A Hand in Holding Hands

by SkaianRedeemer

Summary

An Ashen fanfic reborn. Unfinished, commentary only Chapters 10+.

No friendships. Ever. That's what Kanaya told her weeks prior, but Rose never really grasped the full of it until she found herself at the end of an Ashen crush. Now the Trolls are growing and the culture gap widening, the demon pounding on the door and the horrors whispering in ears. At the centre of it all: Rose, trying to stand on both sides of the shore: without magic, without guidance and without one of her closest friends thanks to the very gap she is trying to bridge. This fic is dedicated to the Alternian third wheel.

Notes

Pardon the black text in some of the pesterlogs: AO3 is doing something odd (November 24th 2012) and I'm not sure how to fix it. One step at a time, I'm afraid.
• Inspired by A Hand in Holding Hands (Original Draft) by SkaianRedeemer
Trapped. Psychologically: like a deer in the headlights. Physically: sealed in a large metal box, the lights dim and the air stale and metal shock-cold under every footstep. No chance to live. They had no locks on their doors they could not control, and they had free reign of the upper levels, but did not dare stray far from those open cells. Outside the lab was ruin: the shattered Troll Incipisphere and the great, green demon that was Jack Noir, who hunted them. For her part, Rose staved off agoraphobia and cabin fever by carefully monitoring the progress of her fellow inmates, especially the twelve Trolls. She wondered if they realized that they were essentially trapped in their own cradle: the very laboratory in which they had been spawned. Or did it bear them any particular meaning at all?

Rose watched the others, as she would admit it was easier than watching her own behaviour. Psychoanalysis was fulfilling, and a solid distraction from the snake-whisper at the top of her hacked sylladex. She had buried the Thorns of Oglogoth at the top of her tree, and Rose hoped that the sheer nuisance of dumping her entire collection of game junk would deter her from picking at the gnarled root. Twice so far, it had. She kept the Quills of Echidna in her Strife Deck now. Much less powerful, much less dangerous: far more acceptable for polite company. Not that she could call them that. The Trolls had taken to their new Human neighbours much like how they had taken to their imprisonment: voluntarily, though not unanimously willing. True, they all recognized that without all hands, Jack would tear them apart. That was certain. But that hardly meant they had to make life easy for one another, especially when there was no obvious harm at hand. In the lab they were safe to muck and meddle, and there they stayed until safety had corroded their plans to nothing and time had become no more of a matter than a series of ticks on a wall. Rose was not sure how many she had logged since they had entered the Trolls' session. She had reached twenty-six, but Jade had tallied twenty-seven, and Dave was never around to ask for certain.

Dave was always away, and every time he left, Rose felt a sinking feeling in her gut. She wondered if Jade or John ever bothered to read past his coy wink and "Just going for a walk under the stars," considering that there were no stars. She wondered if the Trolls ever noticed how, whenever he left or just preceding, Aradia would emotionlessly unplug herself from her computer, rise with the whirl of motors and disappear alongside. Rose noticed, and she understood that the Maid and Knight of Time were the only reason they had reached so many ticks on the wall. They were the reason Karkat was requisitioning strange data analysed daily and sent to his private inbox. Rose understood. Dave and Aradia were using the data to see Jack coming. With it, they were able to stop him from finding the lab – how, Rose could not imagine. When the data was lacking, they would disappear for even longer. She knew they waited for him, hour after hour, knowing that a moment's lapse in their patrol could mean blood that could never be restored. After her suspicions had been aroused, Rose had begun to watch the data, and applied it to what she knew of Jack from her own session. He was learning. He had drawn from his prototypes and grown in power while the sixteen of them cowered in the corner. Dave and Aradia might fight him to a standstill, but Rose suspected that if he ever found the rest of them, disorganized and ill-prepared, they would not all make it out alive.

Rose felt bitter about the whole situation, considering the power she had once wielded. She had put the Thorns aside on strong urging, after Jade had pulled her, barely alive, from her duel with Jack, but without them it was obvious that she had fallen well behind the others. Some days, she wondered if her hesitation was responsible for Jack's continued presence. Some days, she wondered the opposite. The Thorns whispered to her in the calmest of days. What good could come from answering the Dark Gods, after all she had seen? So Rose watched the others, mostly as distraction, and especially during free time.

"Egbert, you scrape of alien fecal matter on sole of Fate's ugliest boot, stop trying to piss me off. I've
been over your archives at least twice, and it's obvious that the pinnacle of your human 80s filmmaking was John Travolta's hit sequel *Staying Alive*.

John and Karkat tended to hog the TV they had alchemized, and would watch it while lazing out on the couch they had parked in one corner of the computer lab. The TV and couch were two of several items Sollux had retrieved from their homes, and if they ever needed more, they could always pull from the grist generating setup he and Equius had prepared in the upper levels. For their free time, Jade and Nepeta tended to run rampant in the Underlab. Terezi preferred to bogart Dave when she caught him at home, and would drag him to the roof. Others found a different sort of way to spend their time, which they had all come to call "going outside." "Going outside" was partly a thinly-veiled innuendo, but was primarily the go-phrase for a private date. The rock outside the lab was the best any of them could do for variety, and the Veil could be anything you wanted it to be. For Sollux and Feferi, or Karkat and Terezi, it could be a place to walk together under the cloak of timeless void and pretend there was some beauty in which to conspire. Even Aradia and Equius went Outside from time to time. Who knew what they found in the open air. Beauty? Or perhaps a foulness in which to bicker and snip at one another, in good ambience. One way or another, it served.

Rose had no interest in dating any of her fellow prisoners, at least not out of hand. For her free time, she had abused the public alchemiter to make yarn or fresh journals and pens, but routine soon demanded more of her. Luckily it was not all dull. John and Jade were still around, Feferi was worth the odd conversation, and Rose was able to rely on daily chats with Kanaya as they worked on Karkat's never-ending data scans. So long as they kept to their work, things were simple. But life in the lab was beginning to change. It had all began the day Rose marked off her third tick, and it had spiralled from there.

"Are they older, maybe?" Rose had asked Karkat, the day after they were positive what was going on.

"We're all the same age!" he had said, gruff and terse. He had not really been in a chatting mood. She was interrupting his lunch, but she had figured Karkat was not going to be in a better chatting mood at any other time of the day.

"That's why I'm asking you. Is it possible you landed in a different order after the Reckoning?"

"Well… maybe, but you're talking days!" He had gestured at her with his deep-fat fried leg of hopbeast. "Look, I had twelve slimy grubs climbing over me. I had a slimy version of myself on my foot and someone crawling up my pant leg—" Terezi had cackled. "…I think I remember what went down about as well as you'd expect."

Change had come to the lab with all the subtlety of John's favourite hammer. It started with Tavros, Eridan and Vriska as they began to, for lack of a better term, grow up. Rose had often wondered just how much older Dave was going to become thanks to his constant time travelling, ever since he had started going to John for shaving cream (which their Heir suspiciously had in bulk). Troll aging was more drastic. Rose first caught ear of it when she found Eridan in a fight with Karkat, and Eridan's voice had begun to warp to a hideous, deep rasp, like one possessed. Karkat, with an astounding, casual shrug of his shoulder, called it "post-wriggling penultimate moult" and returned to John to pick up watching *Xanadu*.

Eridan and Tavros were the biological victims. Rose could not think of two more opposed to be suffering so in kind. First there was the voice change. This had progressed from a rasp to an undercurrent hiss the other Trolls did not seem to hear, but gave the human prey animals the ventriloquist impression that the speaker was whispering at them from another direction. Beyond that, they were growing, and worse: they had begun to shed skin flakes. Karkat's inner neat-freak
soon set to work, using a broom as a baton and whip combined to get them to clean up after themselves.

The itching was terrible, and often prepared the stage for the next change: a deep hormonal one that brought out sharp bursts of rage. Tavros mostly buried his rage if he felt the need at all. Rose saw only one, when he caught a terrible moulting itch on some still-sensitive skin trapped under the edge of his robot legs, and it had taken Equius over an hour to free him. Tavros had called Equius names none of them had even imagined he knew, and their mechanic replied only with redoubled work and sweat. Surprising to Rose, these violent waves, if not the changes in general, had begun to attract moirail-like attentions from the other Trolls in curious, pale flirtations that Rose was stretched to recognize. Gamzee had offered the unusually-furious Tavros a free night's rest on his horn pile, and Karkat had silenced one of Eridan's outbursts with a smack to the head and a series of threats that sounded almost genuinely concerned.

The new bodies emerging from the moult were surprising. Overall, they kept their basic shape: they would just as much resemble their teen selves as any human. But there were differences if one was willing to look. The boys were becoming larger in proportion to humans, and more built. With clothes on there was less to make out, but intimate living conditions bred a certain disregard for decencies, especially when one's lower body was constantly under mechanical repair. The skin on Tavros' bare chest met at sharper angles than Rose knew a muscular boy's should. The skin also seemed sublimely changed in a way that implied physical armour. It was clear that Rose was seeing her allies transform into apex predators.

But the worst was Vriska. While she still engaged in a healthy and active routine of spiteful jabs with Terezi and a worrying tail of John, her primary associates those days were her ex-kismesis and Tavros. Seeing her circle go through this sort of puberty had a symbiotic effect on Vriska's dreamself body. She too began to grow, shift in voice and, when her imagination got the better of her, itch and shed from time to time. While Sollux lisped that he was thankful that he wouldn't be "trapped in this stupid wriggling body for the rest of my life," it was clear that Vriska's situation was somehow off. As Rose had only seen adult trolls on computer screens and movie posters, she could not put her finger on the details, but Karkat was perfectly happy to put his boot through it instead.

"Hey. Moron," he had said, clapping Vriska upside the head with the butt end of his Broom of Office. "Just because you're making shit up as you go doesn't mean you don't have to clean the fuck up after yourself. Eridan! Tell your boyfriend that he either starts growing like a girl or he has to clean up moult flakes like the rest of the boys."

Vriska had blushed up like a Christmas light, and reappeared the very next morning, drastically changed. Her shedding, as Karkat had implied, stopped entirely. The appearance of armour was gone, but the muscles had not, and she had shot up almost a foot overnight. Rose also got the impression that Vriska's dreamself had replaced her teeth with a new set of something not entirely bone: the new ones caught the light at some angles and looked particularly sharp. Vriska did not hide that she was growing new finger nails as well, though the word "claws" might be more correct given how she kept them groomed.

Rose had discussed the change with Kanaya. It had been one of their long nights, and they traded questions about Troll and Human gender roles, stereotypes and prejudices, especially considering the Troll's arguably-vestigial sexes. Any discomfort Rose had had evaporated over time – it tended to with Kanaya.

"She'll probably get back at Karkat for it, mind," Kanaya added near the end of the conversation. They were alone in the main lab, Kanaya browsing the Human internet as Rose sat on the desk alongside, one leg swinging back and forth.
"I don't suppose lashing out at your leader is exactly standard procedure," Rose had noted.

"It's probably closer than any human equivalent. On the other hand, Karkat understands that we're under a lot of stress right now. Some relief would be a help."

"Lashing out is relief?" Rose asked.

Kanaya had half-grinned, but she hid it to maintain her usual look as the neutral auxiliatrix. "It can work."

But the morning did not see any sort of revenge ploy. Karkat could be found, as ever, curled up on the couch. He had started the morning straight off with John, watching some cinematic atrocity where a character preached that "The gun is good!" but "The bone bulge is evil!" Jade was in one side of the room, playing games with Nepeta and their growing collection of alchemized toys and dolls, which Nepeta found endlessly fascinating. Kanaya was still in her room. Everyone else, including Dave and Aradia, were watching the three pubescent trolls scream at one another against the north wall. They were the laboratory's surprise alarm clock that morning, and had a dead zone around them of at least five feet.

"Listen, you little pus-sucking insect! If you don't open your mouth and give me an answer…"

Tavros had raised his arms up between him and Vriska. "Vriska, I'd really appreciate if you... uh..."

Eridan stepped closer, clapping his hand on Vriska's shoulder. "vris, maybe if you'd come and turn that rage somewhere productive..."

Rose squirmed. Eridan must have been taking this fight personally if he was busting out his tone. She and her friends had found that all the Trolls had a vocal tone: a sort of throaty, heavily-accented warp in the voice that they used when they were impassioned in their own distinct ways. They did so casually, as though someone changing their tone of voice mid-sentence to one unique to them was the most natural thing in the world: Karkat's tone would change when he was shouting, Nepeta's when she was roleplaying. Whether it was voluntary or biological Rose did not know, but it ran ruin with the undercurrent hiss.

Vriska pushed Eridan aside with a jab from her finger. "Shut up, Eridan, if you were worth shouting at, you'd have known a loooooooong time ago. Tavros, d8mmit, open your mouth or I'll show you wh8t productive rage looks like!"

She decided to act on her threat and hoisted him, robot legs and all, an inch off the ground. She held him there for almost five seconds, before he proved too heavy even for her and she was forced to drop him, to the audible protest of the floor.

"uH, gEEZE VRISKA, i REALLY DIDN'T THINK THIS WOULD BOTHER YOU SO MUCH."

"Spine, Travros! Don't you dare open your mouth again unless you've grown some nerve!"

"I..."

Rose could not help but stare. Vriska was still like a train wreck with her explosions, where the outbursts of someone like Karkat had long since become routine. It was hard to look away, especially when Vriska was spouting off oxymoronic demands at the top of her lungs with absolutely no sign of self-awareness. But to Rose's surprise, only the humans seemed to keep their interest in the fight. Karkat had turned back to his film (he had an oddball respect for Troll Sean Connery, red diaper costume notwithstanding), Nepeta had never really left her game and Gamzee outright
wandered over to his computer within the fight's perimeter to start whatever constituted his digital routine. Feferi continued to watch the fight out of the corner of her eye, fingers twitching. At one point Rose thought she heard Sollux say "Don't..." without looking up, but Feferi had already composed herself, and that was the end of it.

Eridan attempted to interpose himself between Vriska and Tavros, which was not easy given how little ground Vriska had left between them. "Mindfang, why don't you just—"

Vriska's off-hand shot out toward his neck and lifted him into the air. She made a point not to meet his eyes. "Didn't I tell you to cool it with the FLARP names?" she threatened in a whisper. The hissing undercurrent that ran through all three of their voices suddenly became worse. Rose saw Jade and John shudder, and Strider try to repress his own. In Rose's case, it was as though she heard the sound of Vriska's whisper coming not just from Vriska's mouth, but also a second time, over Rose's own shoulder. A small trickle of purple blood seeped into Eridan's scarf and down Vriska's pinky.

"Cut it out!" Jade shouted from one side of the room. Vriska ignored her. Rose instinctively checked with John, but there seemed to be nothing he could do. Karkat was indifferent. True, John's pull with the Trolls was limited without Karkat's backing, but his pull with Vriska might have just been enough...

"Hey, Tavros," Vriska said as Eridan swung a wild kick at her. "If you're just gonna sit there with your mouth shut, hold your head still. I just had the 8est idea."

Tavros winced at her request. In doing so, he unintentionally lowered his horns, which suited Vriska's needs to a tee. She slapped a hand on his head to hold him there, and tried to raise Eridan up toward a horn-tip.

"Hey!" Rose snapped.

Rose did not stop to wonder why the three of them were up so early, though if she had, she might have thought twice about doing what she was about to do. She should have given more thought to what had brought them to fight, or should have imagined what might be going through their heads, but she did not. In hindsight, more than anything else she wished she had kept a better memory of her and Kanaya's eighteenth pesterchum conversation. It had been a critical quid pro quo conversation, a back and forth exchange of cultural data in hopes of stripping any future conversations of misunderstandings, exactly like the one Rose was about to make. But she did not, and instead she stormed up to Vriska.

"Drop him, Vriska," she ordered.

Vriska reacted very slowly, taking her hand first off of Tavros' head and then making a dramatic slow turn towards Rose. She lowered Eridan for need of his weight, but did not release him. Vriska took up so much time doing so, in fact, that Rose was able to take advantage of it.

"Sit down, Tavros," Rose said, trying to be calm.

"Rose, I don't really think—"

"Tavros: Sit."

He did as he was bid, walking away and taking his seat carefully at the side of the room. Rose did not watch him go. She had to keep her eye on Vriska, even though it meant breaking another one of the lab's unspoken rules. "Never look Vriska in the eye. Never." Vriska tossed back her hair with obvious disdain. Rose kept eye contact.
"What did you say to me?" Vriska asked.

Eridan decided to throw in his own chip. "Don't..." he gurgled. "Don't need your help here."

"Quiet," Rose ordered. Vriska stepped forward and leaned over Rose to emphasize her increased height, a sneer on her face that showed a full set of her terrifying new teeth. Rose was not entirely sure how much of Vriska's new appearance was genetic and how much was just her gruesome imagination born real in her dreamself, but there was everything unpleasant about standing in the shadow of a would-be alpha Troll.

Rose slowly raised her hand to Vriska's face, pointed to the floor. As she did, she double-checked her grip. **Do not draw your needlewands**, she thought in mantra. Vriska had a quarter of the echeladder on her. Anything short of the Thorns would be absurd. **Don't tempt Fate while she still has her dice.** "Put... him... down."

Rose did not know it, but now everyone was looking at her. Nepeta stalled in mid-play, a plastic dinosaur dangling from one hand. Gamzee even looked away from his YouTube Poop. And Kanaya had finally arrived. She was completely absorbed, and watched with her arms crossed as she blinked away sleep. Vriska started laughing and, intentionally or otherwise, her grip on Eridan tightened. Rose's could not help but wonder if having Eridan at her mercy had re-lit some caliginous flame in Vriska's heart, and that was dangerous. With Vriska it was hard to tell, beyond that things could shift at any moment.

Rose set her own teeth and, pointing to Eridan, she slammed her hand down in the air. "Now!"

Vriska's expression shifted from confidence to surprise in an instant, but she recovered, and shrugged. "...Fine," she said, as though it were no concern of her own. "Gamzee!" Gamzee took to his feet, face still stuck in a grin, and Vriska tossed Eridan straight into him. With one last look at Rose, she tossed her hair back again and walked away.

Rose caught her breath at once and turned to leave, wishing she had never even gotten out of bed. But before she could leave, John caught her eye with a not-at-all subtle wave of his arms. He pointed back to Eridan, who was seething at Rose with black hatred. Rose caught John's meaning at once.

"Eridan," she called, exhausted. "Come on, let's have that looked at."

Eridan reached reflexively to his wounds. "What? Why?"

Rose tried – very hard, with limited results – to sound honest. "Because I'm concerned."

Eridan took a moment to really take this in, before he finally said: "...aw, man..." John gave her a thumbs up and Karkat smacked his arm. Rose calmly rolled her eyes at both of them as her deflated, would-be kismesis limped over to her. But it was hard to avoid the looks of the others, as they returned to their work. Eridan muttered darkly about how he had been upstaged, but he seemed a touch less honest about it. Stranger was Tavros, who did not return to work, but watched her with a curious look that only just began at gratitude. Vriska simply sat at her keyboard, tracing her finger in circles above her desk and muttering. Kanaya watched Rose the closest of all.

It would be a day and a half before anyone told her she had just done the clubbed equivalent of walking in and kissing them each hard on the lips.
-- tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering grimAuxiliatrix [GA] --

GA: Rose
GA: What Is The Precise Nature Of Your Relationship With The John Human
TT: Uh
TT: Yes, hello.
TT: Nice to see you again, no I'm fine, how are you?
GA: Theres No Need To Point Out That I Am Being Brusque
GA: Doing So Was Completely Intentional
TT: You figure it's a good idea to start our eighteenth conversation by immediately asking me intimate personal details?
GA: I Was Hoping We Could Talk About Several Items Of Cultural Import That Have Been Gnawing At Me
GA: And That By Approaching The Subject Directly I Would Dispel Any Later Awkwardness Caused By The Nature Of My Questions
GA: And Yours In Turn To Me
GA: Also I Must Admit To A Certain Amount Of Cold Feet
TT: And you chose to do this while I was engaged with two Giclopsi and a ten-storey Lesser Shoggoth wearing a foot-tall princess hat?
GA: Essentially
TT: Why?
GA: Arent You Still Typing
TT: ... 
TT: All right.
TT: What did you want to ask?
GA: Several Things If You Have The Time
TT: I suppose. The Shoggoth's pustules keep bursting into Garnet Imps and their high defence is going to keep me occupied.
GA: I Would Like To Think My Conversations Do Not Have To Be Accompanied By Macabre Busywork To Keep Your Interest At This Point
TT: You're right, I apologize.
GA: Its Fine
GA: Several Of The Topics I Would Like To Broach Run The Risk Of Provoking Similar Insult
GA: Though Such Insult Would Be Likewise Unintentional
GA: So Long As We Keep In Mind That We Ask In The Name Of Mutual Understanding Theres Really No Harm Whatsoever
GA: If Thats All Right
TT: Questions like whether or not Egbert is my boyfriend.
GA: Is That The Label You Would Use
TT: No, no, wait.
TT: Start over.
TT: What is it, precisely, that you're trying to ask?
GA: This Particular Question Pertains To My Confusion Over Your Team's Mutual Non-Biological Relationships
GA: As I understand you have known one another for quite some time.
TT: Yes, several years.
GA: Precisely.
TT: ...
GA: What.
TT: This appears to be one of those situations where I am unable to understand a high-concept thought because of a basic misunderstanding.
TT: I'm going to answer your original question in hopes of illuminating this one.
TT: If I had to ascribe a label, I would call John, Jade and Dave my closest friends.
TT: Well, prior to the apocalypse, I suppose. The qualifier has lost some meaning.
GA: So you do not cast romantic aspirations on any of them.
TT: No.
TT: Did I or one of them give some impression to the contrary?
GA: No. Your relationships just seem too tightly bound by my reading.
TT: Perhaps I should turn the question back on you.
TT: How would you define your relationship with, say...
TT: terminallyCapricious.
GA: With Gamzee.
TT: Yes.
TT: I gauge your relationship is not romantic, and that is the context in which I would use "friend."
GA: Ah, I see our problem.
GA: You're correct in that my relationship with TC isn't romantic but I would not call him my friend.
TT: Perhaps I've selected a bad example?
GA: No.
GA: Well yes Gamzee is a bad example in that he would be happy to call all of us friends but allow me to explain.
GA: Trolls do not form friendships.
GA: It is not an relationship we form naturally except in a few genetic aberrations.
GA: To want friends is more a form of troll disease.
TT: No friends?
TT: Ever?
GA: That is correct.
TT: But...
GA: What is it.
TT: I'm sorry, I am simply trying to absorb this.
TT: If I may say so in the interest of scientific neutrality, I may be experiencing a reaction akin to yours on learning Humans only have a single romantic relationship.
GA: You find the difference that fundamental.
TT: Yes, certainly.
TT: Friendship is a key relationship in human culture.
TT: Alternating position with familial depending on specific culture and generation.
TT: Neither of which you experience.
GA: Correct.
TT: At all?
GA: As I said.
GA: No.
TT: Not even for your... and now I am at a loss of words... for your co-Sburb players?
GA: Sgrub.
GA: And no.
GA: Well technically Arachnidsgrip was once my Moirail as far as relationships are concerned.
GA: But I fear that romance has long since reached its end.
TT: What word would you use to describe the rest?
TT: I'm sorry, I've started my inquiries out of turn.
GA: No I understand.
GA: As for my allies Karkat remains my leader and thus deserving of highest respect.
GA: And I suppose I have a lingering sense of feudal duty towards Cuttlefishculler.
GA: But by and large I suppose I consider the others merely acquaintances or allies.
GA: Under normal circumstances our mutual relation would break off once our mission
GA: Or insurrection.
GA: Or ended.
TT: What you're going through is hardly normal circumstances.
GA: Certainly but you can't expect generations of social structure to collapse immediately under unusual weight.
GA: There may be some trolls capable of forming friendships such as Tc or Karkat but I do not expect that kind of change within our generation it would be too strange.
GA: The social imperative of romantic relationships over non has extended for too long for that.
TT: Does this have something to do with kismeses killing one another and limiting the pool of potential mates?
GA: Yes exactly.
GA: You are already grasping it.
GA: If it helps your visualization I personally have never felt friend-feelings toward another troll.
TT: So your only interpersonal relationships are the formal ones you form for romantic purposes?
GA: Essentially though formative relationships exist.
GA: Perspective matesprits moirails etc.
TT: Yes, like the first few dates, or casual dating, on earth.
GA: Also trial relationships to test someone of interest for multiple quadrants but that's a mercenary way to put it.
GA: That's more just a thing that happens in casual association than a formal type of relationship.
TT: I believe I understand though I admit to having a great deal of trouble wrapping my head around it.
TT: But wait.
TT: This is curious. You have several times insinuated that you hoped for a chance to extend our personal relationship in the future.
TT: Which I reciprocated.
TT: Am I now to understand that you said this with ulterior motives?
GA: Pardon.
GA: Your mood appears soured.
GA: Have I provoked.
TT: Seeing as how all troll relationships extend into romantic branches!
GA: Well certainly.
GA: Wait.
GA: I Believe I'm Coming Understand The Source Of Your Anger
TT: THAT is the
TT: oiewrfw
TT: THAT is the IMPS!
GA: Well One Could Say You're Somewhat Preoccupied
TT: You've got a funny word for "dogpiled."
GA: Heh GA: But All The Same You Made The Misassumption That My Proposal
Was Intended Towards Friendship
GA: I'm Very Sorry
GA: That Was Never
GA: Ah
GA: My Intention
GA: As I Truly Hope You Can Now See
GA: Rose
TT: I
TT: Back.
TT: Give me a moment.
GA: I Understand
GA: Your Screen Is Obscured
TT: Yes but also to gather my thoughts.
TT: *Thoughts.
TT: Goodness, even the mic is gummed.
TT: Why haven't I learned to carry a wiping cloth with me?
TT: No, I feel I'm the one who should apologize.
TT: We've both just been the victims of the misapprehensions you were worried about
at the start of this conversation.
TT: But I'm clearly the one more at fault.
GA: How So
TT: Beyond the immediate rude reaction?
TT: For which I am quite ashamed and apologize.
GA: No Offense Taken
GA: I Did Say I Expected These Sorts Of Misunderstandings
GA: By Making These Trips In This Conversation I Figure Well Avoid Making Them
At A More Critical Moment
TT: All the same. But more than that:
TT: Your assessment that I could be a valid partner in a romantic partnership is far more
valid than my baseless assessment that you could be a partner in a human friendship.
TT: Pardon, that sounded callous.
GA: Do You Think So
TT: I do. I insinuated that you are not capable of friendship.
GA: At The Risk Of Sounding Rude Through Repetition
GA: I Am Not
TT: So you say.
TT: All the same: love, hate, restraint and support are things humans are capable of.
TT: Damn, it's like I couldn't be approaching this more clinically.
TT: Your... and now I can't say "friendship"... Our conversations over the past few days
have meant a great deal to me.
TT: If you were/are... uh...
TT: Honestly offering a chance at a relationship, I would be honoured to seek some
more mature relationship with you in the future.
TT: If you can give me time to settle naturally into a quadrant.
GA: Of Course
GA: I Had Never Assumed Otherwise The Process Is Quite Natural
GA: In Truth I Was Afraid You Might Not Be Capable Of Some Quadrants In A
Reverse Of Our Current Discussion
TT: Possible. The actions seem valid but I can't vouch for the emotional response.
GA: Id Hope You Dont Feel Pressured To Do It
TT: Not at all. Your perspective on the relationship hasn't changed, and I haven't felt
pressured before.
GA: I Suppose
GA: I Must Confess That This Is A Relief
GA: You Had Frightened Me For A Moment
TT: I'm sorry, it is not a very good new beginning for our yet-unqualified relationship.
TT: My turn.
TT: Earlier I used the word "honoured" to describe my feelings, but this seems so...
TT: Emotionally detached?
GA: Perhaps But Do You Really Feel A Need To Assign An Emotion At Present
GA: After All If We Do Feel Close Enough To Form A Tighter Bond In The Future
There Are Four Different Regions In Which To Form That Bond
GA: One Of Which Varies Immensely In Nature Depending On The Rivalry It Coaches
Or Is Coached By
TT: I see. It felt it important to not be rude from the beginning, you understand.
GA: Naturally
GA: And If I May Ask You A Related Question In Turn
TT: Go ahead.
GA: Your Closest Friends
GA: What Word Would You Use To Describe Your Feelings Towards Them
TT: "Love"
GA: Would You
TT: It's one of the correct definition of the term, though I suppose the English language
tends to use it to favour the romantic and the familial. The root emotion is at least
correct.
GA: Hm
TT: What is it?
GA: Im Just Taking In How Fundamental The Bond Is To You
GA: If Thats The Word You Would Choose
TT: You use it?
GA: Not Unlike Yours It Encompasses The Lot
GA: Yet Id Not Really Thought About It In Terms Of Friendship The Idea Is
Completely Alien To Me
TT: I have a similar misunderstanding of kismesissitude.
TT: It is a hurdle we'll all overcome in the end.
TT: I certainly hope none of our differences will strike as an obstacle. Especially not
between you and I.
GA: Yes
GA: Thank You
TT: I would like to ask you another question if that is all right, but I fear there will be a
delay.
TT: The Shoggoth's transparent core is about to burst.
TT: And I am about to discover what horrible prize I will find admit the grist.
TT: With any luck it will simply expel another Ogre but I have seen far worse from
these piñatas.
GA: I Understand
GA: I Once Discovered A Greater Rust Shoggoth Concealing A Lesser Containing A
"roz wwe need to talk"

