floats down to the now-empty cot.

"That works," the human remarks, peering through the hole.

"Let'th get out of here," the troll says irritably as he floats out the window. "You have a lot to explain."

turntechGodhead [TG] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

TG: we fucked up

ectoBiologist [EB] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

EB: what happened?
EB: you just dropped out on us all of a sudden.

twinArmageddons [TA] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

TA: your deviilbea2t wa2nt there that2 what happened
TG: yeah then park security sodomized us with a rusty spoon
TG: and then karkat died

gardenGnostic [GG] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

GG: what the hell????
GG: dave if this is a joke its not funny
EB: aw no
GG: please tell me youre not serious
TA: youd better beliefie it
TA: becau2e iim blamiing all of you iincompetent 2hiithead2 for thii2

tentacleTherapist [TT] RIGHT NOW responded to memo.

TT: Seriously?
TT: How did this happen?
TT: Have you tried kissing him yet?
TG: yes
TG: we got blown up by the imperial warship
TG: and yes
EB: wait do you mean the condesces battleship or just AN imperial warship?
TG: the second one
GG: NOBODY CARES
GG: can we get back to the part where KARKAT DIED
TG: yeah
TG: were working on that
EB: working on that?

Timetables grind to a halt and two flying figures pop into existence over an office tower, quickly dropping the few feet down to the ledge of the inclined roof.

The city around them is unfamiliar to the eye. Neither of them are precisely sure where they are, apart from somewhere on the West Coast: after narrowly escaping a fiery death and weighing their options, they froze Karkat in time and flew in a straight line until the time travel blackout cleared, then popped back a few days to get medical attention for him. Now that that's resolved, albeit in the worst possible way imaginable, Dave supposes they'll have to put their emotional breakdowns on hold long enough to look up a map at some point.

"You really don't give a fuck if people thee at this point, do you?" Sollux grunts.

Dave captchalogues the twin machines. "Yeah, the cat's as out of the bag as it can be. I'd be surprised if it's not all over the news already. The Condesce's gonna be pissed, but then again we're-"

"Cut the crap and thtart get to the point," The troll cuts in, snapping his fingers irritably.

"Alright." Dave takes a deep breath. "So there's one thing we never figured out, you know? Why we're here. The four of us, John, Jade, Rose, me. We just died in our timeline and then poofed in here, no explanations, no nothing. A total mystery."

"What does thith have to do with KK?"

"I'm getting there," the human says, annoyed. "But fine. The Maid of Life, AKA Jane Crocker,
AKA John's ectomom. Her power's-

"Rethurrection," Sollux can't help but blurt. Dave did mention that in his recount of the previous timeline, just before the part where he died, but he'd filed it away as an unimportant detail.

"-yes. And not just on players, if I had to guess, since ghost Feferi could heal the Mayor and sprites bring back random dead shit just fine. There might be a time limit, but I upgraded my modus ages ago with stasis. It even stops in-game timers, so there's absolutely no reason it wouldn't work."

"But she'th not here. None of the Second are. You told uth yourthelf."

"Not yet," Dave says.

The psionic narrows his eyes, repeating, "Not yet?"

"Look, the thing about mysteries in paradox space is that the punchline is always the same. After some point the same thing rehashed over and over ad infinitum just gets predictable. The Ultimate Riddle? Ultimate Equine Cadaver is more like it. That shit's flayed to the bone, dude, we get it. It's not impressive anymore."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" says a confused Sollux.

"Closed time loops. Inevitability. Self-fulfilling prophecies. Frothy poetic jackassery masquerading as bargain bin philosophy, as Karkat put it. I'm saying that the obvious answer to 'why are we here' is 'no goddamn reason'. We brought ourselves here."