Rose jumped a foot, and as she was on her bed at the time, she bounced for a moment in a way too comedic to match her shock. It took Rose a few seconds to realize that Eridan was not actually in her room with her, and came to her senses, furious. Of course he was not in the room: the doors were all fingerprint locked. But that was what she had heard. She immediately tried to put it out of mind.

Rose mustered her manners best she could. "Eridan, I'll grant you that it's dawn," Rose said, checking her clock. "…Precisely dawn. But I was up… very late, and… couldn't at least wait until breakfast?"

"No way, Roz!" he insisted. Rose squirmed. The auditory hallucination was very good: the undercurrent in his voice, even muffled, made it sound as though Eridan were almost sitting in her lap, which was more than she could stand in bed. She took to her feet as he continued. "I don't see why I should have to keep to your schedule when you could just as easily keep to mine."

"Charming," Rose muttered. Eridan had had all of two days to talk to her about her accidental ashen intervention, but of course he would come at the crack of dawn. Rose briefly considered changing out of her pyjamas: her once-purposefully, now-unintentionally mutilated Squiddles t-shirt paired with a set of old flannel bottoms. Eridan pounded again on the door, and Rose decided that any second spent not curbing him was just going to make things progressively worse and worse. She went to the door and hit the button to slide it up.

"What?" she demanded.

"Well, uh..." he said. He was fully dressed, with green flecks of drying sopor slime still stuck to the fabric, as though he had not even bothered to change in the morning. He had been completely taken aback by her prompt response, and began to mumble: "kinda... embarasin"

It might have only been the fact that he had interrupted a rare pleasant night's rest, but Rose was too cross to care. "You're here about Vriska," she said, trying not to sound like she was going to enjoy the taste as she chewed him out.

"Oh, you know?" he said, suddenly eager. "Wow, okay, then we can get right on it! Come on, we can talk strategy."

Rose shut the door on him. It rolled down on its rotors and Eridan, scrambling, caught it with his hand. His muscles flexed and the door halted with a metallic shriek that ran through the walls in every direction. Eridan then fought the howling grind as the gears pushed back against him, to no avail. Rose jammed the up button, and the whole affair slammed into the roof faster than it should have allowed.
"Eridan!" she snapped, not that it mattered as he did not seem at all perturbed. She really had to keep in mind that behind his whining, Eridan was just as top-echeladder and mature as Vriska.

"Rose, are you okay?" called Jade through their shared wall.

"I'm fine Jade," Rose called. "Go back to bed!"

But Jade did not: instead, she emerged from her room, already dressed, and poked her head in behind Eridan. "Are you sure?" she asked.

Rose lowered her eyes at Eridan. "I'm fine," she growled.

Jade shrugged and left at her own pace. As Rose watched her friend leave, Eridan attempted to cross into Rose room, and Rose had to slam a hand into the doorframe. "If the next words out of your mouth aren't 'I'll get Equius,' they had better be fast ones."

Seeing Rose enraged at him seemed to remind Eridan exactly why he had came, and a hand crept up to his mouth. He began to chew at his nails. "Roz, you've really got to see things my way here. We're completely fuckin helpless don't you see? I can see it in her eyes, because I can see it… deep in my owwn."

Rose lowered her guard, just slightly, surprised to see Eridan wide-eyed and trembling. "What are you talking about?"

"Vris! Can't you see we're five seconds from takin' each other's heads off? We'll be sittin there eatin lunch nice an orderly and all of a sudden we'll be gougin at each others with our forks an…"

"Oh, god…"

Eridan was not perturbed. "…an then one of us'll knock the other out and drown em in their own sopor!"

Rose raised a hand for silence, checked her temple and then tried to restore order. "Why… why, if you were eating lunch, were you anywhere near a vat of sopor?"

"I dunno," Eridan admitted. "Maybe she invited me over to her room for lunch peace talks and then broke the truce!" Rose threw up her hands and walked away. Eridan followed. "You don't know her like I do, Roz, she's cunning like that!" he said, coming to a stop next to the wall where she displayed her drawings. Rose assumed he was taking a look. "Roz, I don't wanna kill Vris."

Because that's the likely outcome, Rose thought, and she began to shuffle through her drawers to find a proper set of clothes.

"It's not just that we need every gun against Jack," Eridan said. "But she and I used to be pretty important to one another. I remember the day we met: this fuckin landdweller just sailing up and sinking me like it wwas the simplest thing in the wworld and laughin like a bloody hellmurderin lusus beast. That's when I knew we'd be destined for a rivalry of legends."

"And then she broke up with you," Rose summarized.

"Well... yeah. So?" He followed her in and rested a hand on the foot of her bed so he could lean to his comfort. "I figure with your brains we could work this back together until she and I are just in a nice, comfortable rivalry."

"Mm-hm," Rose muttered, as she picked out a top. "And Vriska agrees with this little plan of yours,
Eridan casually pushed back his hair. "Nah, I've come to you first, Roz! I respect you."

"Eh?" Rose was not sure if she wanted his respect, but Eridan helped her with her feelings by refusing to stop talking when the getting was good.

"The way I see it, Eridan," Rose said, not looking at him any more. "You and Vriska have both done a perfect job of alienating everyone else in your lives. You truly are made for one another, and clearly you don't need my help. So, yes," she said, stepping onto the transportalizer. "I'm going to go..."
Eridan screwed up his face, the frills at the sides of his face twitching. "No wh--"

Rose vanished into the air, and any smug joy she had over spiting Eridan evaporated as she was enwrapped in the shadow-frost of the void. She shut her eyes. Rose did not know how the transportalizers worked but she had the sneaking suspicion from repeat uses that it was connected to the furthest ring. Even as she tried to shut her mind, the voices spoke louder than ever, and the second of transportalization seemed to extend across minutes. To actually listen to the voices would be a poor idea. Rose knew that, perhaps better than the others, but she kept quiet about the Gods being there in the void. The transportalizers were used too often in everyone's average day, and besides, they were harmless. Still, Rose knew they were nearby: the Gods. But she also knew that these ones were just Middling Gods (they were too small to be Horrorterrors), and that they were only peripherally interested in her or the others. Her friends had already taken measures to deal with the Terrors: since the Noble Circle could only best reach them when they were asleep, that vulnerability had been tended to specifically. As to the Middling Gods, while Rose might have been vulnerable to them once upon a time, being burned by the true Horrors had a way of blunting one to the rest.

A few of them tried all the same. One promised power, another virility, and so on and so on, all in the eldritch tongue. Rose had long lost interest in that eager lot, and had begun to focus on the others: the ones she heard in the background, that were entirely disinterested in her and yet continued to speak. Perhaps they spoke to others, in other places yet unseen, or other times. Sometimes, Rose felt she heard her own name. Some of the voices belonged to mutterers. One of those mutterers always seemed to be reading out loud: some days scripture, others great, branching blocks of programming code. Others lectured. That day, one seduced, and one barked sharp orders. All to no reply.

In her fiction, Rose had once written about a great council-hall, filled with the world's wisest wizards, spell-weavers and magical beings alike, all gathered in a grand room of marble and glowing stones in aesthetic glory. There, acoustics had been perfectly arranged and magic and architecture combined to allow the fair distribution of knowledge to all (that had specifically allowed to attend). Here, in the Furthest Rim, Rose had found a Hall of the Learned, but had found it to be more like a smoking-room. The void seemed cramped: for its seemingly infinite size, to Rose it always felt like she had entered a place with no room to sit or stand. She felt the impression of a thousand pressing bodies, all clustered around her, but not noticing her presence. They spoke without turn or rule, smothering voice and breath unless you listened very close, and if they did not turn away. When she was with them, Rose encountered a sense like scent: the smell of people and animals, of oily hair and opium smoke, a sensation that pressed too close, and came from those towering above. Sometimes more than others, the sensation was truly pressing, and on those days, Rose was aware that she was nothing to those Gods. She was a child to their musings and an infant to their power, and though some voices offered great temptations day for day, they seemed to ignore her all at once.

There was a Troll there, today. A stranger.

Rose reappeared in the central hub and had to stumble to stand, and her ears popped. There, she rubbed at her eyes and dazedly observed the hub: twelve labelled transporters around a central hub. She pressed on to the central spoke, which led directly to the main lab those days, thanks to Sollux. Partially recovered, Rose hoped that speed might keep Eridan from tracking her, not that she had many other places to go. With any luck, he would get discouraged and go back home.

From the centre pad, Rose was taken again into the darkness, where she once again caught a glimpse of the strange Troll in the void. Rose stared at this stranger, but he or she did not seem to notice her until the last possible moment, when they locked eyes just as Rose was taken away. All Rose could
make out was the Troll's characteristic candy-corn horns, which were moulded in a shape unlike those of her companions, and that Troll's eyes were strange, though Rose could not put her finger on why.

"Good morning," Kanaya called. It took Rose a moment to realize she had returned to reality, and that the speaker was to her left. Rose once again blinked away sleep. Transportalization always made her a little tired.

Rose found the main lab as she and the others always left it: twelve computers in a square; horn pile in the southwest; incredibly satisfying burn marks to the southeast. The burns lay alongside Karkat and John's television and couch setup. As often, there was a four-horned programmer left happily forgotten in his chair to the north. West of the horn pile was the door to the rusty, poorly maintained hall that lead Outside, if one were inclined to go. Past John and Karkat's home theatre was the exit to the lab's cafeteria. Besides Sollux, Kanaya was only one other person in the lab at that poor hour.

Rose shuffled over towards Kanaya, intending to sit down, but a glance at Kanaya's computer screen confirmed to Rose that she was not ready for work. "Gfm morning," Rose muttered, to her friend as much as the prospect.

"I…" Kanaya stifled a laugh. "…don't know?"

"Good morning," Rose repeated, as she hopped up onto the desk beside Kanaya's computer. "Or evening, to you, as it were."

"Thank you, to you too." Kanaya flicked off her monitor and shifted over to the sketch pad set on her lap. There was no need for her to focus on Rose: they were both quite used to carrying on with work in concert with one of their talks.

"Did you sleep well?" Kanaya asked. "Or should I even ask?"

"Is it that bad?" Rose asked, touching at her face. She picked through her inventory, looking for a mirror she thought she had put in there once.

Kanaya shrugged in apology. "You normally wear some makeup. What happened?"

"Eridan Ampora happened," Rose said with a sigh. She turned to look at Kanaya, perhaps for a reaction, and noticed that her friend looked far worse than her. Kanaya was clearly exhausted, though she worked on a new sketch, entirely unperturbed. Now up close, Rose could see green bloodshot spidering at the edges of her friend's eyes. "…You've been here since I left you last night, haven't you?"

"I have not," Kanaya insisted, to her sketch pad.

"You have. You're a bigger mess than me. I hate to think you went without your dawn and evening showers. You tend to break down without them. I insist you take a moment." Rose was glad she gotten Kanaya's terms for the waking hours instead of her own: evening instead of morning. What was the point in a jibe if you got all the terms wrong?

"Oh, I do not 'break,'" Kanaya protested, but Rose was on her at once.

"There's no need to be hide it, I've been cast aside for your hygiene more than once. The last time you did it, you tried to distract me with one of your horrible novels."

"That's exaggerating," Kanaya said. She looked up just enough to catch Rose's eyes, and flourished her pencil in Rose's face.
Rose batted away the pencil. "It is not. Your novels are abysmal."

"A fair shade over yours. At least mine are legible," Kanaya replied.

Rose smiled condescendingly. "'Legible.' The word you're looking for is 'identical.'"

Kanaya glared back at Rose, before she gradually began to break into a laugh. "...Well, I didn't break last night, did I? I'll have you know that I used to spend my days covered in soil, so if regular bathing is a neurosis for you, Doctor Lalonde, I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you. I'm too busy to bathe today, so I'm afraid you're not going to get anything from me but filth and rank for the rest of the day." She swept her pencil free of Rose's grip and tapped her on the nose with the rounded end.

Rose harrumphed. "Well if we're done playing silly games: what's keeping you so busy?" Behind her, Rose head the transportalizer work as Tavros entered the room and headed to his computer.

"Sketching," Kanaya said. Pretending she was looking over at Tavros, Kanaya hovered over her pad.

"May I see?" Rose asked.

Kanaya continued to huddle. "...One is for you."

That was irregular. Given the Trolls' lack of interest, Kanaya tended not to sketch anything 'for' anyone, and her designs for Rose had come to a halt some time after the Humans had arrived. Rose had not even realized it had stopped, as her day-to-day interactions with Kanaya had gradually erased the impressions she had formed of her friend when they were still in different sessions. "Been a while," Rose said, trying not to sound surprised. "What changed?"

Kanaya shrugged it off. "Full of ideas last night, I suppose." She shuffled about on her chair, until she was sitting just in front of Rose, facing away. The upturned page on the pad was incomplete, but Kanaya flipped back a few pages, and Rose saw something very unusual pass her by.

"Wait, hold on," Rose said. Kanaya stopped, and the pad came to rest on one of the strange pages. Rose did not know what to make of it. It was a rough map of a cave system, started roughly with a purple coloured pencil, before the project had taken on a life of its own and Kanaya attacked it with the proper tools. Much of it had been coloured in, but where those patches of colour appeared seemed entirely random. Rose leaned closer over Kanaya's shoulder, careful not to get too close to the point of her friend's straight horn, and looked at the many details. "...Taking up FLARP?" she asked.

"No, not at all," Kanaya said. "...Though I suppose some of them might be difficult and attempt to it for their games all the same. No, this is a..." Kanaya reached back and flipped to the next page in the series: the centre of the map, with previous page showing only the west. On the centre page, Rose noticed a series of specific machines detailed on the nearby key, though Rose could not make out their function, as Kanaya had labelled them in the Alternian alphabet. In the centre of the room was a platform of sorts, north of which lay a vat filled with a rainbow liquid.

"What do you think?" Kanaya asked. She flipped up the page to show the eastern section, which was not unlike the west, although Rose noticed a small set of dormitories. "...It's a spawning cavern," Kanaya explained, after giving Rose ample opportunity to answer. "For the Matriorb, to begin," Kanaya said. She then tapped her chest, which had become the group's code for "in my inventory." "The rest would be expanded to support standard breeding after she had grown."

Kanaya tapped an otherwise innocuous chamber on the eastern map, surrounded by smaller rooms:
"This is the Drones' subcomplex." Tavros jumped at the sound of the word 'Drone.' According to Kanaya, the dormitory was: "For supervisors. Not standard for a long time, but necessary with the first Mother Grub being otherwise undefended." She flipped back to west. "Cocooning caves, and the wriggling routes. They're all specifically designed to go uphill, so the lines indicate height: grubs don't have much of an idea what's going on at that point in their lives, but they naturally go uphill." And on the central map: "Storage. That's food storage specifically. Communications, armoury, Dr…" Kanaya looked up at Tavros, lowered her voice and said: "Drone armoury. And that's bucket storage and the Drone preparation and deployment rooms." Kanaya tapped her pencil against her chin. "…Do you think there's still any sense in having official buckets? I never gave it much thought, but thinking about it last night, I suppose people could provide their—uh…"

Rose tried to keep a straight face as Kanaya's professional decorum burned away after so little focus on the B-topic. "I suppose they could," Rose said. "I can't say I've given it any thought all. Really, Kanaya, this is all a wonderful step in the direction that returns you to your culture's history of coerced breeding. I don't know what to say." Kanaya glared at her. "My point being: is it really necessary to have any Drones at all? Or at least the violent kind. It struck me as an Imperial adjustment to the natural process."

"We're not certain about that," Kanaya admitted. "Our history has habit of smelling like matches and gasoline, if you follow me."

"Quite."

"As for your question," Kanaya continued, "Feferi and Karkat did suggest some ideas along those lines, but I'll have to talk to them." She scribbled a note in a corner as a reminder. "For the time being, I figured recreating a functional old-style breeding cave in draft would be a good first step."

"That seems reasonable," Rose said. She peered over the map another time. "And this," Rose said, pointing to the central chamber, "is her room."

"Exactly," Kanaya said, and she explained a few of the devices. Rose only really followed that the platform was where the baby Trolls were initially laid, before the mother grub would personally butt them off toward the halls, like a bird operating uphill. "Which is why this edge of the platform, nearest the service tunnels, is walled," Kanaya said. After a moment, she pointed to the vat: "And if you're too polite to say so, I'd like to say that this is the nicest genetic material I've ever drawn."

Rose laughed. "I'm not sure so sure I'm qualified to comment on that. But sarcasm aside—"

"For once," Kanaya interrupted.

"Yes. But honestly: this seems like a wonderful start. You've really gotten into this. I'm afraid I don't much understand the logistics beyond most of the process, but I'd trust you to do it right over anyone else."

"Hm, yes," Kanaya said. Rose was glad to see her press on professionally in spite of the praise: it was behaviour she could empathize with. "Well, I'm going to have to look it up again to be sure. Quadruple check. With additional beta readers, I think," she said, pointing to Rose, "each less informed about our breeding process than the last."

"Dave and Eridan will be thrilled."

"As for the serious research…" Kanaya pointed to Sollux. Rose understood. Their computers still had access to the Alternian equivalent of the Internet, not to mention their hacked connection to the Human internet in turn. "Sollux says we'll have the whole archives in a week or so."
Sollux raised a hand from his typing in acknowledgement. As Rose looked up to see it, she saw that they were no longer alone. Aradia was home, but had not settled straight to her desk as was her usual routine. Instead, she rifled through the pile of junk and spare parts that lay on Equius' desk. Tavros was sitting in front of a word processor, lost in thought, and John waved to Rose from the couch. He even giggled at her surprise in seeing him, as he must have passed her by without her noticing. Feferi had also arrived: in fact, she had already been to the cafeteria and back, and offered her boyfriend some of her kippers.

"Are you going to be able to make most of these things?" Rose asked Kanaya, to return to the subject at hand.

"I think so," she admitted. "Though I may be hedging a lot on the universal magic of alchemy, and it may be necessary to improvise. I have a few ideas. I was going to estimate some grist costs as well," Kanaya said, pointing to some figures scratched below the key and scale, "but a creative mood isn't really a mathematical one."

"It's great, Kanaya," Rose praised. "You've really got a handle on this. If I could ask, are even the wriggling caverns made to some specification? They just look natural."

Kanaya nodded. "You'd be surprised what's necessary."

Rose approached her intended topic with some caution: "Is it meant to… pardon me, prune the grubs?"

Kanaya turned back to the western map. "Not quite. The cocooning chambers are intentionally undersized, that would count, but a lot of it is actually generous. These areas pool water," she said, pointing to certain slight bulges just off the paths. "There are also a few discouragements to keep the grubs from climbing back for any reason, so they don't grow up in the tunnels. Some of them would…They're not very bright, but they want to survive, same as anyone."

"Mm." Rose tried to picture the whole process, putting herself in the shoes of a Troll grub. It was not hard to picture a little pink worm crawling through the tunnels, or to picture her and little blue, green and red worms gurgling at one another by a watering hole before finding a place to cocoon. She wondered if any of them might have even tried to fight for access. "Kanaya? Did you ever wonder what it would be like? Crawling from the caves? As I understand it, you all sort of just landed nearby, so maybe I shouldn't be asking, but…"

Kanaya returned a nervous laugh. "I'm not so sure. After all we've been through, how hard could it have been?"