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EB: are you going to mess with their session?
EB: is there a session? have we figured that out yet?
TG: jade said there's no evidence of sburb seeding its own code on alternia right
TG: here earthside i'm 90% sure there wasn't a reckoning at all at least not as we understand it
TG: so no the session theory is firmly relegated to the dross coffer by now id say
TG: but either way im assuming dream self is a no go on principle
TG: im going to try to bring him back the legit way
EB: how?
TT: Jane Crocker.
TT: Am I right? You intend to reproduce the vector of our arrival and pull a version of her into this universe, presumably closing our own loop at the same time.
TG: hey it makes sense
TG: there's the motivation the means
TG: and most importantly the classic incestuously self-causal aesthetic that paradox space obsessively fondles its genesis tadpoles to
GG: did you find out how to do that?
GG: transmaterialize things from the old universe i mean
TG: how not yet
TG: where yes
GG: well?
TG: ross perkins site
TG: florida
TG: its one of the bigger meteors they havent fully explored yet
EB: how do you know that?
TG: how else
TG: science
Dave sits down on the ledge of the roof and deploys the turntop from his sylladex, clicking through folders as he speaks. "Did Karkat tell you about the term project we were doing for Archaeology?"

"Yeth, but I know fuck all about what you were actually doing," Sollux answers flatly.

"We were trying to pin down the center of all known Sburb sites," Dave explains, pulling up a map. "Some hypothetical origin point around which they were scattered at the time of incidence. Not just the spatial center, which there's already literature describing for some specific subclasses of sites, but also the geological reference frame to which that center stays invariant through Earth's tectonic history, which is trickier. But not impossible."

"Then you can project that forward and figure out where that thenter is right now," Sollux fills in, gears turning in his head. "So you're thuggethting..."

Dave scrolls through a series of images, each plotting a different slice of the Sburbian archaeological record in time.

"Why are chunks of our incipisphere in this world? Rose thought they might have come from a Reckoning, but everything I've studied, the entire body of the Sburbian archaeology in this world, all of it points to the contrary. So my theory is that we put them there. As I said, paradox space is predictable. Causality can't help itself but wind around the players, and holy shit that sounds more egotistical than Vriska Serket off her antipsychotics, but it's true. Important things like that never just happen by themselves."

He selects a scatter plot of every known Sburb site across the globe, corrected for tectonic drift and color-coded by type. If Sollux squints, he can make out a vaguely normal distribution centred somewhere east of the Gulf of Mexico.

"So we're going to go there and do some magic to pull the godth from the original alpha univerthe? And thomehow in the procethh we'll drag all thothe meteorth and crap together for the ride, into this univerthe, and back in time to theed the entire field of modern Thburbology."

"That's the idea," the god confirms. "It's a theory, at least. One I hope to God is true, because if not the plan's royally fucked."

Sollux leans back, trying to fit together the deluge of new information.

"How doeth Alternian Thburbology fit into thith, then?" he questions.

Dave scratches his head. "Uh, I've got no clue, actually. My best guess is that all that stuff about the Speaker is genuine historical fact? It is the Emissary to the Horrorterrors, so it's not that inconceivable for it to have some weird prophetic insight to other timelines."

"That th incredibly reathhuring," Sollux grumbles, but he's starting to warm to the idea now. "Why didn't you tell uth all of thith earlier?"

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TT: I have to warn you to manage your expectations.
TT: There's no guarantee that you'll be able to retrieve Jane, and as little guarantee that her powers work here, or on entities extrinsic to the game.
EB: rose, don't say stuff like that!
TT: Neither are we certain that the theory that we engineer our own arrivals is accurate: there are plenty of inscrutable forces in paradox space with the power and reach to accomplish equivalent feats, although to what end remains unclear.
TT: I know you care about Karkat; I do too. By all means, do whatever you need to bring him back, but the last thing we want is for you to get your hopes up only to have them dashed again. Grief can be extremely dangerous.
TG: said miss let me go challenge jack noir to a wandfight
TT: Exactly.
TG: I know first-hand where that path leads.
TG: yeah ok word of wisdom taken
TG: but dont tell the trolls yet
TG: let us try and work this out first
TG: theyll flip their shit and nobody wants that
EB: is this going to be dangerous?
EB: i'm still not clear exactly what's supposed to be involved!
TA: when he 2aid we got blown up by the iimperiial war2hiip two be clear he meant we blew up the iimperiial war2hiip and it fell on u2.
TA: and now were wanted criimiinal2.
EB: you're fugitives?
GG: let us help!
GG: if you find bec first so we can come through
GG: you said he left the forest, so do you know where he is now?
GG: theres not much that can stop all of us together and im sure whatever we end up doing with the inter-universe stuff, witch of space powers will be important!
TG: yeah well
TG: im pretty sure bec is also at where were going

"It was only a hypothesis before," Dave admits. "The project was supposed to put it to the test, but the results were... dubious. Nothing journal-quality, and to be honest we unapologetically cherry-picked the hell out of that data. Then we got caught up in your whirling shitstorm of political intrigue and mutual assassination, and there wasn't much time to think about it. I just shelved the speculative cosmology and focused on, you know, not dying."

"And then thith happened," Sollux mutters.

"That too," the human affirms. "But this train isn't just running on wishful thinking and desperation. See, after we tripped that temporal landmine back there and collectively farted our brains out in an epic spray of timeline diarrhea, I've been pulling janitorial overtime on my alt-timeline memories. And I've picked a few nuggets out of the sludge that have been... let's just say unexpectedly illuminating."

"You can do that?"

Dave shrugs. "I'm not a Seer, but I am the Time guy. Plus, those shitty handysash badges come in handy at the stupidest times. The incredible ability to not get mindfucked by gratuitously convoluted time shenanigans sounds dumb, until aforementioned shenanigans dig up the gargantuan silicone tentadongs from Bilious Slick's basement and nonconsensual dildo-brain copulation starts looking a hell lot less hyperbolic."

Sollux grimaces at the conjured mental image. "Yeah, fine, and?"

"So in that hodgepodge of splinter events that never were, it turns out I'd been chatting up Lamort a lot more than you'd think."

"Lamort?"
"The troll that helped Karkat who we picked up on the way out," Dave reminds him. "She defected or something?"

"Oh," Sollux says, thinking back. "Her. The blueblood we lotht. I forgot her name. What happened to her anyway?"

He thinks she was the one that tossed Karkat out of the trees, but they never figured out where she went after that or what her deal was. Now he's starting to feel guilty that he didn't think about looking for her, but there were other things on their minds at the time between all the shit going down and... well, Karkat.

Dave winces. "Crushed by spaceship, maybe? She might have survived. I hope so, but it's not like we can go back to look for survivors. Anyway, she knew a few things, and my sick mind forensics managed to piece most of it together from the splinter-self massacre in my brain. All kinds of juicy shit about the Empire, about the Cult, about the Sufferer... but the jackpot is the scoop on Bec."

"You know where it ith," the troll realizes. "And..."

"Keep going. You're getting there."

Sollux swallows. "...it'th the same place. At the epicenter of the meteorth."

"Got it in one."

"What'th the connection?" he wonders out loud. "Do you use ith powerth to pull thtuff from the other univerthe? Or ath a power thource? Ith it a cointhidenthe jutht to bait you into going there?"

Dave spreads his arms helplessly. "Who the fuck knows? All of it is pretty much one big fat question mark at the moment, so don't expect me to have the answers to all the plot holes running amok. Work in progress, as I said."

"The Seer might be able to tell uth thomething," Sollux says. "Have you thtill not talked to them?"

"Maybe, but let's be real: I bet my cape we won't find out until we get there and there's a fancy wall timer smugly ticking down from 4:13 while we scramble around like decapitated chickens counting the seconds to cardiac failure. It's just how it is with Veil gizmos. I've got three years of experience irresponsibly poking suspicious buttons on an operational meteor, I know the drill."