Rose laughed as well, but it was almost out of sympathy. Kanaya sounded truly disappointed and Rose reached out a hand to Kanaya's shoulder in apology. "Too bad?" she asked. Kanaya looked surprised that Rose had noticed.

"It just seems like we... like I was left out of a fundamental Troll activity?" Kanaya suggested. She shook her head, and refused to meet Rose's eyes. "It's stupid," she said, but still she touched Rose's hand lightly with her own in thanks. When she released it, it was to turn back the page on her pad, revealing a sketch of a generic Troll woman wearing what looked like a traditional Indian outfit: Rose wondered if it was truly Indian, plucked from the internet, or some Troll equivalent.

"You've been busy," Rose said, noting the colour.

"Heh. Yes, well—"
"Aradia!" John called, out of nowhere. Rose and Kanaya both looked up, and saw that Aradia had stopped just a few steps from the transportalizer. Rose could not help but note that Equius' remaining spare parts had been neatly rearranged, apparently sorted by accumulation of rust. John continued: "Do you know if Dave's in?"

Feferi, deciding this exchange was not interesting, returned to her meal, though Sollux had perked up to listen as soon as John had mentioned Dave. Rose could easily tell: he was simply a very poor bluff, and his attempt to hide that he was listening made him more obvious than if he had just sat back. "It's just..." John said, "I know you two hang out a lot." John was also a poor liar, but Rose was not surprised to hear him all but shout that he knew about Aradia and Dave's work. Karkat knew about them and Karkat told John everything, some of it even in a normal speaking voice. Rose did her best to keep her own composure.

"I left him in the hall over an hour ago," Aradia replied. "Judging by his indirect comments—" John nodded that he knew what she meant, "—I believe he headed up to Terezi's." Aradia's response was synthesized, out of a voice box positioned somewhere beyond her meticulously constructed, realistic mouth. Rose knew that Aradia was capable of giving her voice emotion, but then, as more often than not, she simply did not bother. It was strange to Rose: Rose could not quite forget the conversation she had had during the game, when a frustrated apocalypseArisen had tried to warn her off of the elder gods. She had not seen any such display of life from Aradia ever since. Aradia continued: "Should I pass him a message if I see him?"

John looked disappointed. "Yeah, I guess... Actually, no, I don't have anything. Just tell him I say hi."

Aradia nodded and stepped on to the platform. There, she tossed a look over toward Sollux, who dropped his poor bluff and had hunched back over his keyboard. Rose was not certain, but she thought she heard Aradia simulate what might have been a sigh, before it was cut off by transportalization.

Kanaya had noticed as well, and turned to meet Rose's eye. "None Of Our Business" she said.

"I'm just curious," Rose said. She would not have admitted unless directly asked, but her mind was already filled with a criss-cross of emotional analyses.

Kanaya seemed to have realized it without asking. "You're dangerous when you're curious," she observed. Beyond her, John headed out through the transportalizer on his own business. "Don't force me to remind you that people here don't like you prying into their heads."

"Are you going to stop me?" Rose asked. "Stop me from having nice, casual, perfectly harmless conversations?"

"...No," Kanaya said, almost as an afterthought. "...You'll behave, because you know if you start poking where you don't belong," Kanaya prodded at her with the pencil again, "You might end up with another Vriska and Eridan situation on your hands."

"Ouch. All right," Rose said. "I'll behave. This time." Kanaya grunted and turned back to her page. As Kanaya worked, tongue stuck to her upper lip, and odd idea occurred to Rose. "...Did you just... moirail-flirt with me?"

"Ah..." Kanaya lifted her coloured pencil from the page. "I..."

"You did!"
Kanaya smiled, as if to herself rather than Rose. "I... suppose I did. It wasn't quite..." She shrugged. "Well." She stopped there, as though content to let her statement rest. The pause that followed quickly turned awkward. Rose could not help but turn her attention to other things and noticed that Feferi was eavesdropping on them now, not unlike her boyfriend had been before. Rose wished she had something for Feferi to overhear. Despite having spent a month together – was 'despite' even the right word? – Rose and Kanaya had not yet come to settle into a quadrant, or even so much as made a move. Rose wished she had said something: returned the sentiment, or deflect it politely, but all she had to offer was petty silence.

But the moment had passed. Kanaya helped ease them both out of the awkward stall by talking about the outfit she had drawn, and some of the others that preceded it. It helped. The outfits were all up to Kanaya's usual standard: where Kanaya's sketches were unable to get her ideas across, she was more than able to convey the details with her description. After some time had passed, she turned back so a very different page.

"Oh!" Rose said, almost a gasp. "...I see."

The sketch was of her – or at least, it had become her over time. It matched Kanaya's standard model, one Rose strongly suspected was based on herself with generic, straight horns. But this time, before any horns had been added, Kanaya had changed her mind and drawn in blonde hair and quick, purple eyes. She had saved her detail work for the dress Rose's sketch was wearing, which not only caught Rose's eye for design, but for its brilliant orange-yellow colour.

"It's an idea I got a few nights ago," Kanaya said, "when Jade brought out her starlit dress. The Three in the Morning."

"I remember!" Rose said. "Equius and his high society dance comment. Vriska and her crack about formal wear."

"Vriska has plenty of formal wear," Kanaya said with a huff. "Though I'll admit it would need resizing that she'll have to do herself. But that's beside the point. I was thinking about this dress last night, and I began to think... I could reverse the design on Jade's dress! Why not bring alchemy into the process, as a unique tool instead of a time saver?" Rose laughed, as 'time saver' was generous for Kanaya: Kanaya had already ranted to Rose about the others using the alchemiter to replace or even avoid washing their clothes. "Quiet. So after some consideration, the idea came to me that I could make you, a..." Kanaya looked up to Rose, and handed her the pad for examination. "...A sun. For the Seer of Light."

"It sounds wonderful," Rose said, perfectly honest. Kanaya's idea was appealing. Perhaps it was her association with Light, but Rose found Jade's surreal dress quite interesting. "If you're willing to spend the time, and it's all right with Jade. I'm glad I came to mind."

"No trouble," Kanaya said, flattered. Rose flipped the page, where she found a few quick, functional sketches that had been prepared of the same garment at different angles. "No trouble at all, really. No one lets me do anything with their clothes. If I come up with a design that doesn't look good on me, it's really just into the trash."

"Well then!" Rose said. "I'm almost sorry I'm not a guy. Not that you couldn't fit me for a suit, I just don't know if I'm interested."

"Consider it!" Kanaya said. Rose could almost see her planning, not unlike Kanaya must have seen her mind going at Aradia's mysterious sigh. "It would still fit you differently than one of the boys, of course, but there's a certain appeal," Kanaya said. She began to flip back several pages. "Have you ever seen a male Troll uniform?"
"Military?" Rose asked. "I haven't seen either."

"There are quite a few differences based on form I could point out, but more interestingly, there are a touches few that aren't. They're touches that I think would look just as good on a woman, and vice versa. Take a look—"

Kanaya was cut off by the sound of something not unlike that of a wrecking ball, coming from the east side of the room. As they turned to look, Tavros' chair rolled to a slow stop beside them. Its former occupant remained in front of his computer, albeit now on his back, with one robotic foot planted flat on the ground and the other fully extended and jammed up through the hole it had made in his desk.

"Tavros, are you all right?" Feferi called from the other side of the room.

"Fine!" he said, pushing himself up. "Just… just yawning, you know."

Feferi got to her feet. "Rose, could you get me the chair?" she asked as she got to Tavros' side. Rose did as she was asked, Kanaya choosing to stay behind. Rose pushed over the chair, checked that Tavros was all right, and then joined Feferi in investigating his stuck foot. As Feferi had presumably done before her, Rose gave the foot a light push.

"Really in there," she observed. Twisting or forcing it proved no more effective.

"It is!" Feferi said. "Honestly Tavros, how do you manage to flounder so much with just a yawn?"

"Well," said Tavros, who was having even more trouble getting comfortable on the ground with two people hovering over him, "the legs just act funny sometimes, and right now, they think they're, uh, kicking."

"Right now?" Feferi groaned. "You mean they're still pushing?"

"I think it might be," Rose said. "It's just fully extended right now." She stepped over to a new position. In doing so, she brushed Tavros' other foot and discovered that it, too, would not budge. "...Is this one magnetized to the ground?"

Feferi frowned at both feet, and then levelled her gaze on the upper, drew her trident and smacked it hard across the toe. The force was resounding, a very impressive blow that more than knocked the foot free, only for it to ram itself roughly back into position.

Feferi cuffed the foot again with her trident. "Ugh! Sollux!"

"Yeah?"

"Tell Equius that Tavros needs him right now!" said Feferi, regal and princess-like even to a computer screen. "Tell him he needs to finish what he starts for once!"

"He's not going to listen to me," Sollux lisped in reply.

Through her teeth, Feferi added: "Tell him I asked nicely."

"He's not going to listen to you either," Sollux pointed out.

Feferi seemed to be well aware, as she muttered something under her breath before returning to Tavros with a smile. Taking a short side trip to his chair, she fiddled with its back cushion until it came loose. With Rose's help, they were able to help Tavros use it as a sort of pillow as opposed to
the bare floor. The legs did not allow much better, though they tried.

"I think I have a few things from the game that might work," Feferi said after a moment. "Sollux, can I pick through your room?" she asked, having returned to her chair.

"You know, FF, we could probably just blast through to the legs," Sollux suggested.

"I, uh, would not prefer that, if that's all right," Tavros protested.

"Fine, but it's gonna take way longer!" Sollux cautioned. He turned back to his computer and then added: "Done."

"T)(ank you!!" Feferi said, and she kissed Sollux on the head. "Did the routing thing work?" she asked, regarding something they must have discussed previously.

"No," Sollux muttered. "Never." He continued to type.

"You'll get it," Feferi said, with a touch on his shoulder. "In just a few days, I think, Kanaya," she added over her shoulder. Sollux just grunted. Feferi then picked up her plate of fish and heading to the platform. She smiled down at Tavros. "Rose will keep you company for a bit, Tavros!"

"I, uh, would appreciate that, if that would be all right," Tavros said to Rose, once Feferi had left. "The ceiling stopped wasn't really entertaining the last time that, you know, that, my legs acted up,"

"I understand," Rose said, taking a glance in that direction. Across the room, Kanaya laughed silently and waved goodbye to her for the time. "I need to speak to Equius, myself. Eridan did a number on my door."

"oH,, uH, dID HE," As anyone familiar with him would have expected, Tavros's eyes flicked just off of meeting Rose's. "I figured he might. nOT THE BREAKING YOUR DOOR PART, i MEAN JUST TALKING TO YOU, He and Vriska haven't been talking about anything else for the past two days."

"Vriska too?" Rose said with a sigh. She dropped to the floor alongside of Tavros.

"Yeah. wELL, nOT TO EACH OTHER'S FACES, just to me. In fact, if they weren't complaining about you, I'd figure they were trying to make me their auspistice."

Rose laughed bitterly. "Well, maybe you should volunteer, because I just told Eridan I'm not doing it."

"Really?"

"Yeah," she said. "I mean, I figure Vriska will come bother me about it on her own terms but no is still no."

"Wow, that's—!" Tavros said, and almost lurched up with excitement, though this was ultimately impossible. "That's good news," he said.

Hm? Rose's interest piqued. "You… don't really care if your friends turn violent?"

"No, that's not it," Tavros said. He settled his hands together on his lap. At the right angle, he would have almost looked as though he were comfortable, if one tried to ignore his angle to the floor. "I think they're going to calm down again as soon as they see there's no relationship in it. It was sort of getting in the way of other things."
"That makes sense," Rose said, at little disappointed that she was not plumbing some new depth of Troll social psychology. "And I know what you mean. New relationships can really put a wall in the middle of old ones, even if they're working out." She was thinking specifically of Terezi and Dave's first few days together, until Dave and Aradia had picked up their grim task, but they were just the stand out example among her friends. She had to admit, the time she spent with her own patron Troll was probably cutting out John and Jade. She would have to think about that. "Do you think they'll drop it?" she asked.

"Maybe. I don't know. That's not… really what I'm concerned about, though."

"What is it, then?" she asked, and watched as he winced away, his head slowly tipping away from her. "Tavros."

"It's… it's, well…" Tavros' face splotched over brownish-orange, an endearing blush that nevertheless did nothing for his complexion. He opened his mouth to give an answer, but to Rose's surprise nothing, not even the tiniest whisper or gasp of air, actually came past his lips as he moved them.

"Tavros," Rose repeated, crossing her own arms.

She had to lean in to hear him, and so had to ask him to repeat himself, which only made him blush harder. He said: "I was wondering. "Since you're not involved, uh, with them, I… was hoping you might be able to give me some relationship advice."

"You want me to give you relationship advice?" Rose was surprised that she had managed to contain herself to a whisper. "Really?" She lowered her voice at last. "I might not be very good for this, Tavros. I mean, I've been single my whole life, I don't even know how to… well… ask."

"Well, i– it's– it's not a very big thing. Not that I wouldn't consider you for big things, but that's not the point right now, because I don't have any big things, and it's not really about asking, but it's sort of about a relationship that I'm already, sort of, in, except maybe not and that's the issue and it's a matespritship and I don't really know who to talk to. I mean, I can't really talk to Karkat and… wOW, i HOPE ME BEING IN A RELATIONSHIP ISN'T THAT SURPRISING TO YOU, bECAUSE YOU LOOK, sURPRISED, rOSE," Tavros face ran the gamut as he spoke, and he looking as glum as ever by the time he was finished.

"No, no, no," Rose said, dropping her hand to better show her smile, and trying to hide her embarrassment. "You've got me all wrong, I'm just…" She searched her memory, but finding only irony, she finished with a sarcastic lilt: "…I'm honoured."

"Really?" It was Tavros' turn to be surprised. His smile, which Rose had not seen much since they had met, was actually quite bright.

"So long as you feel it won't hurt to go with a member of another species and culture," Rose said, deliberately trying to curb her sarcasm, yet still aware she was failing. "Well, if you're willing to talk, perhaps you should fill me in first. Who are we talking about? What kind of matespritship? Is there an issue or are you asking in general?"

Tavros' face gradually began to brighten. "Well, I think so. I mean, we've gone Outside twice already, and I really like him. But we haven't talked much about it lately, and I didn't know if it was me, or maybe he wasn't interested any more? Because it was only twice. So I didn't think I would ask and then I tried and then it looked like I wouldn't be able to."

"Hm," Rose set a hand on her chin. Tavros had a good point. She might understand the Troll's
relationships in the macro but the closer she got the less felt she could really master. She agreed: even on Human terms she was hardly going to call two dates a commitment. By many standards, Tavros' would-be matesprit's behaviour might not even be seen as impolite. Of course, if he was wrong, as he was obviously hoping, there was still a chance for more. "Well, I can see why you're all worried. Who are we talking about, Tavros? What's this issue about not being able to talk all of a sudden?"

But Tavros did not answer. Rose turned around and discovered that while she had been speaking, Vriska had appeared in the middle of the room. She looked straight at them, her wry smile thinning out.

"Goober," she greeted Tavros, barely seeming to notice his predicament. And then Rose: "Bitch."

"Oh good," Rose said. "Someone doesn't want to talk to me. I was becoming concerned."

"mORNING VRISKA," Tavros said with a shrunken nod. Vriska's frown deepened, but seeing nothing on which she could immediately intrude, she summoned an eight-ball from her sylladex and began to toss it to herself as she went to her computer. Luckily for Rose, Vriska was largely cut off from her and Tavros by John and Karkat's movie nook, but that did not stop Vriska from tossing looks at them from her web from time to time.

Rose took quick stock of the situation, which now included Tavros' complete silence. "She… doesn't like the idea of you dating this guy, does she?" Tavros, who looked petrified, coughed in response. "Was that a yes or a no?"

Tavros reached up to his throat and rubbed it, as though it hurt to speak, and whispered. "uH,,, nO, nO, sHE DOESN'T LIKE HIM AT,,, aT ALL,"

Rose tented her fingers at first. She thought over the situation and how to work around Vriska, when an independent part of her mind hit on a conclusion and stopped the rest of her train of thought outright. Lazily, her eyes slid from Tavros to Vriska and then to her favourite burn mark, and claustrophobia closed in. \(\ldots\)It seems my maze is just a labyrinth, Rose rued, clenching and unclenching a fist, and so I'm back where I began.

"That's what she was yelling at you about two days ago, wasn't it?" Rose whispered. Tavros nodded slowly. "She came in early and caught you two… talking about another date." Tavros nodded. Rose knew this was not exactly polite but she had to ask: "Why Eridan, Tavros?"

"Well I don't really know," he said. "Have you ever heard him talking about his relationships?"

"Yeah," Rose said, looking at her hands, nodding meaninglessly. "Yeah, that's exactly the word I'd use."

"And we were talking a week or so ago, and he had a… uh… philosophical conversation with Gamzee." Tavros caught Rose's eye with his, and pantomimed raising an aluminum tray to his lips. "Later Gamzee went to the load gaper, and Eridan told me he figured that we were all land-dwellers now because there just isn't any water any more? And least I think that's what he said. Slurring a bit. And he was… really upset. So I was talking to him and told him how nice the land is, really. And I asked if that helped and he looked really sad and said, 'tAVV, YOURE THE ONLY ONE WWHO EVVEN BOTHERED TO CHEER ME UP,'"

Tavros' impression was terrible – some of the Trolls were capable of much better – but Rose was deeply touched: very deeply, under miles of quickly accumulating oh-no-not-again. Tavros continued his story in the happiest tone Rose had heard him use in a while: "So we talked for a long
time and two days later he came and asked me if I wanted to take a walk Outside, and I didn't really
realize what he meant at first. So I said I couldn't because of my legs and he just looked so sad all of
a sudden that I had to think 'wAIT, wHAT DOES THIS MEAN,' and—"

"Tav," Rose said, putting an arm on his shoulder, and then immediately: "T-Tavros! I'm sorry, I
think I need…" Rose tried to be direct: it felt like the only way she was going to be able to say
anything and still stay the hell away from Eridan. Rose saw Vriska watching them again, eyes
lowered, and Rose dropped her hand. "I have to—"

"Got it!" It was Feferi. Rose kept from sighing in relief, partially because it seemed rude, but more
because Feferi was now carrying some kind of hideous, brain-prototyped welding torch. "…Don't
ask," she pleaded.

Tavros seemed to have no intention of asking: he simply said ",,,uHH,,," and forgot to say more.
Rose gave the awful-looking device another look. She supposed she was willing to give it a try.
After all, Equius would need Tavros freed from the table to get to work, right?

And then Vriska cleared her throat. Oh, Rose did not like that sound one little bit. "May I help you
two with this stupid foot thing," Vriska asked, "or are you just going to ignore me and weld his legs
to the table? 'Oh, no way Vriska could help, god forbid.'"

Rose swallowed hard at this greeting-cum-threat, and noticed Kanaya look up from her sketching.
Rose looked to Tavros, who shrugged nervously, and she sighed. "Vriska," she said, "could you
help us with Tavros' 'foot thing'?"

"I'd love to, Blondie." Vriska got to her feet and prowled over to Tavros and Rose. Carefully, she
lowered herself to the ground and lightly tested Tavros' magnetized foot, and then stood and
thumped the other, to no effect. Satisfied, Vriska stroked her chin and began to pace, first to one side
of the desk, nearest the corner and cafeteria exit, and then to the opposite. There, she leaned down
and shoved the entire desk, computers and all, an inch up onto the adjacent desk. Nepeta's mouse
began escaping downhill.

"No need to break all our stuff!" she said, as though she were beign helpful. "And stand back," she
ordered, shaking out her arms. "Not you," she added to Rose, who she grabbed by the head. "What,
do you want me to blow his feet off?"

"That's more or less not the idea," Rose said, indignant. "I—arrgh!"

A flash of colour cut across Rose's vision, first bright and blinding, then settling into an afterimage:
the outline of a hand with coin in palm, the sign of the Thief. Vriska shoved Rose to free her, leaving
her feel cold – stunningly cold – at her core.

"Vriska!" Kanaya shouted from her seat.

Even though she somehow knew it would be of no consequence again the supernatural chill, Rose
clutched her arms across her chest. "B-borrowing some Light, are we?"

Vriska tried her best to look hurt. "You did just say we didn't want to blow him up, didn't we?" With
a flourish, Vriska tossed something out of her inventory and into the air. She caught whatever it was
with similar showmanship, and then displayed them to the others: two hand-carved bone spheres,
one white and one black.

"Those are… dice?" Feferi asked.

Vriska simply tapped Rose's temple with the back of her free hand. "Now scoot," she said. Wavering
to her feet, Rose did as she was told. Feferi met her there, ready to help her stand.

Vriska began to circle Tavros, stepping over his leg at one point. As she attempted to pass behind him, she found herself face-to-face with Kanaya, her fists at the ready.

"That was totally unnecessary," Kanaya growled, pointing to Rose.

Vriska soured to hear it, at least at first, but a glance from Kanaya to Rose seemed to brighten her mood in its usual ill way. In reply, Vriska raised a finger from her spare hand and set it to Kanaya's lips for silence. She pushed back gently, and Kanaya was forced to retreat a step.

Vriska began juggle the two dice to herself, tossing one from palm to fingers and letting the other drop back to palm. "You remember helping me find the Taijitu Pair, don't you Tavros? We had a lot of fuuuuuuuuun picking them up." She squatted next to him, the white die between her fingers.

To Rose's astonishment, Tavros actually broke eye contact with Vriska as if without fear of repercussions. "Despite her, uh, mysterious tone, I actually did think that that was a lot of…" Vriska stood up – the sudden motion, Tavros did find startling. "…fun."

"You have more than one set of dice?" Feferi asked. Rose had been wondering the same.

Kanaya huffed. "She has all the dice."

"I have allllllll the dice, Kanaya, say it right." Vriska pouted. "You used to be so good at it." Vriska tossed the white die to her opposite hand. "All the sets from one to nine. Took a long time! Most of them are useless, though. I already started with the best!" She grinned at Feferi, and again held up the white. "This is the only one that can heal, though. Sort of."

Tavros piped up. "We found it after Vriska had, uh, given up on getting past Level 99, so we went after her Denizen."

"Argh, and you can't! It just stops right there, so stupid! I double-checked, like, four times!" Vriska complained. "Ugh, I would have died for that! But I guess I only get to die for Troll Casper's shits and giggles. Hmph. The point is, these d2s used to belong to Scorpio."

"Those are d2s?" Sollux asked about the spheres, having apparently overheard.

Rose had what she felt was a more important question. "…Your Denizen was named 'Scorpio'?"

Vriska grinned. "Giant eight-tailed scorpion."

Sollux raised his voice. "Those are d2s?"

"Yeah, yeah, keep your pants on!" Vriska said with a wave of her arm. "It's like… good decision, bad decision… balance of the universe… you know! Lighty stuff!" She rolled the dice in one hand. "Chitinous blowhard rambled on and on about it, the power of fate versus…" Vriska grinned, and suddenly adopted and overwrought, theatrical tone: "inevia8le, perf8ct st8gnation!"

To Rose's surprise, the other Trolls laughed, save for Kanaya.

"Yours too?" Feferi asked. "Ugh, the glubbing Denizens! Mine just kept going and going about how we, uh… '(ave no ) (ope'… and that I was 'S) (--ELLFIS) ( LITTL--E C) (--EAT--) ER! and… Sollux, what was the 'stagnation' thing?"

Sollux pondered for a moment. "Wasn't it… something about all of the Denizens living forever in
TH-E GRAND C-EL-E2TIAL ORD-ER OF 2TAGNATION!? Something like that?" His impression would have been an excellent match for Feferi's vocal tone, if not for his lisp.

Feferi snapped her fingers. "And yours was... 'the healing pau2e of 2tagnatiion' Do they all use that exact word?"

Sollux chuckled. "Repetitive bullshit. Give me five minutes with their code, we'll straighten it right out."

Given everyone else's good mood, Kanaya seemed to lighten a touch. Trying to smile to Rose, she noticed her friend's confusion. "Did your Denizens not follow this script?"

Rose shook her head. This was all new information to her.

"The point is..." Vriska said, taking everyone's attention back to where she no doubt felt it mattered. "The point is: these dice inflict and cure status conditions on players. And like we found out with my arm in the game, Sgrub treats this kind of behaviour," she tapped the foot, "like 'Confusion.' Of course, the last time I rolled these dice, Gamzee turned into a scarecrow for three days."