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TG: it all comes together as usual with sburb
TG: im telling you its written in the stars
TG: written in the clouds of skaia
GG: ok how do you know that now?
GG: and how did bec get there???
TG: we have an inside source
TG: *had
TG: as for how apparently they tried to get a bronzeblood to commune with him and he freaked out
TG: noped out of the state just like that
GG: :((
EB: wow, that's kind of really underwhelming?
EB: no nefarious plots or dark majyyks involved?
TA: iim 2orry our liive2 arent entertainiing enough for you
EB: no, i mean, it sounds like good news.
EB: that improves your chances of success, right?
GG: yeah! that means once you get bec we can be there
TT: When do you intend on putting this poorly-concocted resurrection plan into motion?
TG: im not literally kicking doors in and taking names as we type if thats what you mean
TG: i have the body timefrozen in my sylladex so theres technically no rush to get myself neck
deep in more ancient rubbish just yet
TT: John and Jade may not be able to do much from where we are, but as a Seer of Light, my
prognosticative powers are unbound by such things as mere distance. Send me everything you have
and I will do my utmost to assist.
TT: I insist.
TG: im not arguing
TG: all hands on deck
TT: Good.
TT: Because so long as I have anything to do with it, Karkat Vantas is not staying dead.
EB: yeah! i never got a chance to meet karkat in person.
EB: he can't go and die just like that!
GG: weve got your back dave and sollux!!!!

"That's your plan. Go to the one thingular origin of everything wrong with thith planet and 'figure
it out' when you get there."

"Pretty much," Dave says.

Sollux sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose.

He doesn't have a choice, does he? It's not like he can let Karkat rot if there's even a slightest
chance of getting his best friend back.

"Fuck it. Let'th do thith."

He rises to his feet, cracking his knuckles. "It's going to work," he says quietly. Then, louder,
"We're bringing him back. It has to work."

Dave joins him, folding away the turntop with a flick.

"It will."

Chapter End Notes

There we go!

That's the end of YAARFAOE, which sounds stupid when you sound it out as an
acronym. I wonder if anyone saw that coming—any of that, really, with how many
plot points I managed to stuff into this chapter. Unresolved threads abound, but our
heroes have a quest and a direction. You could say that this is more of an act finale
than a proper ending, but Karkat's perspective ends here... for now.

When I started this project I hadn't written fiction of any substantial length in a very
long time, and what I was posting in the olden days makes me cringe even now as I
think back. I'm hinging on the fact that I won't be thinking the exact same thing years
later looking back on this. Either way, if the style I write has changed over the course
of these few months I've been churning this out, that's why.

Regardless, I definitely don't regret wasting months of my vacation having no life and squeezing 100,000 words from my poor brain, and the reception was surprisingly better than I expected, though that's likely in no little part due to my twice-a-week update schedule (read: no life).

Now, about the sequel.

If it comes (which I'm giving pretty good odds) it'll probably come around late November or December and have a significantly slower (but still presumably fixed) update schedule, perhaps weekly, since my studies will be in the way.

I intend for it to follow Dave's perspective, starting with the kids' entry to this world and their subsequent shenanigans, skim through the time frame of YAARFAOE and keep going afterwards picking up where we left off here. Essentially it's going to be a prequel, paraquel (which I just looked up and is possibly not a real word) and sequel all in one.

When it starts, I'll post a link to this story as a new chapter to notify anyone following. I'll also do the same thing when we reach the starting point of this work (when the prequel part ends), and when we reach the end point of this work (when the sequel part starts) for anyone that's not interested in particular parts, which I totally understand.

In the time between now and the [...quel, I'll be posting other Homestuck stuff on this account at my own pace. It's possible that if I'll be struck by the irresistible compulsion to write another longfic that runs past December, in which case I'll try to start the [...quel anyway but with substantially slower updates. I find that unlikely, however, since I'll be busy.

Anyway, it's certainly been an experience for me, and I hope that you enjoyed reading this ridiculous mess I created.

Holy shit this end note is too long.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!