"You did that?" Feferi exclaimed. "I mean, he was pretty happy about it but it took forever to—"

"Hey! The dice did that!" Vriska insisted. "And this time..." she said, ruffling Rose's hair, "they won't!"

And before anyone could stop her, Vriska tossed the two so-called dice, which rolled up to Tavros' legs and gently clicked away. Slowly, even reliably, they began to slow. Though Rose could see no difference between them at first, she noticed one of them was slowly turning, as if carefully weighted, until it gave and rolled to a stop against its twin. The dice let out a burst of white light, and Tavros' stranded foot dropped to the ground.

"No need to thank me," Vriska told the entire audience, the smug grin on her face her preferred reward. "If you're smart, you'll go find Horseface," she said to Tavros. "That's still one of his parts. It'll break again in an hour, I just sort of 'set it back.'"

Tavros sat up, the various moving parts in his legs, fully back in motion, though he was not quite satisfied. "Yeah," he said, "this is the same funny sound it was making when I got up."

"Then we had better get you to Equius," Rose said. Between Vriska and the questions stirring in her head, she was happy to volunteer. She said goodbye to Feferi, who smiled and waved in reply, but was stopped by Kanaya.

"Excuse me a moment, Tavros," Rose said. To Kanaya, she said: "Thank you, but really, I was all right."

"All The Same Vriska Needs Someone To Stand Up To Her" Kanaya insisted.

"But not you any more," Rose said at a whisper. "You know that. You've said as much yourself."

"...I know," Kanaya admitted. "I guess some feelings die harder than others."

"I thought the moirail feelings were, well..." Rose knew the story well enough. "Transitory."

"Pity does have some common roots," Kanaya said. "...But I will admit to scolding her right now more in an effort to get her to... bend than out of pity."
"You don't have to say 'bend,'" Rose said. "I understand. We've all got reasons to want to snap Vriska in half. Except maybe our Heroes of Breath."

"Careful, Rose," Kanaya said. "See you soon."

"See you."

Rose reunited with Tavros, where he was resetting his desk to its original position. He did it in an odd way, with his face unsure but his muscles more than up to the task. Tavros' moult was being good to him. If only his mood would match. Rose signalled to him.

"Tavros," she said as he came up to her side. "A question for you, if I may. …About your Denizen."

"Taurus?" he asked at once.

"Smelled awful," Vriska said, otherwise preoccupied with some Troll flash game.

"Its name was 'Taurus'?" Rose asked. "Odd. I had the strangest feeling it would be the same as John's Typhus."

Tavros looked sympathetic as he stepped up to the platform, but could only shake his head. Rose gave him a "Thank you," since it seemed rude to leave him hanging without a response just because her mind was chew on this new piece of information. He kicked the board, somewhat hard as it were, and disappeared.

As Rose waited for the light on the pad to wink out and inform her that Tavros had vacated its twin, she continued to puzzle the riddle she had been given. It was strange, in that she was not sure why she thought of it as a puzzle at all. Why was it strange that the Trolls had different Denizens? But it was hardly just that. Perhaps it was her being a Seer. She saw, heard and felt many things that the others did not. Perhaps this was one of those.

But her mind was blank. There was just one, nagging feeling, pelting her with single drops of discomfort like slow torture, the sound of the droplets of an enigma's whispering call echoing on some level beyond basic comprehension.

It had been a month since Rose had joined the Trolls, and in that month, even more than the years preceding it, Rose felt a strange sense of disconnect. Her hunch about the Denizens was just the newest, if perhaps strongest sense of wrong she had experienced in her life, most in the last few hours of her original game. It did not seem like a threat to her, this feeling. If she could stomach it, she might very well go on her entire life without knowing what strange truths it hid. But still, Rose wondered if she might solve it. She knew someone trying to solve this mystery would have to be eager, and wise, and perhaps even swift, but Rose knew that if she could put together the pieces, whatever strange pieces they might be, it might provide her with some level of insight into the very nature of her existence, even if she might not like the answer.

"And above all, watch with glittering eyes the whole world around you because the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places."

-- Fanfiction Legend August Derleth

The light on the pad went out, and Rose followed Tavros into the transportalizer. There she found herself once more immersed in that secret, personal conference of the wisest of the wise. Rose wondered if they might know the answers to her questions, if anyone. Rose looked around, and listened, but she heard no answers, and saw no sign of the strange Troll that had been there just before.
I keep finding myself putting things in this that are only meant to be seen on a second reading. Some of you are on your second readings, in a manner of speaking, so I hope you catch them as they come!
As Rose emerged in the central hub, she found that Tavros had waited for her, politely standing just to the side.

"Rose, before we go talk to Equius..." he started. "I just wanted to ask you, uh, again. About Eridan."

Rose blinked. "Oh, right. We were interrupted. I'm sorry, Tavros." Tavros smiled politely. "And... I'm sorry, Tavros." Rose could not quite meet his eyes. "It's not that I don't want to help, but I'm not really sure what I can say about Eridan. You've picked a complicated crush." Or perhaps a particularly simple one.

"...oh," Tavros said, his face falling as far as his tone of voice. "That's okay Rose. Thanks for listening, though."

Oh no, don't look like that, Rose thought, biting her lip. "Look... if Eridan's there when you get back from Equius', why don't you talk to him and see what you can about what's happening? I think that would really help a lot. Just go out and... do it. ...Ask him Outside yourself."

"Okay Rose," he said, sounding even deeper in the dumps. Rose shut her eyes, swearing inwardly, and it was because of that pause that Karkat was able to grab her by the back of her collar.

"And two for the road," he said to John as Rose's friend stepped out from the Cancer pad.

"Huh? Oh, hi Rose! Hey Tavros!" John clicked his tongue. "Bad timing."

Karkat balked. "I think you mean 'Fantastic timing, this is going to be an unmitigated success.' C'mon, Lalonde," Karkat then began dragging her over toward Equius' transportalizer.

"Uh... what's going on, Karkat?" Tavros asked. "We were just going to Equius."

It was John who answered. "Jade went down there with Nepeta about half an hour ago to hang out. She messaged all three of us, Rose, did you bury your hubtopband again?"

"...Not intentionally," Rose said, feeling guilty. She fiddled with her inventory for a moment and dropped her favourite portable computer into her hand, along with the leftover chips that had been hanging from its leaf since the night before. She was just about to put the thing on when Karkat reached out to stop her.

"Long story short, Team Green found another crop of Underlings just outside the Leijon/Zahhak hive."

"What?" Rose and Tavros asked at once. Rose then asked, "This is, forgive me, the ninth?"

Karkat rolled his eyes. "Does it matter? Are we, or are we not counting the dozen single Imps they've picked off while they were playing furry charades or... god knows what they're doing down there. Whatever! The point is, with Tavros coming, and you along to drop the average, we're going to be just fine."
"I hope you realize I resent that," Rose said, only beginning to grasp the situation.

"Then try doing something about it." Karkat then noticed Tavros, who had raised his hand in the air. "What is it?"

"Karkat, I don't want to sound like, i DON'T WANT TO FIGHT, bUT, wELL,,,"

"His legs are broken," Rose said. "Or at least, they will be, and you can guarantee it'll be at the worst possible time. We were going to Equius to get them repaired."

Karkat growled, and then pointed at Tavros. "Go find somewhere to get comfortable, because you're gonna be there a while! The ole' Blueblood's already on scene with Megido."

Rose tried to pass Tavros a sheepish smile. "Maybe try going back to bed, Tavros," she suggested. "If it kicks out again, you might as well already be on your back."

"Well, technically, I can't lie down in my—"

"LEAVE!" Karkat shouted. Tavros obliged and headed off to his quarters. Karkat started muttering under his breath, but before it could spill out onto Rose and John, he looked up and spat: "Finally!"

Rose turned about to see Dave standing on Terezi's pad. "Oh, like you'd have left without us," he said. "Way I understand it, we're the key to your entire plan."

"Just you, if you mean plan 'Strider and Megido actually work for their supper for once,'" Karkat said, with convincing acid. If Rose did not know better, she'd have thought he knew nothing about Dave and Aradia's usual activities.

"Well damn, there goes my perfect non-attendance award. It's all over, isn't it teach? Never gonna get into a good slacker job without my anti-brownnoser ribbon. Kiss my minimum wage dreams goodbye!"

Karkat tried to ignore him. "Where were you? Where's Terezi?"

"Wow, we've hit critical impatience here," Dave said, looking past Karkat to his friends. "There I was, painting the most amazing mural ever conceived by Human or Troll, when I trip across 'the Douchesponge' in its natural habitat. C'mere, Lalonde. Watch as we observe it floundering about like an asshole because its girlfriend took, like, ten more seconds to step through the hole in fucking space-time that breaks the laws of physics." Terezi grinned, having appeared part way through the ramble. "Shit, Vantas," Dave continued, "if you wanted some time to talk to Rez or whatever, you should have challenged me to a communist farm equipment duel or whatever it is you Trolls do when you butt heads."

"Or he could say hi from time to time," said Terezi to Karkat, with a suggesting shrug.

"But how is that interesting to me?" asked Dave. "How's a guy supposed to know he's interested if he doesn't try to walk up and bloody my nose?"

Terezi smirked. "Try bloodying his. Maybe you'll get his attention!"

Karkat stamped his foot down on the metal grating that made up the floor, and pointed to Equius' pad. "Basement!"

"I'm going!" Dave said, stepping past Karkat. "Bro…" he said to John, and then onto the pad. "… Rose, aren't I being polite? I'm like some snooty Jeeves toting bags at the fucking Hilton here, I'm so
polite."

Rose shook her head to hide a smile. "You're the very model of a superficially ideal subordinate: pliant and submissive."

"Submissive!" he said, with a click of his fingers. He pointed to Karkat. "Eh? Food for thought!" He then kicked down on the pad with his heel, and disappeared.

The moment Dave was gone, Karkat turned into a muffled huddle with Terezi. Karkat had his usual trouble with volume control, but Terezi was quiet enough to avoid being heard, or at least she would have been. Rose had trouble not overhearing. She supposed it had something to do with being a Seer. Her class and element was supposed to give her the ability to calculate the future, but due to the time she had spent Grimdark, all Rose had been able to muster were a few metaphorical low-hanging fruits, like the acute senses she had picked up automatically somewhere on her echeladder. They were probably meant to help probe her element in some way, shape or form, but all she found it good for was eavesdropping. When John went to the transportalizer, Rose stayed. The conversation was too interesting to pass up.

"What was that about?" Karkat hissed.

"Pfft," Terezi said, blowing a lock of hair out of her face. "Dave and I were talking about this… and that… and we figured that in your case, maybe you'd go for someone who was—"

"Forget it, I don't want to hear," Karkat said, and Terezi started to laugh. "Just tell me why the whole… routine."

Terezi took a moment before she stopped chuckling, and then leaned in to whisper. "Maybe it's because you keep flirting with John in front of him. He's just pointing it out!"

"I did—"

"Do you even remember the popcorn?" Terezi said before he could get out another word. "You don't, do you?" Rose raised an eyebrow. This story, she did not know.

"It's a messy food!" Karkat protested. "It falls where it falls!"

"H4H4H4H4H4H4 You didn't have to eat it!" Terezi grinned and reached up to her matesprit's face to tickle a cheek with a fingertip. "K4RKL3S D4V3S JUST T34S1NG YOU"

Karkat reached up to push away her hand. "Don't—" But then he caught sight of Rose, loitering. "Hey!" he said to her. "Do I have to tell you, too?"

Shoot. "I didn't know if you wanted me to, uh…" This was the downside of eavesdropping. Rose never had a good lie for it.

"Forget it," Karkat said, and he broke away from Terezi to head to the platform himself. "You've both got fifteen seconds," he said, before he kicked the pad.

Rose watched him vanish and sighed with relief. She turned to Terezi, about to ask if she were going to go first, when she caught her shaking out her hand and smiling over a frown. Catching Rose watching her, Terezi hit Rose somewhat affectionately on the arm and walked to the transportalizer.

"Wait," Rose said. "They didn't tell me: do you know what they are? The Underlings?"

Terezi's smile did not fade: if anything it became genuine as she held up seven fingers, lowered them,
and held up another one. In response to Rose's unspoken question, she flexed a muscle on her left arm. Then she, too, kicked the board and disappeared. Rose followed, far less amused by Terezi's count than she had been in the dark. She passed through that stuffy, noisy room in the void to the lab beyond.

John and Dave met her on the other side, Terezi and Karkat already ahead. She looked to each of them, taking a moment to recover post-transportalization. "Seven Imps?" she asked.

John waved it away. "We've had way worse."

Rose locked his eyes with him. "And an Adonis."

John raised both hands, cautionary and sheepish. "And maybe an Adonis."

"I see," Rose said. "It's such a relief this is such a casual thing to the both of you."

"Oh, fuck, you don't know the other thing, do you?" Dave said. "Should I tell her the other thing?"

"What other thi—" Rose started.

"Seven prototypes," Dave said, without any response from John.

"Oh, well fantastic," Rose said, and took off of the platform at a jog. The others followed, John soon taking the lead. They rounded only a single corridor before John shouted out and dropped to the floor in a roll. Behind him, a gob of fire no larger than a spit-wad crashed into the wall, sizzling and eating its way through the raw metal. Rose took a cautious look around the corner and spotted a thrice-prototyped Marble Imp with dragon wings just down hall. It caught sight of her and ducked into a nearby room for cover.

"Imp!" John called out, and was rewarded as the Imp tottered back out of the room, Karkat's sickle struck through its chest. Rose could see the thing's health bar and it froze just above zero. Another advantage of being a Seer was being able to see the user interface, though it was a power Rose had never been much able to really accept. As the Imp staggered, something odd began to happen. The Imps eyes began to flicker, like an old, broken TV set, and the air around the players began to beat with a single, constant bass pulse. To anyone else, it was white noise, but to a member of a class that could see the game's mechanics, it was more. Rose knew it as the sound of the game itself.

Autodetected: additional PCs (5) in Zone 61.

> avg zone.pLvl

RoHe 99, WiSp 82, MaTi 99, HeVo 99, KnBl 99, SeMi 99, SeLgt 74, HeBr 82, KnTi 90; Avg 91.444

> autolevel 91

Before their eyes, the Imp began to deteriorate, its muscles shrinking just enough to be seen. Above its health bar, its written experience level dropped one step at a time to 91. As it went, its health bar plunged just past zero, and it popped into a handful of grist.

"See?" Karkat said to Rose as he helped John to his feet. "You dropped the average like a stone. Of course, I'd rather someone who could actually fight if we run into a boss."

"Now that's not fair, Karkat," John said, absently glancing at Rose out of the corner of his eye. "Jade wasn't even sure if there was an Adonis down here."
"Yeah, because they show up once someone starts trimming the—" The halls of Equius' quarters near-shook with the sound of a roaring klaxon. "And here we go!"

A half-dozen Imps screeched down the hall. The game had reset the strife, and it told Rose so: "STRIFE," plastered across her vision. To Rose's further irritation, it began to beat high-tempo music into her ears as well. From the way Karkat instinctively turned to Terezi, she could hear it as well.

"It's the local Battle 2," Terezi said. Rose nodded confirmation.

"Mid-boss," Karkat gloated. But he had little time to celebrate before something huge hit down just a few rooms away, slamming into a heavy wall like a giant metal drum. A wall down the hall began to dent. Karkat gestured to the dent. "And that's an Adonis."

"Thank you for the vote of conditional confidence, John," Rose said, "but I'm afraid that he's right." John nodded in reply, and as they heard a muffled, whinny from behind the wall. "...Of course it is."

"How close is it?" Karkat asked.

"We've got a few turns," Dave said. "This place is a mess." Rose did not ask how he knew.

"Then we better get going," John said, to rally the others. "Everyone up!"

It had been a bright and glorious day when everybody had woken up in the kingdom of Cuteopia, but before they had really gotten to work, there came a horrible giant, and its army of striped goblins! The giant stepped over the walls and shouted demands. "A tub of fish!" he said. "A bag of oats the size of a grain-storing tower-structure!"

"oh no!" said the lovable thief! "i have a feline there aren't enough oats in the whole wide world!"

"Nepeta, I don't think—"

"So she climbed!!" And she climbed and she climbed, up the towers to the walls, up to the highest point in the castle, where the wizards that once lived there purrformed horrible expurriments! But then— "Oh, shiiiii...nnizzle," said the lovable thief, who had just remembered that her friend the centaur could hear her and would not be happy if she used bad words! Even if there was a striped goblin, already up on the platfurm!

"This is why I think this is a bad time!"

"i can fight you!" said the thief to the goblin. "even if it's not very safe up here! i might fall if i pounce, so it's a good thing the witch from far-off lands can HELP ME WITH HER GUN or I MIGHT BE IN TROUBLE!"

Jade Harley, who lived on a rock in not-space and not Cuteopia, could only really see Cuteopia if she tried really hard and frankly, she was not in the mood to do so. To her – and probably to Nepeta if she would just give it up for one minute! – they were inside what had once been a cubicle farm. Well, it looked like one, or at least it had before the giant monster had landed in the middle and upset the whole thing. Equius' subterranean quarters in the lab served as the lab's administrative offices, or at least that was what it had made itself out to be. While some of the offices showed eerie signs of prior use, this cubicle farm had borne more resemblance to a maze than a work environment: with cubicles set up in dead ends and treasure chests stuck into every third desk. In fact, Jade was of the impression that none of the computers actually worked. Even if they had, it would not change the fact that they were just another randomly generated set piece from the great game they had been forced to call "home." Jade snapped up her sniper rifle, the Tottenshot, and searched for the source.
of Nepeta's trouble. Her friend was up in the catwalks that criss-crossed the basement, and the Imp had just cut her off from the mid-boss. "Cover me!" Jade called to one side.

Equius looked up at the causeway and nodded. "Agreed."

He darted past her, politely asking Jade to excuse him as he went, and barrelled into two approaching Imps on the ground. Jade took the opportunity to line up her shot, and as Nepeta approached the Imp, Jade sent a round through the Imp's torso. As ever, the shot left no hole, causing imperceptible damage only in the thing's code. That had not been the point. Instead, it distracted the imp. It looked for Jade, and Nepeta took the opportunity to strike, cutting the Imp through with a stroke of her claws. Marble and health gel pelted down onto the great beast below, and Nepeta followed, jumping off the catwalk and striking hard into the thing's neck. The Adonis reared, but Nepeta would not have been a Rogue if she had let that throw her. Nepeta held her grasp, claws cut deep where the thing would have kept its spine, straight between the crab-like armour plates on its back. It would have been a hideous, crippling blow on a living being; instead, to this simulated beast with no vital organs, no bones beyond the abstract, and nothing that would speed their process, damage was moderate at best. Nepeta continue to cling, giggling.

It was a towering thing, the Marble Adonis, feet taller than any Giclops. It was crab-armoured muscle from head to toe, to the point of grotesque distortion: Jade could see muscle on its dragon wings; she could make out every prominent muscle from seahorse fins to plain-horse face; there was even muscle on the suggestively-placed spinneret that adorned its normally smooth lower body. Jade almost thought she saw muscles on his moustache, which was magnificent one way or the other. To complete the picture, it had a preposterous blonde hair-mane. As Jade understood it, the Adonises were one of the great beasts that were set about the players' worlds, meant to guard important side-quests as mid-bosses, alongside the odd Dersite chess monstrosity. They could command the Underlings, who weren't normally so bright, but as far as strategy was concerned, they relied on the Denizens, the Agents and orders from the Dersite Queen. Since none of those were on hand, the mid-bosses tended to be somewhat erratic.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Equius asked, one Imp under-foot, the other trapped in a headlock. "A shame to destroy it."

"Uh… huh," said Jade. Jade never knew what to say to Equius. It just never seemed like a good idea. In his arms, an Imp struggled and squealed incomprehensibly, beating on his hands.

The Adonis twisted, reached up over its shoulder and grabbed Nepeta, and threw her to the floor. She landed, if at a bit of a roll, but her momentum was too much and she careened into an office supplies cabinet, eliciting a yelp of pain. Jade winced in sympathy. The Adonis pointed to its victim and shouted a command, which three of the surviving Imps responded to at once. Jade pumped a round into the backs of one of the retreating Imps, but again, no luck.

"Of course, this will not stand," said Equius.

The final Imp continued to squeal from its headlock. It seemed especially perturbed that it was not being allowed to follow the Mid-Boss' orders, or at least, that was Jade's impression of "Gur fzryy! Gur fzryy!" or whatever it was saying past Equius' underarm. The Imps were especially simple creatures. Before she and her friends had left their familiar four prototypes behind, Jade had almost gotten a hang of their AI, for all the miraculous effort the game had made to make them seem as lifelike as the carapace-people. She supposed their language must be simple too, though she did not understand it.

Jade swapped out her rifle for her favourite mid-range weapon, the **Curean Blunderbuss**, and closed the gap with the Adonis. Equius put his fist through the Imp's head – in a manner of speaking,
as the Imp collapsed on impact – and followed one step behind. Nepeta rolled to her feet and yelped again, but still made off with a small chest that had fallen out of the supply cabinet. She then ducked behind the rest of the debris and used it as cover as she began to plot her escape. Jade knew that was what she was doing, because she said so.

"...beneath the sad but kind of comfy pile of rubble, the lovable thief considered her options as she rubbed her ouchie leg and wished she had some of the great healie fruit because wow, my foot is not supposed to bend this way, is it? ...Eugh. Oh, that's not nice at all." Equius pulled ahead of Jade, which was best, since it was where he was needed. He cut off the nearest Imp and shoved it hard aside. Nepeta continued her monologue: "She wished the goblins would give her time to heal it herself but they were very purrsitent!" She pulled up on one leg, raising herself just high enough to stab out at another incoming Imp. "the lovable! thief!" Nepeta continued to stab as she narrated, "was very glad! Oh, go away!" She cut a wild cut in front of the Imp. "that her friend the clockwork robot was able to keep the giant at bay!"

A rocket cracked against the Adonis. Now that Jade had a better angle, it was easy to see that Aradia had been keeping the Adonis off of their wounded companion. She had arrived with Equius, having already been in his room for one of her frequent repairs and their mutual… conversations. Jade levelled her gun and fired a flechette of radium into the thing’s spinneret, but Jade did not even think it noticed her compared to round after round of Aradia's small-grade explosives.

Equius tossed aside another Imp, finally reaching the rubble Nepeta had used for cover. His moirail popped over the back with a big grin. He tossed her one of his healing items as she narrated: "suddenly, the thief was rescued by the sudden arrival of the—"

"Nepeta, stop wasting time on this f00lishness and eat your potion."

Nepeta's response, glaring and pout all in defiance of her injury, almost made Jade laugh in the middle of the fight. Nepeta popped the candy all the same, all without breaking her pathetic-death-stare. She broke it only to reach down and, by the sound of things, wrench her own foot back into place as the potion worked its magic.

"equius. catch"

Jade and Equius both looked up, only to see a wall of muscular Underling flesh barrelling in their direction: an arm as tall as them. Jade dove for cover as Equius took one half-step onto the rubble for height and slammed his hands up against the Adonis, seizing its arm. Jade scraped her leg, but the Adonis came off far worse as Equius tried to throw it entirely. One of its legs slammed into the opposite wall as it tried to balance itself, making a noise that resounded through the complex and even threw the Imps off-balance. Not one to be taken off-balance when she could help it, Jade raised her gun again and fired at one of the Imps Equius had wounded. Even that failed to drop the thing. Jade was starting to get irritated. She was a better hunter than this, or at least she had been in the game.

"Are you okay?" Jade asked Equius.

"You could have…" Equius said to Aradia as he staggered under the weight, "…You could have given me more warning!"

"no time" said Aradia. As if to explain, another explosion ripped across the room from the opposite wall. The Adonis began to rise, trying to elbow Equius in the process, but as it did, Jade saw that Aradia had punched a hole in an adjoining hallway. Through it, she could just make out that…

"The glorious cavalry," said Aradia, monotone, "has arrived to save Cuteopia."
The Adonis had barely risen to its feet when Karkat and John, in symmetry, pressed toward it and attacked opposite ankles. The creature swiped at them, but they stepped away, disappearing in a blur of speed and some of Dave's special training. Karkat's blade came away gore-bit with marbled white-purple blood: a special reward from the game for his element. He shook the blade to coax the sludge down onto his fist and rounded for another attack.

The Adonis was bellowing, sloshing its tongue about almost at random in its alien speech. "Gnetrg bhgfvqref!" Jade opened fire on the Adonis in reply, joined in her attack by Terezi and Dave on the fore. The Adonis swung down at them, only for Terezi to grab Dave's wrist and vanish. Jade saw them, that same second, drop down onto the creature's back from above: she had not even seen them take position. Dave left Terezi to begin his own multiplication. On the Adonis' back, Terezi unsheathed her cane, taking the weighted sheath in one hand and her jagged, half cane-sword in the other. She leapt to cut at its face, and the Adonis swung at her with its great bicyclops horn. They both missed by inches.

"Jade!" shouted Nepeta. Before Jade could respond, she felt a wrenching tug on the back of her head. An Imp, imitating the players, had turned their own jumping stunt against them. It had caught Jade's hair on the way down, tearing at her scalp. Jade was immediately disoriented, and another jumped her from the front, cutting across her chest. The weight on her back was relieved only by Nepeta, who ran the Imp through with such urgency that she nicked Jade in the back as well. Jade gouged at the remaining Imp's eyes with her fingernails: the Imp barely responded to her attack, but it sufficed to push the thing away. As it stumbled to one side, Rose appeared with a flash step of her own and stabbed the Imp from behind, on both Quills of Echidna. To Jade's immense frustration, the creature survived even that. Despite a growing sense of nausea, Jade raised her gun and fired into the thing's head. Rose flinched as a flechette emerged, piercing through from one side of the Imp's head to the other.

And even that failed. To the Imp, it was no worse than a blow to its smallest finger, and it barked defiance and snapped crab-claws at Rose. Rose kicked it down, obviously just as shocked by its resilience as Jade. It seemed about ready to get up again when it shook, sat up straight, and then popped into grist.

"Poison damage," Rose said, "from your ammun—god, Jade, your health!" Before Jade could protest, she had Rose's hand in her face, forcing one of John's healing gushers between her teeth. Jade chewed and swallowed obediently, only to be surprised by a shriek at her back. She tried to turn, but Nepeta's hand clapped down on her shoulder.

"Hair in the wound!" Nepeta said. "Hair in the wound!" Jade hissed with pain as she felt what Nepeta meant. The tear in her scalp was healing fast, even if it meant closing about strands of her hair. Nepeta set to work.

Rose tried to pass on a reassuring smile, but quickly turned about to guard her friend. "The Adonis just ordered them after the Humans," she said. "He must know we're a significantly lower level."

"Tell me about it!" Jade said. "Rose, didn't Imps not used to be a problem? Nepeta and I were just walking along and there they were, trying to make a full-sized picture of themselves with a photocopier! We fought for a while, but… I don't know! I'm useless!" Nepeta murmured unhappily. "And then suddenly this big guy was here, stomping through the Village of the Adorapawl."

"That…what?"

Jade tried to wave that away. "The… uh… the over there," she said instead, pointing past the battle to the opposite corner. "And you know, Rose, I know I had some trouble when I first got in the game, but I think this worse, but – ow! – but what do I know? I just hit my head!"
Rose nodded absently. "Where are the other Imps?"

"There's three," Nepeta said, as she continued to work with Jade's hair.

"Two," Rose said. "Karkat got one in the hall. Have you seen the others?"

"No," Nepeta and Jade admitted together. As they spoke, the Adonis slammed a fist into the floor nearby, straight at John. He dodged to one side and struck out at the fist – a blow that went entirely ignored. The mid-boss turned after Aradia and two of the Daves, instead. Rose darted out to grab John by the arm and bring him to their corner.

"What is it?" he asked, flustered.

"The three of us are admitting we're out of our league," Rose said.

"Nepeta?" he said. "You're pretty much the same level as every—oh." His face fell. "You mean me."

"Yes," said Rose.

"Thus the..." He tugged his sleeve. "The grabbing. ...Yeah, okay. There are two Imps left. I say we deal with or hide from them. Anyone have a plan? We'll be safer where we can see them coming."

John said. He took notice of the catwalks. "Jade, can you get us up there with your Spacey-thing?"

"I can get you up there," she admitted. "The Witch thing, iiiit's... mostly other people and stuff. Kanaya's the other way around, I think."

"Okay," John said, "send me and Rose up to that catwalk. I'd windy-thing myself up but this is faster. Nepeta, can you get Jade up there safely?"

Nepeta pulled away from the back of Jade's head. Jade was relieved. "No problem," her friend said.

No 'problem'? Disturbed by the lack of pun, Jade turned about and saw Nepeta trying to hide her right fist inside the cup of her left hand. She was not doing the best job of it, and Jade quickly saw that her fist was covered in slick red. Jade's hand instinctively went for the back of her head, but Nepeta raised her own in caution, and Jade stopped.

"Okay," Jade said, as much to Nepeta as her Human friends. "Ready?" Jadereached up and clapped them both on the arms. Reaching deep inside of herself, she found that strange feeling that had been building in her since the start of the game. She did not know how to describe it, save to call it a flame that burned in her heart: a flame burning green in the shape of a twisting spiral. She felt power surge along the spiral, first to its own core and then in a burst out through her entire body. With a flash of light, Rose and John reappeared on the catwalk above.

John took to his new position faster than Rose. "What's his health?" he asked his friend, all business.

Rose took a look down each edge of the catwalk before checking the game's UI. "Half," she said, not wanting to look any further before confirming their safety. John was of like mind, already heading down one side of the catwalk to check the adjoining passages. As far as Rose understood it, the catwalks were part of the lab's extensive maintenance tunnel system. They filled the upper half of every basement room, and continued into the real access tunnels inside the walls. It seemed unlikely that the Imps would come from those tunnels, but the Underlings did know the layout instinctively.

Below, the battle was a mess. Rose could spot her allies trying to run three tactics at once, and that
was never a good sign. Never minding Jade and Nepeta's retreat to the safest ladders, Terezi and Dave were acting independently of the others. Without John, Karkat was on his own, shouting at the others to help him: "...or we can stay here all day for all I care!" Equius and Aradia lashed out at the monster only at random, as they spent most of their time having one of their talks.

"I cannot help but notice your utter disregard for the good repair of my home and surrounds." Equius was close enough that Rose's preternatural ears could have easily heard him, but he was being loud enough to make it unnecessary.

"Don't be silly." Aradia's synthesized voice was close to monotone, which was often the case with Equius. "If I weren't intimately concerned with the state of your hive, the exits might collapse and trap me in here during one of your extended repairs."

"My repairs take exactly as long as required," Equius said in retort. "If I had any reason to extend our time together, I would simply ask instead of being frustrating and indirect, like certain others I could name."

"Oh?" she asked. "So will you?"

"I..." He puttered about for a moment. "Yes. We shall go on and expedition together. Against these inde% Underlings if nothing else."

Equius might have been wise in choosing the word "expedition" for Aradia, his use of his personal tone was his undoing. Perhaps he used it to rally his confidence – Rose was not sure if the use of tone was ever intentional – but the effect of the demanding, bossy timbre was the same in the end. Aradia made a flat, beeping sound, not unlike a grunt. "I think I'll pass," she said, and flew away.

"Rose!" Jade called from one side. "Found one!"

Rose saw it. One of the Imps: prototyped musclebeast, bicyclops and, most relevantly, spider, was crawling along the walls toward the two girls on the ladder. Its heads hissed at them just before it pounced, and Jade was not equipped to intercept. Fortunately, John had been watching, and the Imp was quickly smashed back to the wall by a gust of wind. Rose ran over to the ladder, not sure what she could do. Use her own powers? It had been so long...

Rose touched on the fire in her heart: that strange, pink, slow-turning sun. Quickly, she gathered an orb of Light in her hand. Her body knew what this was for, muscle memory at work, as it was one of the first and only tricks she had learned before taking up with the Horrorterrors. Unfortunately, the Light responded with all the obedience of an over-eager child. The orb, meant to burst in a blinding attack, did as it was told, but not when she had asked and not at all in the correct fashion. It erupted with a flash, but unlike the practiced attacks Rose had once generated in-game, this one burned the eyes of both the Imp and her companions.

But not Aradia. With the Imp stunned, Aradia reached over and fired a small rocket from one wrist. The Imp was reduced to a scorch mark on the wall, and grist on the floor below.

A burst of Light had no effect on a Hero of the same, and so Rose was able to help Jade to the top as she blinked away the flash's after-effects. "I'm sorry," Rose said, and Jade nodded in response. Nepeta tried to recover without letting go of the ladder. As she waited, something caught Rose's eye – or more precisely, invaded. The game's GUI, impolite as ever, stuck an attack banner across the top of Rose's vision, containing with the words "UNDERLING RUBRICK: CHARGING TIDES". Both Seers shouted to warn the others.

The Adonis, its body channelling Eridan's purple flame, fell to its knees and spread its arms wide
below it. Slowly, it began to pull arms forward, as though they were dragging a great weight. No one in the group cared for the showmanship, and every one of Rose's companions took advantage of the pause to land extra hits on the as the beast's magical power began to gather. There was nothing they could do to stop it entirely, unfortunately. In a moment, a great wall of water appeared as though flowing naturally through the wall behind the Adonis. It rushed towards Rose's allies, leaving them only seconds to act. Up in the catwalk, Rose and her friends were safe, and Nepeta climbed the last few rungs join them. Aradia grabbed Equius, as he was nearby, and disappeared into the time stream, and Dave did the same for Terezi. Jade could do nothing to help her friends from her position, but John snapped up his wrist and launched Karkat off-balance and into the air. Unfortunately, John had greatly miscalculated. The wave that filled the room flowed with full force for some time, and when Karkat landed in the water before John could act, the water grinded him against the wall and buffeted him with clutter and chests. When the water cleared, things looked dim for a moment, but thanks to Troll resilience or game strength, Karkat began to push himself to his feet.

The Adonis stormed towards him, but was stopped when four of his opponents returned to the room from the flow of Time. Nepeta dropped to join them, and the Adonis lashed out against them all at once with its magic. It now seemed unafraid to use its myriad powers, most of which had been so far removed from their animal sources that it defied a logical progression.

"Glad the Imps can't really do this," Jade said to Rose, in a quiet voice. Rose only nodded, knowing she would not be heard over the sound of Jade's rifle. John was participating in the fight with an airborne hammer. Rose could do nothing. Instead, she turned to the walls, the ceiling, every odd crevice, looking for that one last Imp.

Far below, Karkat was carrying on a shouting conversation with whoever happened to pass him by.

"Don't see you saving me from the hundred mile-and-hour wave, Strider," he snipped, which almost seemed polite compared the insults at Equius and Aradia that had preceded it. "Oh, no need to be concerned for Karkat, he's just the meat shield, he's not trying to build up his power with a liquid." Karkat shook a bloody fist at Dave.

"...Look fine, dude," Dave said with a glance. He was right. Karkat may have been covered in bruises and soaked in water, but the parts of his body already soaked in blood remained untouched through some game magic.

"You didn't know that!" he protested.

"Well then do the Bloody thing and get it over with," Dave suggested. Rose could see Karkat had not gathered near enough Blood to use his powers in his element's strange way, but imagined that Dave would not have cared one way or the other. "How's this work, you walk up and squirt it out your eye like a lizard?"

"How about you mind your own business before something squirts out your eye?"

Terezi happened to land nearby. "Is that how it works, Karkles? I didn't actually know!" Rose could only imagine Terezi's hearing was as good as her own. Like Karkat, she kept her eyes on the fight as she talked. "1 JUST F1GUR3D YOU H4D GR34T BLOOD PR3SSUR3"

Karkat frowned at her. "Why would that even—"

"It would explain why his head hasn't popped," Dave said. He was the only one not watching the Adonis, since it would not have been half cool enough to do so.

"See?" Terezi said. "Someone got it."
"All I want to know, between your back-patting and your pre-prepped tailored jibes" Karkat said, as he dodged a shot of webbing, "is why you wasted all your infinite Time saving the one person who knew what was coming."

Terezi grinned at Dave. "H3S GOT YOU TH3R3"

Dave took a beat to put together his response, and was interrupted part way by the Adonis' backhand, but otherwise kept himself together. "Kay-kay, you've got it all wrong. I was the one all swooning off into the lady's arms, blushing waif like I am. Hey, who knew she could time travel? I'll tell you, I'm just a lucky son of a bitch, picking some nice arms to fall in, I think."

Terezi's smile went from toothy sarcasm to smooth and genuine for just a moment, but Karkat continued without interruption. "More like you're a handsy nooksniffer, is what's going on here."

"I'm touched," Terezi said under her breath.

Dave heard her and muttered, "'s what he said," but Karkat was too busy carrying on to notice either.

"But hey, I get it! Maybe you just don't have the mangrit to lift this paragon of wrath on muscles over here, I get that! But hey! Hey!" Karkat was forced to shout after Dave for a while as he ducked away, before Karkat realized that he was not necessarily snubbing him and simply returning to the fight to take a good opening. "Let's ignore that, then!" he shouted to Terezi. "Let's just you and your boyfriend make smart-ass remarks until the giant body-builder falls down dead."

Terezi near shot daggers at him, but if they said any more, Rose careful eavesdropping was interrupted by a call from the side. "Equius, I need to see Karkat!" Rose turned her head to look, but before she caught sight of Nepeta, her eyes locked with a set of white slits perched just above one of the causeway system's dim lights. No sooner had the last Imp seen Rose than it spat a bullet of water out at her, straight from its seahorse-trunk mouth. The projectile struck her hard on the jaw and neck. It hurt – hurt like Rose had never been able to imagine a punch would until she had first taken an Imp's to her eye. For a second she was stunned, and only heard Jade's answering shot before she regained focus and found that the Imp had left its perch and taken to the air on a set of dragon wings. She caught sight of it once again as John retrieved his hammer and readied to face the Imp. It struck their platform hard in its landing, shaking the whole thing.

The Imp lunged at John before he had regained his footing, and swiped out with its claws once, twice, both hitting nothing but air; a third cut landed across her friend's shoulder as he tried to counterattack. The Imp gave a shrill cry, not unlike laughter. But that was a mistake. Here, like in so many places, the Imp showed its flaws as a simulated foe. It had not finished its scripted motions before John returned its attack with a hammer straight to its chin. His second attack went wide, and the Imp tried to capitalize, only for John to duck under and past, tripping the Imp onto the platform behind him. Rose pounced and stabbed once to its face, again through the side, and then a third time to the shoulder. The Imp shrieked and cut up at her in reply, but Rose pulled away in careful motion. Stepping fast behind the Imp, Rose jiggled her left Quill, which caused it to spawn a thick cord from its base across to its twin. Before it could follow her, Rose caught the Imp about the neck in a sharp, garrotting motion.

"Rose!" Jade called. Rose looked up from the struggling, but powerful Imp to see that Jade had once again readied her high-powered sniper rifle. Rose pulled away, and her friend filled the Imp with each shot from her powerful gun's meagre three-clip. The last Imp shattered, winning Jade's cry of "Finally!". Most of the grist went to John, who had ducked in with his hammer, just in case.

A moment later, Dave popped into existence beside his friends. "…Hey," he said as he observed the scene. "Guess I'm fashionably late."
"Aw, Dave," Jade said, "we still need your help. Someone needs to compliment us for that display of sheer combat prowess."

Breathing deep, John gritted his teeth. "Just like old times, huh Rose?"

Rose smirked, catching her own breath. "You mean old times, when you could barely lift your hammer, but we were still routing Imps by the half-dozen?"

"Is it my fault you can't sympathize with the old times?" he asked. He shook his head, and looked over at the fight below. "Sheesh, Rose," John said, "Where's your empathy for a poor useless guy? You psychiatrists have a word for that."

"Sociopathic tendencies," Jade supplied. She patted Rose's arm. "But that's a good thing in here!" Another pat. "A good thing!"

"That's a relief," Rose said. "My desire to turn you all into a collection of decorative hats has been subdued by your show of support."

Dave raised an eyebrow. "Wait, hold on. First tell me what kind of hat. And think carefully, Rose. This will impact the rest of our relationship."

"Oh, I understand," Rose winced as Jade again opened fire on the boss below. "Give me a moment."

"Take your—"

But then he stopped. Rose did not need to ask why: it was not as though Nepeta had flown through the air just for him. The Trolls' Rogue landed just off the Adonis' shoulder, which she pierced with her claws before pouncing to a nearby pillar and then back down to the ground with impossible, Rogue parkour. Equius, who had apparently thrown her, provided a distraction to cover her escape, fist-first. The other Trolls were just as astonished as the Humans, but this was only underlined when Nepeta ran up to Karkat, looked him in the eyes and clutched his face in both hands.

His face delicately cupped, Nepeta looking him in the eye, Karkat looked near about to panic, only for Nepeta to rub both hands down his face. Before the others had even realized what had happened, Karkat's look of horror transformed into a smile, then a manic grin, made all the more enthused and terrifying by the liberal smears of Jade's blood streaking his face: a player's real blood added to his collection. Slowly, the Human and Underling blood all began to disappear, as if receding into his skin.

"Megido!" he called to Aradia, who was helping Equius hold the Adonis off. "Both of you clear out!" Aradia did as her leader instructed. The blood absorbed, Karkat's power flared, and for a moment, Rose could even make out the symbol of Blood catch across the game's interface. "The rest of you! ON. ME!" he called to the others. And then he charged. The Adonis responded as none of them would if facing a fully-empowered Knight of Blood: it dropped to his level and snapped its arm straight out to grab Karkat, but the Knight jumped the attack and lodged one of his sickles into the flesh of its palm. He pulled, harder than seemed physically possible, and near propelled himself up the creature's arm in a flash of red power, high enough to strike at its face. Sgrub gave him no blood as he used his powers, out of a sense of game balance, but that did not make his attack look any less brutal as he lashed out at the Adonis' face, cut past a the creature's attempt to gore him with its horn, and then caught a sickle in its neck as he began to fall back to the ground.

His power was fading, but Karkat was hardly done. "'Rezi!" he called from his position. Terezi was already en route. She cut at one of the Adonis' legs with her blade, slicing a neat blow along one of its marbled stripes, and struck the other with her heavy staff. As the Adonis barked at them in its
garbled language, she jumping up to snatch Karkat safely to the ground. The Adonis went after them, but that only left it open for Nepeta, who vaulted off Terezi's shoulders in her own turn and cut at the creature's hands. Her strikes continued as she moved, coming to a stop on tip-toe atop one of the room's last standing cubicle walls. Dave seemed ready to join them, but the Adonis' pressing attack took it out of range; Jade worked fast to reload. Nepeta worked with incredible speed, but the Adonis was powerful in its own right. One of the boss' fists did break Nepeta's defences, but as her perch tipped to the ground, Equius caught the Adonis' follow-up in mid-swing.

And then Equius began to chuckle. As he and the Adonis fought, Equius reached out his hand for his moirail. Their coordination was perfect, the signals passing between them imperceptible, and Nepeta's hand was virtually ready to meet Equius' before she was even on her feet. In a moment they were up, first on top of the fist and then, with a vault, to the shoulders of the Adonis.

"After you," Equius offered, gesturing to the Adonis' shoulder with his free hand.

"That would be purrfect," Nepeta concurred. Before the Adonis could react, she dropped to her knees and plunged in her claws, to the knuckle.

Her eyes were closed, her hand still clasping Equius' as he carefully kept from squeezing hers in turn. This time, everyone could see the power flow: the room shone blue or green, as one looked to one side or the other or its sources shone stronger than the rest. To Rose, the game was happy to announce a Fraymotif, but she did not pay it much attention, as she could hear the sound. They could all hear it: first a crunch, and then the slow, churning sound of sticking meat that did not exist. The Adonis twitched, and then heaved forward as the power worked inside its body. Rose could not believe it: it would seem that when it came to merging Heart and Void, the game had chosen to be very literal. For the first time, Rose was glad the Adonis had no true organs, and no true sense of pain. What had remained of its health bar expended, the brace slipping further and further off the coloured bar, until it fell and collapsed against the floor. Like all of the Mid-Bosses, the Adonis shook, froze, and then exploded in a shower of grist.

Nepeta took the landing with all of her usual awkward grace as Equius made a practiced landing beside her. While Nepeta brushed herself off at first, she soon was picking at the loose grist on the ground just out of habit. It was, if nothing else, tidy. As the others clued in to the fact that the fight was over, they began to absently join her, all save for Aradia, who simply up and left. Equius watched forlorn as she passed him without a word, but he offered none to get her to stay. He too joined in the work. Part way through their chore, Karkat called up to Jade as she and Rose made their way down the ladder.

"So what, did any of you monkeys level?"

"Good morning to you too, Fuckass," Jade said. She flicked a rifle shell at him, which he deflected with irritation. "Nothing for me."

"Me neither," Rose said with disappointment. John just shook his head, and Dave ignored the question entirely.

"Fantastic," Karkat said. "Because the nine-level gap you four give us from the auto-leveller is really worth the trouble we get from hiding you from fucking Goombas."

"Trolls have Goombas?" John asked as he hit the floor.

"Trolls have Goombas so nasty they'd bite off your face as soon as walk back and forth into you!" Karkat shouted. He then proceeded to do a case-for-case analysis of Human deaths at the hands of famous, Troll-eight-bit opponents.
"I have got to see Troll Mario," John said, interrupting something about Flea Men.

Karkat swiped a hand past John's face. "You couldn't even comprehend the social implications of Troll Mario before he landed his engorged, Red-blooded gut straight on top of your fragile, teen skull."

"Flirtiiing," Jade whispered to him as she passed him by for a heavy chunk of Build Grist. He swiped a hand at her, too. She had been quiet enough for John not to hear, but once again, it had not been a problem for Seers.

"You're damn right he's flirting," Terezi said, at a normal speaking volume. John was confused, but Karkat just played to type.

"Oh, where do you get off?" he asked her, but he immediately changed the subject. "Hey!" he called. "Hey, all of you! All of you, over here right now, this is an official meeting! STOP FUCKING BATHING," he added to Nepeta, who was rubbing her greasy sleeve through her greasy hair. Nepeta happily replaced her hat and joined the circle that formed around Karkat.

"Okay, hi everyone," John said. Karkat's uncharacteristic, if begrudging, silence suggested that this had been rehearsed. "Karkat and I know you're all tired of the surprise Imp attacks."

"That's one way to put it," Rose said, speaking for everyone.

"Well, here's the deal," he said. "Karkat and I had a plan and, in a manner of speaking, you've all been a part of its first attempt."

"What Egbert is trying to say," Karkat interrupted, "was that Seahorse Fabio and his gang interrupted a major announcement we were going to make this morning. From tomorrow on, everyone's work shifts are being adjusted. We're going to send patrols into the Underlab to flush out what's left of the Imps."

"Really?" Jade said to Rose. They were just two voices in the concert of murmured response. "There's so much ground to cover!" Rose agreed: the lab had once been filled to the brim with Underlings. That the Trolls had cleared out a liveable area in the upper floors did not imply that the rest was anywhere near safe.

"On top of that," John said, failing to interrupt the group. Instead, he stuck his fingers in his mouth and blew a shrill whistle. "On top of that," he repeated to listening ears, "we're going to make sure there's a Human on every patrol."

The response to that was grim. Jade and Rose understood, though judging from Dave's usual non-reaction, he knew quite well that "Human" meant only the other three. Rose looked down at her hands, still angry at how useless she had been in the battle, practically until the last moments and even then just to help topple an Imp. It was not a comfortable feeling. Of course she would join the patrols.

"I don't wanna hope for bosses, really," John admitted, "...but that is where the money is, so to speak. Well, the XP. I dunno how many are left, or how the game even does that stuff! ...But don't be surprised if you get called in at random. If there's so much as another Mid-Boss, most of us will be coming." His friends nodded.

"ALL RIGHT, THAT'S IT," Karkat said, in his room-clearing voice. "ALL OF YOU BEAT IT. TEREZI?!" Karkat then coughed, adjusted his voice and repeated himself. Terezi rolled her eyes and walked over from Dave's side. Karkat coughed before he spoke again, as if worried his tone would
slip a second time. "Look, I'm hungry. You wanna grab something to eat, or what?"

It almost sounded like an apology: Terezi certainly looked him over as though she thought the same. In the end, she shrugged. "Sorry, Karkat. We seriously do have some painting to finish." Karkat harrumphed. "It's like what you were ranting! It's kind of hard to get your hands on him these days."

She turned to leave, tapping Dave on the hand as she went. He tossed her a thumbs up, but then turned back to Rose and pantomimed you, think and hat before taking his leave. Together, he and his patron Troll hopped through the mix of rubble and detritus, neither really able to kick the habit of stepping aside to grab the nearest chunk of grist.

Karkat frowned after them. "Not hard for you, apparently," he muttered, so soft that only a Seer could hear him.

Chapter End Notes

For what it's worth, the other classes that can see the GUI are Bards and Mages: Mages because they reshape reality and Bards, because I thought they should be able to hear the background music and decided it was silly to split the powers (let's just say "they're in tune with the game's (ultimately very predictable) beats and patterns"). While we're talking about powers, there's a reason Jade never teleports Equius to help Nepeta. We'll get into it eventually. #excitingnotes

Before you say anything about Jade's Witch powers (and we get tied up in the minutiae about what is and is not a power canon Jade got from Bec or her Sprite), note that the rules I'm using her were carefully defined for the first draft over a year ago. I'd switch over, but since Andrew's still throwing out powers at his usual, leisurely pace (and since Jade's situation makes understanding impossible), I prefer my finished notes to his unfinished. Among these, note Karkat's Blood powers, which I can prove are over a year old via my old throwaway fic, kk_email.exe. I decided it was best to introduce the different powers before Andrew makes them even more different. Ironically, his newly revealed Class rules don't differ much from my own (I probably will adapt those to match), but I'm not going to otherwise hedge my bets. #mindthegap

#didyouknowthat I actually meant the Adonis to be a mid-sized enemy, the size of a Lich or so (but still a Mid-Boss, don't mistake me). That ended when I caught sight of the muscular horse-man living in a tube in the lab's basement when I replayed Alterniabound for layout-checking reasons. Suddenly, I had my Mid-Boss. And yes, I realize the horse-man was probably supposed to be a Dersite Knight, but I have a headcanon that even the big Chess pieces are intelligent, so... By the way, before anyone mistakes my use of "Adonis" to be mis-informed, the original Mid-Boss was going to be a mix of the "attractive male" romance novel model and the actual God of Desire, in an effort to make a more interactive boss fight. ...A more interactive boss fight in my fanfic, yes. Originally, Adonises were going to have a game power divorced from their prototypes that could Charm players (Confusion). I later decided that if I was going to be silly and write about status effects, inevitably Confusing my points of view was just going to complicate things. #nowyouknow

Rose eventually picked did assign at least one hat. John was thrilled. #hashtagjokes #hilarious
Over the next few days, Karkat and Terezi's relationship began to fall apart. Neither made it much of a secret. Both of them were predisposed to fight in public, one for lack of foresight and the other for want of focused spectacle, and as time went on, they spent less and less time doing otherwise. This was not to imply that they fought often. Instead, they fought no more often and no more fiercely than anyone did communicating with Karkat, and that was the problem. Terezi had never communicated with Karkat the way the others had. Either Karkat had beaten her at her own game, or Terezi had lost interest in playing. Dave could not really tell which. He was not even sure how their troubles had begun.

Frankly, Dave had never imagined the hundreds of factors that played into a falling-out like this, Human or Troll. His bro had dated on and off – mostly off – but had never so much as shown Dave any pics, much less talked about why things had broken off with Mystery Name #4. He had certainly never come to his thirteen year old kid brother for a slap on the back or a "Dude was whack, yo." With Karkat and Terezi, he got front row seats. For six days and seven nights, Dave got to watch things play out, and found that it was like they were letting hundreds of little grains of sand slip out of their fingers a pinch at a time, until there was nothing left. Words changed: compliments became less enthusiastic one half-step at a time before evaporating entirely; criticism became complaints. Vantas had never exactly been a wellspring of grace and civility, but Terezi's special exception seemed to have expired at last. Karkat was not likely even conscious of stopping, in the same way that he had not been conscious of starting in the first place. Since Karkat's changes were so subtle, especially for him, Dave could not call Terezi's actions a response, but in the same way her jokes and teasing began to lose their affection. Mutual respect bled. The slope was so gradual that Dave did not even notice when he himself realized that Karkat and Terezi were going to break up.

Dave was not sure what to expect when the same finally occurred to Terezi. He wasn't even sure how much money he'd put on a Troll breakup being similar to a Human, but he figured that so long as it didn't involve a fight to the death or something manic like that, he could probably take it. On the other hand, Dave also figured that Terezi wasn't going to come to him for a slap on the back or an in-depth discussion on whether or not alien dudes be whack, so he got ready for anything. Unfortunately, he had forgotten that he was dealing with a lawyer who liked to be sure she had all her cards in hand well ahead of her court date. She had slipped up beside him as they worked on one of their murals, and then had started talking: cagey, trickster-like, as though every word coming out of her mouth was a secret part of a goodbye prank directed at her soon-to-be ex. Or, at least, that was how it had seemed at first. After a while, Dave had started to pick up a vibe that maybe she was being genuine, if a little weird, or maybe that she hoped the scheme might have a genuine aftermath. Dave realized that he had taught her too well for him to be certain. Either way, Dave knew he did not like the direction the conversation seemed to be inevitably heading, and Dave was going to have to do something about it…

Unfortunately, the inevitable had a way of being put on hold, especially in the Lab. Dave knew that better than anyone but Aradia. In a moment of shrieking force, the conversation with Terezi had to be set aside, so that Dave could deal with Jack. With any luck, Dave could ensure that she would not even notice the lacuna.

Not that the conversation didn't continue to boil over in his mind, as he waited for Aradia to catch up to him. Idiot! he scolded himself. Dave tried not to show his frustration, even if he was alone. But he
forced himself to think about the conversation, and not just because he wanted to plan a good way to deflect it. It was something his late Sprite/Beta-Self had taught him near the end of the game. His feathery alt-self had recommended that, whenever he went back to change the present, he should keep the soon-to-be-repaired timeline in mind, as if the repairs were guaranteed to happen. That would make the repaired timeline more real than the broken one. Otherwise, Davesprite had warned, the broken one was going to eat at him: it would have him wondering who was who, which timeline was really alpha, and other thorny existential distractions that he did not have time to ponder. Wanting to get back to an awkward conversation with Terezi might have struck Dave like a stupid goal to shoot for, but if it meant avoiding the opposite, Dave was willing to call it a win.

At present, he stood on one of the spare meteors of the veil, a half-hour in the past, and shadow-boxed to vent his mixed frustrations. *I am a goddamned… Jab. Naïve. Hook. Idio—*

*Clang.*

Dave looked up at Aradia past his fist caught in her grip, and she looked back with her usual blank of emotions.

"…Ow." he greeted.

Aradia's only response was to say: "Day thirty-eight, hour nine."

"Nah, I'm not doin' it this time," Dave said. "I just didn't keep track, because I don't want to think of myself as a number." Aradia did not respond to that, at least not overtly. In spite, Dave felt like he was on the receiving end of a sarcastic glare. "…Yeah, I'm day thirty-eight, hour nine."

It was an important distinction. Dave and the Aradia-in-front-of-him had come from the lab when it had been thirty-eight days and nine hours since the Humans had arrived in the Troll session, but they weren't alone. There were probably two or three copies of themselves running around in some other part of the Incisisphere, not to forget the ones back at the lab. This Aradia could have been from the future, or could have come from the past without him, and talking strategy to the wrong person could lead to a beta timeline far faster than Jack could gut them.

Since this was the right Aradia, Dave felt he had to start with the critical question. "So did he find us?" he asked. Dave had not had time to confirm on his way out: survival might have depended on them hitting the past very quickly.

"Attack us, yes. Find us, no," Aradia said, and Dave let out a sigh of relief. There was no sense in playing the coolkid on something so drastic. "I'm not sure how it played out yet, but he was nowhere near the meteor Lab at the time" Aradia said. "I'm running what limited information I have right now."

"Did you see how it hit the others?" Dave asked.

"I was in the main lab," Aradia said. "tavr0s: dead. equius: dying. kanaya has a wound in a major artery and is not receiving proper treatment since she's underestimating the danger. shell be dead within the next few minutes, I thi—"

"Hey!" Dave cut in, trying to sound like he only sort of cared. "Past tense."

Aradia shrugged. "Have it your way. Considering we're in the past all of this has yet again to happen, I'd say the tense is wrong in a different way. Which would you prefer?"

"Well I've got a funny idea. Let's try Door #3 and pretend that maybe it's not going to happen at all?" Dave looked her in the eyes, but got no reaction, and all she could make of his was his shades. "No
dead Tavros, no dead Equius, no Maryam suffering to death in graceful, emo Anne Ricey silence. I think that sounds like a good idea. Actually, a lot seems like a good idea when it means nobody dies."

Aradia seemed to decide that if Dave was going to ramble, she was going to continue her list. "j0hns c0nditi0n is g0ing t0 dev0lve int0 a c0ma but hell be all right assuming pr0per medical care"

"Oh yeah, definitely with the proper medical care, when he's the closest thing we have to a doctor." Beyond a frown, Aradia ignored Dave's tone. Sick of their conversation, Dave glanced to one side to look out over the horizon of their small platform. Beyond, hidden by a mess of other floating rocks, Dave could just make out the Lab, sitting peacefully and still intact for the next twenty-seven minutes, twelve seconds. It was "triply safe," Aradia liked to say. There were sensors planted all around it, two very peculiar meteors in orbit, and most importantly, the Heroes of Time were on guard.

"Did you see anything?" Aradia asked.

"No, I was in Terezi's room," Dave replied, kicking up dirt with the toe of his shoe.

"And she…?"

Damn, Dave hated working with robots. Not that he had a very wide perspective on them or anything, but this one always seemed to be able to guess what he was thinking no matter how cool he kept up. Probably scanning his perspiration or something. Calculating his thoughts. Dave had a great Forbidden Planet segue he wanted to make, but part way through putting it together, he remembered that she'd see through that, too. He kept his eyes on the Lab, mostly to avoid looking her in the eyes. "What's the organ that goes right here?" he asked, pointing to a particular spot of her abdomen.

Though they had lowered their hands, Dave's fist was still more or less in contact with Aradia's palm, and she closed her hand about his. Her hand was warm, through some ungodly heating system Equius had installed for some reason Dave did not really want to think about. "You're allowed to… to be upset, you know," she said in one of her off-tones: not quite the intended comfort but all the same not a computer's synth. It was some remnant of her own voice, forced through voice box and ghost combined: a voice that had been forced to struggle free from the clawed feet of the Horroterrors over the course of the game. "Besides," Aradia said, "you don't know what happens to them. Where they go. Does… does that help?" Dave looked back. "I like to think they all get together in the Dream Bubbles still," Aradia said, almost smiling. "I think they're probably happy!"

"Yeah, happy with Rose's old backers, sure." Dave rolled his eyes. "We know how that played out." Aradia opened her mouth, as it were, but Dave shook his head. "Look, it's a bad day. And to be honest, it's worse to leave them dying than dead, okay? They never get it. That doesn't mean I'm going to turn into a weepy faucet about it. Would you?"

Aradia responded only in the slightest way, by gently squeezing his fist, and Dave replied only with a brush of his thumb. As Aradia should not have and did not expect any more from Dave Strider, it was there that she broke their contact. Dave turned about. "C'mon," he said. "Let's find out what did this, and I can go back to having boobytrapped chats with Pyrope and you can get back to whatever stuff robot Troll girls do for fun."

"Boobytrapped?" Aradia said. "That's one way to put it." She too turned back to the Lab, but then added, almost conversationally: "I was studying the archaeological relevance of outdoor load gapers used in Troll society before the invention of plumbing."
Dave blinked, and then concluded that: "…You're joking. That's what this is. This is you breaking
down and finally telling a joke, and it's coming out like Troll Ben Stein thanks to that sexy answering
machine voice your boyfriend gave you."

Aradia shrugged. "You'd be surprised how many interesting finds you can find in an outhouse.
Trolls essentially treated them like waste deposit bins as well as load gapers, so their artefacts aren't
just preserved in the earth, but tend to be chronologically layered."

If Dave had not been so flabbergasted, he might have had trouble keeping a straight face. "You're
telling me that… I'd be surprised what you'd find in Troll shit."

"Yes."

"I believe you."

"You should," she said. And then, after a beat and a straight face, Aradia's voice box let out a burst
of static that almost sounded like a snort of laughter.

Dave was incredulous. "The hell was that?" he asked. Aradia just shook her head and pulled her
music boxes from her inventory. "Hey, c'mon!" Dave said. "The hell was that?" But she had already
disappeared. Dave huffed but followed, and soon they were fast-forwarding time, each in their own
bubble, until Aradia came to a dead stop and Dave landed a moment later. It was exactly two
minutes before the blast, or as Aradia continued to put it:

"Day twenty-two, hour nine," she repeated as he arrived. He wobbled, trying to find his feet on an
rock that had begun to spin as they had left.

"Still me, Aradia," he said, stomping his foot to bring the thing to a halt. It did not.

"Just being sure," she said. She raised her left arm slightly and fired a burst of flame from the palm,
which slowed the meteor and all but threw Dave to the ground. As he recovered, he looked to his
partner and found that the colour of her eyes had flipped as she took to scanning the horizon.

"There he is," she observed. "And there we are." She pointed into the distance. Dave had to set the
magify feature of his shades to see a thing, but soon he too could make out another Dave and
another Aradia in a fight against what appeared to be nothing but empty space. As he recovered, he looked to his
partner and found that the colour of her eyes had flipped as she took to scanning the horizon.

"That's an early one," Dave decided after watching a few blows.

"Day five, hour sixteen," Aradia replied. "It's early, but at the same time, it's one of our first battles
with no – ribbit – need to go back and correct ourselves."

"Well congrats to us," Dave said. "Because now we're gonna have to."

Dave watched every moment of the fight he had already fought, not wanting to miss any important
details on one hand, and not wanting to be upstaged by Aradia's perfect survey on the other. It did
not take him long to figure out that trying to keep up with a girl with a computer complimenting her brain was boring as all hell, and he was a hairsbreadth from weighing just how ironic it would be to ask about the contents of underground Troll shit piles when it finally happened. Past-Aradia broke away in what was accidentally the direction of the Lab. Beams of green power lanced to follow her, darted past, and soon both of the observers understood.

Dave adjusted his shades. "'Hey, John,'" he dictated to no one in particular, "'Check it out. Got a riddle for you. What's got two legs, two wings, one arm and can kill four of us by missing?'"

"Vriska could fly, once," Aradia murmured. Dave looked up at his partner, who shook herself in a very living way, as if from sleep. When her eyes returned to the lab, she was again fully alert.
"sens0rs are facing away on 0n f0ur-one f0ur-three and five-0h" she said, referring to the meteors floating near the lab. "That might account for our missing it. Someone should have double-checked their calibration this morning."

"Yeah, let's go with sensors," Dave said. "Fucking sensors," Dave said, "always failing, giving us bad data, making it impossible for us check the Lab for giant smoking holes before we run back home for the night."

Dave could not tell if Aradia ignored him or not, but she continued her report. "Jack's breaking off," she said. Dave remembered well enough. "We've left. i'm running the data"

"You do that," Dave said. "I know when I'm not needed. It's Data Time, time for the cool guy to step aside while the computer does what computers do best:"

"Done," Aradia said, taking out her music boxes.

"…Black. Fucking. Magic," Dave concluded, though he took out his timetables as well, and reached to turn them back.

"Wait!" Aradia's hand touched down on the nearest timetable. "Something's…" She held up that same hand for silence, and then cocked her head. Dave did the same, but for all his effort could not hear anything out in the void. As Aradia focused on the damaged Lab, Dave caught sight of something else odd in the distance: Jack had stopped his retreat. He too was listening to a distant sound. It was only when Dave turned back, and looked past the Lab, that he understood what was happening. The outer edge of the session was beginning to blacken, as though someone was slowly spilling ink onto the outer edge of a glass ball. It spread, and the world around them seemed to darken, then harden, and before the shade had reached the opposite pole, the session began to split at the edge of reality.

Dave had seen it all before. "'Radia," he said, the words coming quick and urgent. "Lalonde: did you see her before you left?"

Aradia lowered her eyes, which were working another scan of the world around. "Yes. She had just stepped into the room. She was fine. Just fine." Her mind on two topics at once, Aradia pointed to the space just behind the Lab. "Look there," she said.

"How 'fine' was she?" Dave asked. He could just make the thing out with his shades: a bright speck of light in the distance, like a star, white-hot.

"She was tired, but nothing immediately worse than that." Aradia said, though she had to repeat herself, as the sound she and Jack had heard at a distance reached them in full. Dave knew it as well. That shrieking, awful sound: drilling at first, and then rending, as the session itself was ripped apart by the seams. The light in the distance began to spread into a crack that split like glass in a jagged
path that would soon spread along the whole of the game's sphere. Jack went to investigate.

Dave barred his teeth at Jack. "Fine, huh?" he called to Aradia. "That means all it takes for her to bust the entire session like an egg all over the eldritch floor is three dead friends." Well, Kanaya would be dead, but John would look dead and Dave had outright disappeared from a room that had been nearly eradicated by an energy beam, so what was Rose supposed to think?

"Can you blame her?" Aradia shouted back.

"Considering she's doing this?" Dave spread his arms wide to the crack in the distance, though he soon had to shield his eyes. "The last time this happened, I died! And when I woke up I was nearly pancaked by a thirty-foot, grimdark blacksmith!" The major brunt of the sound – the sound of someone's spell boring through the session walls – passed, but Dave continued to shout. "Whoops, three friends died! Better nuke my own house."

Aradia watched the crack spread, eyes unblinking and unprotected. "…You've got a point," she said at last. "If Lalonde is going to go neutron the moment the wrong person or people dies, she's a liability."

"Glad we can be honest to each other about it," Dave quipped.

"More glad you can," Aradia replied, honest in a different way.

Dave knew what she meant, and groaned into his hand. "Look... Do you think it's anyone, or just us and Kanaya?"

But before Aradia could reply, the two of them were interrupted. Near its point of origin, the crack began to split wide, like a jagged eyelid. Though the skies of the game session were now dark and had once seemed transparent, past blinding light and painful tears Dave could see something being exposed beyond the crack. He turned away at once. He knew better than to stare at something like that, at the eldritch things beyond Human and Troll understanding. But when he turned away from horror and terror, he found surprise lurking at his back.

"Morning, Strider," said Rose.

Dave swatted errantly at Aradia, who turned about. He was not at all relieved when he found that she too could see the new arrival. Dave liked his hallucinations the way he liked his poor metaphors: kept to himself.

There was no doubt in his mind that this Rose was a hallucination. Firstly: logic. Secondly: the blanche-white eyes, no pupils. Third: the horrible amount of blood coming from her Grimdark belly, straining through that mangled Squiddle icon of hers. Despite the wound, this Rose kept nonchalant, with one hand hanging innocently behind her back and her body held lax instead of with Rose's poise. Dave was willing to call that 3-b on Dave's Sicknasty-Official List of Reasons Not to Trust Creepy Ghost Roses. Moreover, Dave could still hear things from behind him, no matter how dangerous it would have been to look. Not long after the Horrorterror beyond got its first chance to look in to the Incipisphere, the lab had cracked like a bomb and Dave began to hear another sound with which he was familiar. It was a strange, screaming patch of white noise that had followed the real Lalonde around like a static puppy when she had gone Grimdark in their original game, though Dave could barely make it out over the sound of the session's rending shell. Without a doubt, the real, hopefully-beta Rose had gone for the Thorns of Oglogoth and had gone after Jack. That was bad, but not surprising. That just left the matter of this one.

Just to rub it in, Dave noticed that the hallucination was smiling: indeed, not just smiling but
grinning, as if being there and confounding him was tickling on the edge of the world's greatest gag and all she had to do to seal it was to keep quiet. Even Rose had a better sense of humour than that. Certainly a better poker face.

"So who the hell are you?" Dave asked, though he was not sure if it was really to the hallucination or more to Aradia.

To his surprise, the vision answered in a sense, by pointing behind him. Instinctively, Dave started to glance over his shoulder but he was stopped mid-motion as Aradia cuffed him with the side of her hand. "It's trying to get you to look at the Horrorterror!" Aradia hissed at him. Dave sucked a breath through his teeth and nodded a brief thanks.

"Oh, I get it:" he said as he turned back to the false Rose. "...you're a dick. Why didn't you just say so? Sorry, if I'm ruining your lunch break here, but we'd rather not go dancing off the sanity train. Let me take a shot in the dark, here," he said to the doppelganger. "You're a part of Psychopus, the million-legged clown back there." The false Rose smirked. "And you're responsible for my friend there, I guess?" he asked, pointing back toward the beta Rose.

"Maybe it's the other way around?" said the ghost. Her voice sounded just like Rose's, if someone else was using it.

Aradia was also keeping her eye on the more immediate threat of beta Rose, just on the periphery of her vision. "We should go," she said.

"Gimme time," Dave begged, straight-faced and looking forward. Personally, he agreed with his partner. Indeed, his hands had not both left his timetables even after the strange Rose's arrival, but something about this ghost was making him curious. He had Aradia had agreed on another point, after all: Rose was a liability, and just once – just once – Dave wanted to believe that they could get out of this whole rat trap with Jack without Lalonde losing her shit again. If this fake had been sent by one of the Horrorterrors, it might have answers. "Here's an idea!" he called to the double. "Let's try this again, and don't be so fucking literal! ...Who..." he spelled out: "...the hell... are you?"

The rending sound began to approach in a sense, as the crack started to split through the skies directly above. Beyond, Dave could feel a thousand eyes peering in, as the gods watched a Servant of Terrors fight the unusual Jack Noir. Whether or not the beasts behind those eyes provided Rose with any additional assistance, Dave did not know. All he wanted to do was go back and set everything right.

"Dave." Aradia tapped his arm. "Look down," she said. "Careful," she cautioned, and pointed to a spot between their feet. Dave looked, and there he saw a strange stalk-plant beginning to grow. Just like last time. Lalonde was predictable even when she fiddled with chaos. Though the plant was alien to him, Dave had seen Rose cause ones like it to sprout in the old session, as well. He knew what was next. The Horrorterrors were in, and now everything left in the Incipisphere was going to change. By the sounds of things, Rose had not bought victory for the price, yet again. "Dave, there is at least one hundred-storey tentacle god at our backs, there are eldritch plants growing at our feet, and if we so much as look in any other direction, that would be very, very bad. we have to go"

"I don't want to be here any longer than you do, gal," Dave assured. "Now, I'm gonna ask you for a favour, okay? If you don't like my explanation when we get back, you get two. Just give me a chance to talk to this zombie clone."

"...You get one minute," Aradia said. "Or I'll drag you back."

"Deal."
Rose's double laughed, and then spoke again: "You know what, Strider?" she said. "It's actually good to see you again." And as she spoke, she scuffed her foot in the layer of tight-packed grey sand on top of the meteor. From there, she rather quickly draw a pattern with her foot, and then stepped back.

"What's this?" Dave asked her. She had drawn a symmetrical pattern in the ground: three lines spreading either out or toward a single circle at the symbol's base, with two lines splayed back and one straight.

"You asked," she replied. "This..." she said, deliberately touching the centre line with the toe of her shoe, "...is me."

"...Well, I'm glad we got that all cleared up," Dave said. He committed the symbol to memory but was otherwise not going to give it much concern. "You having fun with the plants?" he asked. He was not sure how else to approach the question of the thing's motives without it catching on to what he was doing.

"Don't be a pain, Strider," said the ghost. "I know what you're going for, I just know what isn't going to hurt me to say."

"And you had been doing such a good job of being genre aware," Aradia muttered.

"Hey, I've still got this," Dave said. But before he could explain how, a black-green fireball swept above their heads as Rose and Jack clashed above. The ghost alone watched them pass.

"Heh," said the ghost, which was decidedly un-Rose-like. "Isn't that funny? Last I checked, you were the type that'd've thrown yourself out there. Be a real Knight, and get yourself gutted all over again. Except now you're outta bodies and it's just too hard to help your friend."

Oh, fuck you you little— "Funny," Dave said instead. "You're not even wasting our time pretending you're Rose."

"I might as well be."

"Uh huh," Dave said. "Well that fills me up. You want any vague and pointless bits of information, Aradia?"

"I'll survive," she said.

Dave smirked. "Awesome. ...Fifty-eight, fifty-nine... G'bye," he said with a wave to the ghost. Aradia hit her music boxes, and Dave was moments behind her.

But this time, it was at least one moment too many. In the split second after Aradia left, but before Dave could follow, the plant struck. It jammed a thorn into his ankle, sending a jolt of intense pain up Dave's leg, which began to spasm. He fell to his good leg, which rapidly lost its strength alongside. The rest of his body, from the tips of his fingers to the tip of his tongue, began to slowly go numb,
and his hand fell flat against the timetables and pressed them to the ground under his weight. In the distance, Dave could see a tinge of green light swell at the edge of his vision, and could hear the sound of Rose, screaming. Still able to hold up his upper body, Dave called out his half-sword and severed the plant just above the root, though the sword slipped from his grip as he swung.

"So," said the ghost. "What you really want to ask me what it is I want. What we want. Let's be honest, huh? Well. We want a lot of things, Strider." What strength was still holding Dave up gave out of his arms. When he fell back, his numb body hit the ground in a strange way. It was as though the surface of the asteroid was beginning to give below him, as though the very rock were shifting around him, swallowing him up. "No one ever wants the same things as everyone else, do they? Not even us." She knelt down, and gently pressed on Dave's yielding body until he was flat on his back.

"You know," Dave said, probably slurring more than he wanted to admit, "real Rose isn't usually this eager to get on top of me."

"Cute," she said, as she took to her feet. Then, she reached out with her foot, which Dave suddenly realized was bare, and filthy, and pushed up on his chin. Dave was forced to look up and back, and so caught sight of the wide gulf that hanged there, spreading through the sky above him. "Me, I like to think this whole thing a lot more personal than it is for the rest. That's why I'm the immediate threat. Get it? You should. You're the one who's seen it all." After a moment of thought, it added: "...How about you see a bit more?"

The ghost pushed with her foot, and Dave's head was tilted further back and, again, the rock shifted away, until Dave was staring straight into the yawning gap. Beyond, he saw a great black space, empty and filled to overflowing. Beyond, something began to move, to reach in, and somehow most offensive of all, to enter.

Dave Strider balked, or at least he did at the core of his personality, yet untouched by what he was beginning to see. This was no way to go. Dave Strider was not going to go gibbering off into that good night just because a zombie best friend tapped him on the jaw. Trying to outpace the contradictions his eyes were feeding him, Dave reached inside. He didn't know where the timetables were any more, but he didn't quite need them. Not for all his powers. Not if he wanted to... stop.

Of course, there was little he could do without Aradia once he had stopped, but still...

...Dave recoiled the moment he returned to the present. Whatever it was he had seen before freezing himself in time caught up to him as the seconds began to flow again. His arms and legs thrashed out at the bodies he felt crowding him, and he began to hyperventilate, his lungs soon forcing out more air than they took in. He did not even notice, at first, that it was strange that he could move again at all. Hands held him down, somewhat: warm hands, and one that slapped him across the forehead. A strange, soothing sensation accompanied the pain of that slap, and for a moment, all Dave could do was focus on it until his breathing returned to normal, his thrashing stopped, and his mind settled. It took him a moment to realize where he was, and that the false Rose was gone. It took him a while longer to realize the Horrorterror was gone as well.

As he truly came into himself, Dave also realized he was not wearing his shades, but quickly found them presented to him from a grey hand.

"Here, you big baby," said a familiar voice. Dave snapped on his shades, and tried to look at Terezi only sidelong to stay aloof. She did not seem much impressed. She was dishevelled, wearing a ratty old t-shirt he knew she used as pyjamas, and still dripping with sopor in places. As Dave came to his senses, he realized he was in her bedroom. Aradia was just beside him.

"Thank you," she said to Terezi. "We'll be going back now."
"Whatever," Terezi grumbled. "Just get out of my room." She turned away, not further acknowledging Dave.

Aradia hefted Dave to his feet without much ceremony, set his arm over her shoulder and led him out of the room. He found that he had some trouble moving his legs, and was only willing to keep up if only because Aradia was making it clear that he had to or she would leave him behind.

"When are we?" he hissed to her, though his tongue felt heavy. Only his head was still clear.

"A week ahead," she said. "Day forty-four. I've already gone back to deal with Jack's attack, but I couldn't exactly walk in on the Terezi of the present while you were having a conversation with her. Don't worry, though. Everyone's fine. We can probably assume that no one so much as blinked."

"And what does Terezi have to do with—"

"You were losing your Mind," Aradia interrupted. "I wasn't sure how bad it would be when I brought you back from your Time Freeze, so I went to her before bringing you back. It looks like I was right." Her synthesizer made a sound like – but in quite a few obvious ways unlike – she was clicking her tongue. "I almost hated to bring you back," she added. "You looked very peaceful."

"More like dead, you mean," Dave said. Noticed her volume, Dave made a point to keep his voice down as well.

"I don't think she was very happy I woke her," Aradia admitted, returning to the subject of Terezi. "But weird thing: she didn't ask why you had ended up like you did. Have you told her what's going on?" Dave shook his head, but Aradia had no other explanation.

"So give me the full details," Dave asked as they walked. Together, the two of them began their walk to the roof. Dave knew the route well, as he had often had to take or fly past Terezi's infinite sets of stairs to get out of the Lab in an emergency. "What happened after I turned off my clock?"

"Well, I had noticed you weren't with me immediately..."

Aradia replied with the full narrative: how she had returned to the scene of the incident and found Dave's temporally paused body looking like it had been half-swallowed by the meteor, which had seemed to melt in the area around his body and thrashed around him as if in violent tides. "The false Rose was saying that something was 'Awful,' but I was not really in the mood to eavesdrop."

"I 'preciate."

Aradia had engaged the ghost, who had proven far more physical able than the real Rose, exasperated by the fact that Aradia had been forced to limit her field of vision to avoid the Horrorterror. All Aradia had needed was a moment to grab Dave's body and escape, but the ghost had stretched the fight out as long as possible, wrestling with his robot partner hand-in-hand before suddenly vanishing. Aradia admitted that she was too hasty in how she tried to get back to Dave's body the moment her opponent had vanished. As a result, she had almost been taken out by Jack, who must have come to see what all the fuss was about. Dave asked Aradia if she knew what had happened to the beta Rose that had summoned the Horrorterror, but Aradia could only shake her head.

Aradia continued. "Of course, I know how to deal with Jack," she said. "At least enough to run away from him, for once, and I made it before he saw the Lab. But when I reached your body, the false Rose reappeared. Only momentarily. And she signed me a message, in ASL." Aradia demonstrated the signs: "She said, 'Be seeing you.' And she held on 'see' for a moment." The sign for
"see" involved the eyes, and Aradia flicked hers to bright, white lights to substitute the ghost's.

"There's an Alternian Sign Language?" Dave asked, but as he didn't really care, he changed the subject. He filled Aradia in on the limited scene she had missed, and the ghost's line about its mysterious 'we' not agreeing with one another. "So what are we thinking here?" Dave asked as he wrapped up. "You think that really was an avatar of one of the Trans-Plutonian Squiddles?"

"That seemed to be the only question it was happy to answer," Aradia admitted.

"Yeah," Dave agreed. "Even if all it said was…" He drew the three-pronged glyph in the air. Aradia nodded. "I'll start checking our Internets," she said. Dave was willing to let her have it. Aradia's "checking the two internets" was nothing like a meat person's.

Dave tried to think of something he could do to help out. "And I'll… I'll hit Rose with 'physician, heal thyself' until she sits down on her own couch? Fuck, I don't know."

"One step at a time" Aradia advised. As she did so, she came to the topmost step of Terezi's stairs, and walked out onto the roof of the Lab. Dave followed after her, and looked past the edge and above. There, high above them, orbited one half of their second line of defence. It was a small, purple meteor, modelled as a facsimile of Derse. On the opposite side of the Lab, far below their feet at present, was the false Prospit. To Dave, they now seemed more necessary than they had in some time. Oh, Dave had seen what Rose had done to their game session. So had John, and Jade, and all the Trolls watching from their computer screens. When they had united in the Trolls' session, they had decided that they had to do something to prevent it from happening again. Talking to Rose was only half of it. Before they had fallen lax and all their plans had swirled down the metaphorical drain, the fifteen of them had put all their energies into creating those two rocks with all their game knowledge. The false Derse and false Prospit kept their sleep dreamless, and keep them all out of the dream bubbles in the realm of the Horrorterrors. Safe.

"Hey," Aradia said, as she, too, looked up at their work in the sky. "I know you promised me an explanation for your stunt, but I do… I think I get it. I know you don't want to lose Rose."

"You don't get it," Dave said, and he laughed. "Maybe the other Trolls, not you. Let's be serious here. But that's okay. You can pretend."

Aradia's voice box harrumph-crackled. "Even so. But we still should have left in the first place. You can judge all you want, but I don't want you dead. You saw beta Rose try against Jack, Grimdark and all. She lost. He's not playing by the rules, so we need to break the rules in lock-step or we lose the game. You're the only one I can rely on to do that right now."

"Hey, don't think I don't get it," Dave replied, not breaking his look on the moon. "Who was the one who locked himself in time with no way to get out on his own?"

Aradia smiled, though Dave only caught it out of the corner of his eye. "Fair enough," she said. "But I think I'll leave you here. You have to get back to your 'boobytrapped chats with Pyrope.'"

Dave frowned. "Right. Well!" he said, trying to fake amused, "you have fun with all your Troll shit about Troll shit."

"Thank you, I will," Aradia said, and she waited for him to take his leave. Robots could always afford to wait – Dave wasn't particularly fond of them for that, either. Dave took out his timetables, but hesitated to leave, as he was not quite in any hurry to rush into a loaded Terezi. Still, he had an image to maintain, and left before it became a thing. He stopped, practiced and proven, with two
minutes to spare before he would have to be in Terezi's room to swap out for himself. The false Prospit hung high above him, and Aradia was gone.

Normally, when Dave returned to the Lab, it was to collapse into bed and sleep until his alarm went off just a handful of hours later, screeching S Club 7 CDs at him until he couldn't possibly lie there any longer (some days he would sing along, instead: had to mix it up for Jade and John before they started to get ideas about where he stood). Some days, if he was feeling gnarly after the fight with Jack, he would sleep in the shower instead. Today he did not much have that option. Dave mussed up his hair, hoping to disguise the sweat before he remembered that he was talking about Terezi, and the conversation came back to him. Dave shook his head, wishing double that he could just up and go to bed, but he figured it might be better to nip the entire awkward subject in the bud. He'd be honest, he figured. Terezi'd understand. After all, it seemed like sometime between here and there, he was gonna be honest, so why not now?

Ready as he was going to be, Dave headed back toward the lab, cool as he could muster.

Rose entered the main Lab half-asleep, but otherwise composed. She had not been sleeping well lately, what with Karkat running her through the ringer on "Imp Flushes" for the "Basement Reclamation Program." Today she was off of both flushing and data work, and so she had celebrated with the traditional Human bout of oversleeping. Rose was not fond of the Imp flushes, which was a polite way of saying that she would have rather tried to gain levels by murdering Karkat the next time he gave an order, or perhaps Eridan, the next time he tried to hate-flirt with her. Sadly, that would pretty much be the next time either of them were so much as in the same room with her. At least Eridan left off if Vriska or Tavros was there to dissuade him. Still, Rose wondered if Karkat suspected why Eridan kept volunteering for her shift. By and large, Rose did her best to simply ignore Eridan, though that somewhat involved dreaming elaborate fantasies where Karkat and Eridan hooked up black and made each other's lives awful for one another, but after a while, Rose realized that that would just make Eridan happy and that was not her business. Nuisances aside, Rose had gained exactly one level from the flushes, mostly thanks to the experience she had been sitting on from her session. It had been the closest Rose had felt to 'good' in days.

Rose had had one other bright moment in the past few weeks, namely the night before. Though she had to admit it was one of the reasons she had overslept that morning. That noon. Whichever. Rose had been on a flush the night before, and the Lab had thrown salt on her wounds by making sure Nepeta's quarters had been freezing cold. Kanaya had found her shivering on her return, and had checked on her condition. Her so-called friend had then driven Rose into legitimate worry by "diagnosing" her with some horrible Troll disease. Kanaya had held up the act for almost half an hour before Rose caught on to the symptoms getting sillier and more outlandish. When she realized the game was up, Kanaya stuck around when Rose went for hot chocolate and mint, and their conversation had turned into one about real Troll diseases, the threat of communicability and the ethics of quarantine over culling. Rose did not regret choosing stimulating conversation over sleep, or at least not so much as... well, she supposed sometimes you reap what you sow. But speaking of reaping what you sow, Kanaya had not yet apologized for her prank, and so Rose had half a mind to work revenge into casual conversation before the day was up: plans which were quickly derailed.

Rose found the main lab to be in its usual late-morning mess. While there was an active patrol in the Underlab today, it was ostensibly Dave's shift, which meant the Trolls on shift were working alone. Kanaya smiled in greeting from her computer chair. Tavros was busy doing data work, as was Karkat himself, but neither seemed to be paying all that much attention to their screens. When he wasn't being actively distracted by Vriska, Tavros was sneaking glances over at Eridan. Karkat was just straight-up watching the program on the TV screen, and was making his disapproval known.
"Oh no!" called a high-pitched voice from the screen. "If Plumbthroat steals the ballots, he'll ruin the Model UN!"

Rose stopped walking towards Kanaya.

"It's like I'm being keelhauled," Karkat griped. "This is scraping the skin of my back with barnacles made of nostalgia and filling my wounds with salt water and saccharine. Both of you are going to pay for this. My foot's going to be so far up your excretion gap, you'll taste heel."

A Human hand appeared over the back of the couch to flip Karkat off. Rose approached the couch warily, and found Jade and John watching from there.

"You're watching Season 1," she said after a moment.

"Yup!" Jade confirmed.

"...Why?"

Rose looked up at the screen in some horror, and glaring neon and anime sheen stared back at her. The main cast was gathering on Main Street to discuss the plot, as ever, and Rose was ashamed to say that she could name every one. The kindly Butterscotch. The zealous Mint. Over there was Creamsickle, who had too much imagination. On the right was Rocky Road, who in localization had been made a token (mottled) black boy. And there was first season lead, whom the first season's localization team had given a voice shrill enough to shatter plate glass: Raspberry. Oh yes. Rose knew even the original Squiddles.

"Do they ever stop smiling?" John asked, who looked like he would never stop smiling, himself. Rose could only imagine he was discovering his televised utopia, but it was hard to tell with John.

"Not until they get cancelled and handed to a team that's actually heard of facial expressions," Rose said, still not sure she was really awake.

"We had better go!" shrieked Raspberry. "But before we do, let's all—" The audio skipped as it fell into a stock clip: "—hoooooold hands for:"

"SQUIDDLE! POWER!!"

Right. That. Rose rubbed at her temples to dispel the effect the flashing lights had had on her vision, but could not help but watch afterwards, hypnotised. This was definitely twisted enough to be one of her nightmares. Hopefully the Horrorterrors had broken past the False Derse and were slowly dragging her into insanity?

Rose was shaken out of her snark several minutes later by what sounded like an explosion above them. They all jumped in their spots and looked straight up, no one with more urgency than Aradia, who had been sitting quietly plugged into her computer. They kept listening until the sound of voices came from just below them in the transport hub. A second pause followed, and then the noise picked up at full force right in the middle of the lab.

"Stop running away from me!" Terezi appeared in the room a second after Dave – which did not even seem particularly safe. Dave flicked his eyes about the room, as if taking stock of his audience. Terezi only had to yell a few more words before Jade reached the pause button on her remote, since the giggling of a half-dozen Squiddles seemed more than a little impolite.

"I'm not running away from you!" Dave replied, but Terezi was fast on his tail.
"No, you're just trying to get in public where you think I won't shout at you!" When he tried to object, Terezi cut him straight off: "Seer of Mind!" Rose was not entirely sure how honest Terezi was being about her powers, but was not about to second-guess Terezi as she struck out, fists trembling. Rose had seen many threatening things in the game, but nothing had struck her as dangerous as Terezi did at that moment, as she corralled Dave against a desk with her one finger. Terezi and Dave were both covered in dirt and dried paint, but Terezi emanated pure Troll rage in every muscle, and though she was bare handed Rose would not have said much for Dave's chances if she decided to attack him. A teal streak cut through the grime on one side of her face.

Terezi jabbed Dave in the chest with her finger. "You're a dick, Dave Strider. You don't know when to keep your mouth shut. You want to turn your stupid pink tail and run? Fine! But this isn't over. You just wish it was. I WILL M4K3 YOU HURT FOR TH1S!" Terezi reached up to adjust her glasses, though Rose saw it was just an excuse to wipe at her nose and sniff back tears. As if worried that Dave or someone else had heard her, she immediately lashed out: "You couldn't even pretend! You couldn't even pretend to care how I felt, because you're too busy pretending that you don't! Who does that?" She swept an errant look about the room, as though demanding an answer. "1TS OV3R" she said to Dave. She took a step back, as if to turn, but then stalled. When no counterattack came, verbal or otherwise, Terezi left the room as she had come, in greater fury.

The room was left in silence. Rose took a check of the place and was appalled to see first Vriska, who looked like it was Twelfth Perigree's Eve, and then Karkat, who looked even happier. Dave, on the other hand, having said nothing in his defence, and added nothing now. He cast a meaningful look towards Aradia, and then a peculiar one to Rose that she could not make out with his shades in the way.

"Oh my god Strider!" Vriska said. "What did you do?"

Dave broke eye contact, to remove his shades (he kept his eyes shut) and rub them against the hem of his shirt. When he had replaced them, he announced "I'm out," and headed for the transportalizer.

"Dave, wait!" Jade called. She scrambled over the back of the couch, past Rose.

"Yeah, dude!" John said, following after. Dave ignored both of them, but they followed him through the portal. The room was again silent, except for Vriska who was cackling to herself. Rose turned her astonished face up to Kanaya, but Kanaya was already glaring at Karkat, who had taken John's spot on the couch and had restarted the DVD. Kanaya got to her feet and slapped Karkat across the shoulder.

"What?" he said. He looked from Kanaya to Rose "What's with those looks?"

"Aren't you going to… I don't know…?" Kanaya suggested.

"What? …Terezi?" He looked back and forth between them. "You gotta be kidding me. Gonna play a big joke on poor Karkat, huh?" His sarcasm was evident, but when they refused to budge, he at least admitted to it. "Look, all right? You want me to go up there and go 'There, there you big blubering idiot,' right? But guess what? Terezi doesn't wanna talk to me. She and I have been on the rocks for weeks now. Big, sharp pointy rocks!"

"Weeks?" Rose asked, sarcastic. Karkat just jabbed a finger in her face for interrupting.

"Now, if I go up there right now after she's been having a fight, she is going spear me on one of those rocks like a grub kebab." He demonstrated with one of his hands, 'impaling' it through the fingers with the other. "Now, the alternative is for me to sit down here, basking in the idea that Terezi and Strider hate each other! The spiteful, dead-ended Human way, even! So either I do one
thing, and get screwed over, or I just stay here, and my life is stu-pendous! This is the best news I've had since you punks showed up and started chafing me day-for-day! You actually want me to go up and step in it?"

"...I'll go," Rose said, not wanting to listen to Karkat any further. "Someone should. I suppose I could... try to apologize for him? For all we know, Karkat's not the only one being a dick here." She shook her head, ignoring Karkat's dismissive spit from the couch. As Rose moved to leave, she reached out a hand to brush Kanaya's shoulder to get her attention away from Karkat. "See you," she said.

"See you," Kanaya whispered.

Rose did not much mind the elder gods as she passed them on her way through the transportalizer, and they did not much mind her in turn. Rose found Terezi's transportalizer unlocked, perhaps forgotten, and took it before its owner could change her mind. Beyond, Rose found the startings of a long mural Terezi and Dave had been drawing, which went off into the distance and equal parts impressed and detracted Rose. Rose went along for quite some time before she came to the unfinished end of the mural, where she found the source of the loud noise that had started the whole affair. Embedded knee deep in the floor, at the edge of a massive gash in the tiling, was Terezi's original cane. Rose was not entirely sure she wanted to go past that point, the literal line in the ground between her and Terezi. She could not imagine the sheer game-driven force that had gone into the swing. She was starting to regret coming up here with no information. What on earth had Dave done?

Rose went on, to knock on doors and check down corridors, before finally going up the long stairs to the roof. There she found Terezi perched on the edge, legs dangling over the side. One hand lay limp in her lap, and the other was held clutched to her face, spread wide over shadow-cast eyes. When she heard Rose approach, Terezi lifted her hand and took a sniff of the air. Her face screwed tight with anger at first, but all she ultimately did to communicate with Rose was to look away. Rose stopped her approach. Above them, the sky struck black in all directions, save the false Prospit hanging high.

Terezi snapped back to attention well before Rose was ready for her. "What do you want?" she asked.

Rose did not reply. She was not entirely sure what she wanted herself. In a manner of speaking, she felt like she was simply there out of propriety, and it was now very clear that Terezi was not going to fish for comfort. Terezi took a moment to glare Rose down before continuing, but instead of piling on the passive-aggressive hypotheticals, like Rose would have expected, Terezi repeated her initial question, legitimately: "What do you want?" She was brusque that time, as though she felt that if she could ask quickly enough, Rose would be gone all the faster.

"...I want to talk," Rose said. It was automatic. Terezi was upset, and wasn't this what Rose had always at least pretended to do when the time came?

"Talk about what? Sit me down on your couch? T34R INTO MY H34D" Terezi had turned enough so Rose could see her dagger teeth, perhaps not truly not as sharp as Terezi wanted to pretend, but more than sharp enough. "...I'm the one that does that here," Terezi said. She tapped her temple.

"You don't know the first thing."

Rose started to step forward, but Terezi slammed a hand down onto the roof beside her. The stone buckled under her hand. "No!" she snapped. "You don't get it! You think I haven't seen you? You think I haven't seen you trying to ditch Eridan and Vriska like the... plague they both are? You think we haven't all seen? You won't even talk to them straight when it really matters! You have to go around, and around, in circles, like you think it's a good thing, and you think I'm going to let you..."
come here and play head games with me?"

"Is that what he did, then?" Rose said, trying to keep the conversation focused whether Terezi wanted it or not. It had been clear that Terezi was going to continue trying to change the subject, and Rose found her patience was at a premium. "You told him you like him, didn't you?" Terezi growled in reply. "Don't be ridiculous, we've all seen it coming for weeks. Everyone but the two of you. What? Did he not give you the decency of a 'straightforward response'?"

"Strider?" Terezi asked, sarcastically. "What if he didn't? Dave Strider's an ass." She swept her arm across the rooftop. "I'm sure everyone here is so surprised, too! Dave Strider? An asshole? You think…" she started, but paused to turn and take to her feet. "You think that I'm here because Dave, fucking, Strider doesn't know when to stop playing head games? Yeah, sorry Rose, I know him. Maybe not perfect, but well enough for that. Better than you know me, at least… or… or any of us!"

"I'll choose not to take that personally," Rose said.

"Oh, well CONGR4TUL4TIONS! You're going to do just… fine." And where Terezi had not let Rose come near her, she walked straight up to Rose. Terezi was short an inch on Rose, but that only allowed Rose to see over her glasses, where she saw eyes like two dried wounds on her face, tinted in a faint teal of tears already passed. "Not going to take it personally, Rosie? Not going to take it personally, when Vriska finally gets tired of you poking around in her life and goes volcanic?"

"I intend to be out of the way," Rose said, testy. "You want to talk about Vriska and Eridan? I can do that. The way I see it, there's no reason for Vriska to go ballistic at present, and I don't intend to exasperate her."

"Vriska Serket doesn't need a reason!" Terezi snapped. Her voice was rasp. The young Trolls had always struck Rose as a little deep-throated, even the females, but Terezi's voice had gone into a rumble that would have done her well in a future in court. "God help you if you give her one! You haven't talked to her, you haven't hunted with her. You do. Not. Know. Her. and what you're doing is going to get you killed, and you will deserve it!" Terezi threw up her hands, and suddenly began an impression of the Spidertroll. "Oh, 'We should be partners,'" she recited, "'That's so aw8some! You're the best moirail ever, did you know that? FFF—" Terezi paced a small circle to recover herself. "Murdering innocents on my watch, the second my back was turned. And if you rub her face in it, and is she sorry? Oh, very. Very sorry, Terezi. And then she pushes Tavros off a cliff on a blackcrush impulse, and just when I'm trying to pull everything together, Aradia… Aradia…" She shook her head, again and again. "Tell Kanaya she's an idiot! Picking up Vriska right after that? Is she insane? Just because she felt a little flushed one afternoon and didn't know how to say? Idiot! If you knew anything about Vriska Serket, you would already have told her you were done. Carved it in stone! Bronzed it! Vriska ignores pity and she doesn't deserve hate."

There was venom in that, venom Rose could not place but could taste in the air. Terezi rounded about and put distance between them both again. Rose did not know what to say, and did not make the mistake of trying to do so in spite. Terezi paced for a moment, but when it seemed that the topic had died, Terezi spoke up again.

"So what did he say?" she asked. "Once I left?"

"Which one?" Rose asked. "The one who just pissed you off, or the one who didn't come as soon as he knew what happened?"

To Rose’s surprise, Terezi almost laughed. "…Let’s try both."

Rose sat down. It was the only thing she could think of doing to look casual, and began to fidget
with her hands to carry on the illusion. "Dave left," she started. "I think he went to his room. John and Jade went after him."

"Did he say anything?"

Rose shook her head. "Karkat was… less than kind. He made excuses to not to come up here."

Terezi looked away. "Fuck him," she said. "Fuck him and his candyassed… wriggling…" Terezi's attempt to parrot her former matesprit's insults fell to the side. "…Fuck him."

Terezi broke away and returned to the edge of the roof. Rose, who was still not sure if it was safe to approach, squatted on the rooftop far behind her. As she sat, Rose churned the situation in her head. Frankly, she wanted to leave just as Terezi had near-demanded, but something kept her. …Empathy?

It was not doing her much good, as Terezi soon began to ignore Rose entirely, and instead stared straight on. At first, Rose thought that she was lost in deep thought, with her face turned up toward the sky, but soon, she began to fidget with her hands, on and off. Only her face was not moving: it seemed as though she watched some invisible point in the sky, and kept lock on it. After a while, Rose realized that Terezi was talking to herself, but Rose could hear no sound. Terezi's lips moved only a little, but her hands picked up the motions: first her fingers, and from time to time, her whole arms. At last, whatever she was dictating came to its conclusion, and Terezi looked down at her lap.

But as she did, the second after her eye contact had broken with that invisible spot in the distance, Terezi let out a choking cry and an uncontrolled look of misery passed over her face. She hid her face from Rose at once, shocked and perhaps even frightened at her own emotions sprung from nowhere to overcome her the moment she had lost focus. Rose started to her knees, to move forward, but Terezi had recovered enough of her bearing to lash out with her palm and warn Rose away. Doing so seemed to cost her composure a second time, and so Rose obeyed only with hesitation.

Terezi braced her head against her free hand, as if trying to gently suffocate further outbursts. She then took her outstretched arm back to her chest, and clutched it close, like a normal girl.

Don't think like that, Rose scolded herself, but it was hard not to. Terezi's cheeks were flush teal with embarrassment, the teeth that bit at her own lip could tear flesh from bone without trouble, and in and idle moment, Terezi pushed a lock of hair over her nearest horn. But she was still a teenaged girl, wasn't she?

Terezi breathed deep and seemed to test her own lips before she risked saying what it seemed she had meant to say when she had first begun to turn. "...When I was… about two or so, I learned to read," she said, and waited for Rose to acknowledge that she was listening. When Rose nodded, she continued: "Or maybe I started to like reading, or read interesting things for the first time, or something. And one night I just had to show my lusus, so I went to… to read to her, and…" Terezi sniffled. "And I think she liked to listen, so we started doing it all the time. And after a while, I think stopped doing it because I wanted to show her and it started to be just something we did? Especially if I wanted a distraction. I mean, we couldn't really talk in the normal way."

Rose, still wary about speaking up and shattering whatever had inspired Terezi to speak to her, leaned forward to communicate her interest, though she did not approach.

"Back then," Terezi said, "I used to have this really old book." Terezi looked down to her hands, which Rose realized were posed as if holding the tome. "Found it somewhere. Used to read it… all the time. It was a collection of old fairy tales, and fables… lectures, really. Last-generation propaganda, that sort of thing. My favourite, was… uh…"

Terezi turned, somewhat, partway towards her invisible point in the distance, her feet firmly on the ledge. She gathered her focus, and then began to recite.
"…Once upon a time…" she started, and as she spoke, her shaking tone was slowly replaced by practiced recitation. "Once upon a time, when the world bled with the deaths a thousand loyal Trolls in the face of shock rebellion, there was a soldier who lived in the northeast, where he lived a simple life and was content. And when he was called, no matter the night, or the weather, or the state of the world, he would stand for his empress and fight. And when he was allowed to rest, he would gather his closest companions to his table, where they made hobby and trade in the making of small wooden figurines.

"His moirail, a blacksmith, provided the tools, and tended to them as they sat and spoke together for all the time it took the project to complete. The soldier's kismesis, a soldier of like stock, would go into the forests, to find wood as per the terms of an arrangement that had been made between them, and would bring it to the soldier and his companions. The soldier's matesprit would work with drawings, planning the figurine, drawing out the shapes of Trolls, and beasts and scenes, to give each its perfect form. And the soldier would work the wood, and detail them, for he was ever skilled with a knife, and had no equal in battle or trade or show. He could cut with it, spin it, throw it in the air and catch it, hilt or blade without harm. He could throw it to a target, or he could sit with his companions and use it to carve out truth and fantasy, embellishment and detail, and he was content. And whenever he had finished, and brought that perfect form to life, he would give the figurine to two others. They were rivals, a couple he had guided in the way we call auspistice today. Together, the couple would paint it the figure in every colour of cloth and blood, or bark and soil, and they made the figures real. Together, they made figures and scenes, from near at hand and far away, from beyond the mountains and the oceans, or in the depths of the seas, which they had never seen but shaped with uncanny realism. They carved glories in the stars, and horrors in the pits, and heroes and villains alike. Together, the soldier and his companions could make the world breathe without ever leaving their workshop. And they were content, to sit and speak and work together.

"Now, as often happened in those days, when the world bled, there came throughout the land a call to arms and readiness. The time of great battles and great monsters was long over, but unity is a forever war, and the Empire fought its rebels. The soldier took up his weapon alongside his companions and went to the front and the lines as the Empire demanded of their talents. And they fought in petty battles, for what glory could be found, until each night was done. And the night came when the kismesis of the soldier fell in battle, and died, though the soldier stood by alongside, fighting with tooth and claw and glutted knife.

"When the war had ended, the soldier returned to his home, which his moirail had kept in his absence as he made weapons for the Empire. And the home was clean and tidy, and so the figures waited, in rows and rows, full of colour and intricate life. And the companions sat at their table. The soldier's moirail tended the tools, and went out into the forest, to gather the wood. The soldier's matesprit would work with drawings, planning them down into the shapes of beautiful trees and hideous plants, and soldiers in dress and rebels in rags. They would make the sights and sounds they had seen in the field, and recreated the places they had been, far beyond their homes. And the soldier took the wood, and worked it, and his pieces were beautiful, but lifeless. His trees were dead where they should have breathed in the wind; his soldiers stood stock and still, like any wooden toy. The land the companions made for their set looked dry, no matter what effort the feuding rivals made to paint it.

"And the rivals began to joke that the Troll figurines were corpses, doomed and lost in a hellscape. They said that they would paint the soldiers bled out, so the blood might show some sign of life, and feed the land. And so the soldier began to lose the respect of the rivals, and over time they went another way. And one so died.

"And the night came that the companions gathered again at the table, and set to work. And the moirail tended the tools, and gathered the wood. And soldier's matesprit pared her designs, down into
the shapes of things they knew would rile the soldier, and spark the fire of craft in his heart. But the quality his work did not improve, and there was no paint to make them real.

"And as time went on, the soldier did not improve. Soon, his matesprit became ashamed him, and they fought," Terezi said. Given the circumstances, Rose watched for a reaction, but Terezi carried on without a moment's falter. "They fought until they had traded pity for scorn, and drifted their own ways.

"And the soldier ceased to make his beautiful things, for he had no way to give them life, and no inspiration to guide his hands. He became sullen and began to... well, falter." Terezi was proceeding so naturally that it had never occurred to Rose that she might be adding her own embellishments, or picking and choosing the perfect words. "One night, the inevitable: a message went out across the lands from the heart of the Empire, warning that the Drones had been dispatched. And one by one, from the lands closest to the hives and out, Trolls began to prepare with their kismeses and matesprits, to be ready for their terrible guests.

"And the soldier's moirail came to him, made him a promise that he would find new pity and new hate. But the soldier was not listening, for he had fallen ill in the mind, to fits of cowardice and immobility."

"He was depressed?" Rose asked. Terezi nodded. "I can't see that coming up often in children's stories, much less Troll. It seems..." Rose was about to say 'weak' but decided to go with: "...cullable."

Terezi smiled. "But if you don't know what they're coming from, how do you know that they went anywhere at all?" She continued: "Though the soldier was pitiful, and through his cowardice a subject of scorn, he had lost his charms, and was ill-kempt. His moirail brought him to a seeker's place, where Trolls in desperation could find some company. There, the moirail boasted of the soldier's skills with a blade, but even that had fallen aside for want of regular practice. The moirail kept up efforts for weeks and weeks, until one night, the soldier would not leave the sopor to face the sunset."

"And the moirail was upset. Angry. Sad. He had hoped to craft with the soldier again. 'I have to go, he said. 'You've made a fool of yourself, and I will not be any part of it.' And he left, and met with his own kismesis, and went to live with his own matesprit for many sweeps, close at hand.

"Time passed, and the Drones came." Terezi swept out her left arm before her. But this gesture was different. It was not like the ones that had come before, complimenting the story. Terezi was not pointing the village she had brought into being with her story, but to the invisible point she had been watching before, as she had rehearsed her story in silence. She pointed out in the void in the real world, past safety, towards Jack.

"And the soldier rose that morning and found that it was too late to run, if he could have. For a time, he waited in cover – a coward," Terezi clarified for Rose, "blade in hand, though he knew he had lost his true skill. And when the Drones set to work at the other side of town, the man who had once been a soldier wandered his home, and came upon his figurines. His companions had left them all behind, the poor, unpainted samples alongside the marvellous, which cut him in his heart. But as he examined each one, and turned them over in his hand, he began to remember his companions, and what they had accomplished, and what they had meant to him. And he found his confidence, a ground on which to stand that had eluded him for so long. And he examined each piece, and could see where the poor figures had failed, and set each one in the place it would have stood if things had turned out better, and thought on his companions, as they had been in better times."

Terezi stopped her story for a moment, and looked at her empty hand, which she clutched as if
holding a wooden figurine. Rose was not sure whether she was play-acting for effect or genuinely distracted. "And he left his knife as a tool," she said, "and went out to meet the Drones, head high, with a smile on his face."

And that was the ending, Rose realized, quite slow. "And I never understood," Terezi said, "when I was little, why someone like that would fall aside so easily. Why he'd get so depressed because of their kismesis. I mean… how could he have let his life fall apart when he was so strong in the end? Biology? But… then why… I mean, who would let that happen! Screwing up the mating season is something you think only happens to everybody else. Who would be so stupid as to screw it up? It's not hard! But this guy… even though he did… I never thought bad of him. Because when it really mattered, he died like a Troll. That's the point! And now…" She looked up again, towards the doom unseen, and began to cry anew. "And now I don't know! I always thought I'd be fine, but I don't know how he did it alone."

"You mean… Jack?" Rose was not sure what sort of response Terezi was looking for. "That's not really the same thing, is it? I mean, I know what you're saying, Terezi but I think you might be stretching your metaphor."

"Not Jack. Just… scared. I'm scared, all right! So cull me!" She shook her head. "I'm scared and I've got nothing. I threw it all away, like your douchewit friend decided to point out before he left. Fine! Karkat doesn't want me? Fine. He wants to burn all his bridges and spit in my face on top of it? Fine! Fuck. Him." Terezi's hand crushed its invisible statuette in her fist. "And if your friend and I don't see eye to nose, I can live with that too. He didn't have to be a dick about it, but fine. But…"

Realization flashed across Terezi's face for a moment, and frowned, and slowly the aggression trailed out of Terezi's voice, and she sighed.

"…Hadn't sunk in, had it?" Rose asked, when Terezi did not continue. "It's funny, isn't it? How some things just don't seem as final as you think in your head."

"Thought I had," Terezi said, wistfully. Terezi turned away again, back to the horizon. She looked again out toward Jack, this time without shifting. "I dunno, Lalonde. Who cares."

"You seem to."

"Don't be trite," Terezi cut.

Rose gave the approach a rest. "…Terezi?"

"Yeah?" Terezi replied, still terse but all the same, answering.

"What did Dave say?" Rose asked. "…I mean, he's fond of pointing out faults but you knew that before today. What did he do?"

Terezi shook her head. "You won't get it."

"Try me."

Terezi seemed more inclined to up and leave, but for some reason, answered all the same. "…he said that maybe we could still be friends."

Rose felt jolted in her confusion. "…I don't—"

"No. Neither did he. Or maybe he just didn't care. Can't tell with Dave." Terezi hugged at her legs.

Rose was hesitant. "Terezi… I know I shouldn't ask, but…?"
"It's insulting!" she insisted. "How am I supposed to explain it to you? I already tried to explain it to him, but did he listen? No, he just kept trying to throw it in my face!" Terezi's voice went from angry to shaking as she described it. "And then… he leaves."

"And that's when you chased him downstairs, I guess?" Rose asked, happy for the change in subject.

"No! Oooh no, STR1D3RS 4PP4R3NTLY NOT TH4T SM4RT!" Terezi wiped at her nose. "No. He time travelled in the middle of our conversation. He thinks he's stealthy, but he screwed up and I noticed. And… and I didn't know what was worse, I mean… that he didn't want to go back and take back his insult? Or that he had the power to do that and was willing to use it in any way. So I start yelling at him. 'What did you erase?'"

Rose squirmed. She knew Strider better than that, and realized that Terezi did as well, thus the sense of betrayal in thinking he had done otherwise. Rose knew that there was only one reason he'd have left the conversation in mid-sentence. Rose knew that there was only one reason he'd have left the conversation in mid-sentence. She wondered just how to broach the subject, when Terezi showed that there was no need.

"…and after we've been screaming at one another for a while… Look, what do you know about Jack?"

Rose was one part relieved and one part hurt. "…he told you?" Rose asked. Dave hadn't told her a thing, she had just worked it out. Terezi seemed to assume that Rose had been told about Dave and Terezi's patrols as well.

"Yeah! I'm there screaming at him and Captain Hero tells me about Jack Noir. How he hasn't actually been leaving us alone? How he probably can find us if Dave and Aradia don't watch him all the time? And how we've all died like… four times each? Even with all we're doing?" Rose swallowed – she had not guessed that number. "And I'm nervous, and I have no idea how to deal with this. And before I realize it, I think 'I have to talk to Karkat,' because he knows all about this, but then I remember: Oh! Right." She sighed. "But I'm doing okay. For a while. But then Dave slaps me in the face with this friend crap, and when I ask him about it, he starts being this stoic jackass, and I can't tell if he's trying to be a stupid hero to keep me away from Jack, or if he really means… all of it." Rose said nothing. "I mean, I thought Dave liked me, but I'm not going to be shaken up if he doesn't. Push off, move on. But I figured Dave liked me well enough to just say so and not humiliate me like a black crush, that shit!"

"Maybe he was just stressed about Jack," Rose pointed out. She really had no idea how things went on a normal patrol for Dave, much less the one that had just preceded.

"I thought about that. But then I did a little more thinking, and I really don't think that was part of it," Terezi croaked. "Because then I realized that maybe he's not trying to humiliate me. I mean, you Humans really seem to mean the friend thing. And he keeps saying that I'm a great friend, and he likes just hanging out with me, I realize it… that's it. Maybe he's right. Maybe that's why Karkat's gone and dropped me like a hot rootbulb. Maybe that's why I don't see Nepeta anymore. Maybe Dave's just the first guy telling me the truth. People lie to me all the time, it's part of the job." Terezi was shaking again. "And then I realize that I have nothing and maybe it's all my fault, and everything I hadn't been thinking about Jack comes crashing in. And I let it all out on Dave, and he doesn't even have the nerve to say he's sorry." Terezi stood, seemingly to regain control over her emotion. "So yeah," she said, after she had grasped them. "I blew up. Do you get that?"

It would have sufficed to say that Rose did not, but she was no fool to say so out loud. Terezi was legitimately upset, and so Rose gathered up every word and every bit of information she could muster to try to understand why. When that failed, she stayed quiet, thinking. Rose felt as much torn between her own beliefs as she was with the desire to not sound like a Squiddle defending the core
concept of friendship to a briny old sailor-man. It seemed like a cheap sentiment, not at all like Terezi's righteous anger over Rose's flitting touches with auspistice.

...But why did Terezi care what I did with Vriska? Rose looked up at her companion, who was still gazing out again in the dark. Terezi, sensing the look, turned back part-way. With Rose sitting, Terezi towered over her. From there, Rose could see that Terezi's poise and control was so carefully trained that even this spat of tears had barely eroded it. The lawyer had never stopped operating just because she was upset, and her improvisational skills were still primed. Rose realized now that those instincts had watched the conversation go bye, and that Terezi had been able to take everything she had said without thinking, in malice and pain at the start of the conversation, and had use even those to make her point.

"I do get it," Rose said. Or at least, she understood as best as Terezi could teach her, which she reflected was very still little but considerable for the small span of time. "...when you were talking to me about not being straight with Vriska, it was because that was what Dave did with you. I get that." Terezi looked up, and nodded. "Vriska doesn't deserve hate.' That's what you said." Nod again. "It's a death threat." No reply. "Because of the Drones. Someone who doesn't deserve hate... or pity, right Terezi? They're worthless, and deserves to be culled." Terezi, looking almost ashamed, turned away. Rose had to slump forward.

"You're pretty smart, for a Human," Terezi said, her voice low.

Rose rubbed at the bridge of her nose. She could not really agree. It was only because she had been talking to Kanaya for so long, and had learned all that she had about Troll culture that she could even fish this one explanation for Terezi's behaviour from the ocean of cultural impulses that probably struck her every action the way Rose's did to her own. She wasn't sure any other Human would have made the connection, though she hoped she was not alone in this. "You tried to tell Dave... what he was saying?"

"...I guess," Terezi admitted. "Just... there I was, right? He tells me about Jack, and I realize that everything I thought was safe about this place and my life is junk. And since we were just talking about Karkat, and Dave had just rejected me, I realize that everyone I care about is abandoning me. And the only person I've got left that I even trust is starts telling me that I'm not good enough to...

"But that's not what he meant," Rose said, without thinking. "Terezi, I know that friendship is this temporary, trial phase for you, but..."

"Oh, good, Rose is here to explain things! US3 L1TTL3 WORDS SO MY STUP1D 4L13N BR41N C4N UND3RST4ND OK4Y?"

"He wasn't trying to consign you to it!"

"Of course I know what he meant, Rose! And I say it's shit! I mean..." Terezi dropped back to the floor, across from Rose, wanting to get to eye level but far too angry to do so casually. She rubbed at her temple. "I mean: I get it. He thinks of me the same way he thinks of you, and John, and Jade, but Rose: that doesn't mean anything to me. That upset you?" Terezi gave her a chance to answer, but Rose was not going to take that bait. "...Because it shouldn't. Think about it. I think if you had to choose between one of your friends and your mate, I think we know who you would pick, and everything else is smokescreen. You want to fight about this? Because I say I'm the one being honest. Your friends don't care about you the way you'd need when things are... are worst."

As Terezi finished her threat, and got no reply, she almost seemed to deflate a little. She seemed very tired, and empty, like the last threat had been all she had left in her, and with Dave too far gone to hit with it, she had thrown it at Rose. What she said next was almost the same sentiment, but it was as
though Terezi now felt the need to say it without bile as fuel.

"I mean… what if…" she said, and then cleared her throat, swallowed. "What if Kanaya decided she wanted to be kismeses tomorrow. What would you do? Would you have it in you to start treating her with pins and needles? …I dunno. It's not even a very good comparison."

"I follow," Rose said. Since Terezi had calmed, Rose felt the opportunity to open up herself. "What I mean is that I get it to a point, I think. I get that you were upset, and that that was too much for you. I think that if I were in your shoes, I'd have blown up for for lesser reasons, even, before friendship even came into play."

"But you don't get how I feel," Terezi said.

Rose wanted to tell Terezi that she understood, but it was becoming rapidly clear that she did not. Once again, her mind strayed back through her conversations with Kanaya. "…Terezi, I don't know what to say about most of this," Rose admitted at last. "I don't even know what to offer." Terezi looked over, questioningly. Rose sighed. "If you don't feel you can do it, when you're calm, I could tell Dave that you two should be apart. If that helps."

Terezi curled up her legs tight to her chest, and set her glasses aside so that she could rest her head against her knees. "I think he gets that much," she said. Rose could not help but agree with that.

And then, with everything else calm, finally the Squiddles won out. It took Rose a moment to build up her courage, to express something she had previously found cliche, even vapid, but now did not truly want to leave unsaid. When Rose found her voice, it even started out in a squeak, and she had to clear her throat. "…Terezi, I know you're not going to believe this, but I have to say it. I think – adamantly, even though it's not a solution to your problems – that Dave really… does care about you. As much as Strider does anyone. And that that's what he was trying to say, and that I hope you'll talk this out together."

Terezi hid her eyes for a moment, behind her own legs, but her proper response was firm enough. "Rose, when we want someone to be in our lives?" she said, referring to the Trolls, "we ask them to stay. And I did." And Rose nodded.

They sat there together one last time, like before, but facing and proximate, both of them thinking about what the other had said. This time, Rose actually did feel like she was doing some good.

"…Rose?" Terezi asked after a time.

"Yes?"

"Do you think you ever… stop liking someone? I mean, do you think you ever look at them and say 'I guess his eyes aren't really that cute' or, 'You know, he doesn't make me laugh anymore.'"

Rose was not honestly sure what to say. "Maybe. Maybe if they change?"

"If they change…" Terezi said, like a sigh. "Don't you wish… don't you wish you could just go up the next night and say 'I'm sorry! It was all a mistake! I was pale for you all along!' Or… 'We can be friends. We can be best friends, the best f-fr-…'" Terezi reached up and wiped a tear from her cheek, in the process replacing her glasses. "…Hmph."

"Are you going?" Rose asked, when it looked like Terezi was about to leave. "I have a…" Terezi stopped. "…Look. This is only sort of related, but you're the first person I can really ask." Rose was not sure where the question was coming from, but with Terezi leaving, Rose suddenly felt cold, as if she were being left alone with that invisible spot in the distance. "Do you think Dave and Aradia can
hold Jack off?" Rose asked. She worried about her phrasing, that it might stray too close to implying that Terezi knew Dave better at a time when that might be hurtful, but Terezi did not seem to mind. Indeed, she chuckled.

"He's Dave fucking Strider," she said. "And Aradia... well, she might have not been very smart about how she hit Vriska, but at least she knows when somebody needs to be hit." Terezi was grinning, but ruefully, and when Rose looked up at her she looked up at a mouth full of shark-teeth, wide and terrifying, and up at sad eyes, still not hiding the truth for all the rest of her marvellous façade.

Rose looked away. "Are you sure you don't want me to talk to him?"

Terezi's smile faded back behind her lips. She then reached into her sylladex and pulled out a piece of paper, which she looked at, sighed, and crumpled it into a ball. Then, she looked down at Rose, hefted the ball and bounced it gently off of Rose's face.

"Bonk," she said on impact, and turned to leave the roof behind.

Rose reached over and took up the wad of paper and unfolded it carefully, discovering a print out from a laser printer, with a pen signature indecipherable in the corner. She leaned in to read the contents. She wanted to laugh but really, the whole thing just caught in her throat.

"...okay, TURN the spoon first you shit..."

Rose returned to the Lab the way she had come, and made her way back to the central computer lab. She ignored everyone that talked to her, pressing on without a word. Rose had never really imagined what it would be like to break up with someone, but she was imagining now. She could only imagine Terezi's hurt if she saw Dave in the next few days, and could not imagine what nonsense Dave was likely to go through to bury the same emotions. There was not much left to bridge that gap now.

Terezi had wanted some support when things were at their worst. But for her, there was no one to do that if they did not fill a quadrant, and now Dave was out, and Karkat was on the exact rocks he had predicted. Worst of all, it seemed that Terezi was right. If Jack were to come tomorrow, Terezi would have no one. Rose knew that Dave would have her, John and Jade, and for all Rose knew, Aradia on some level. Where the Trolls needed their connections hard-forged, the Humans were happy loose, in a manner of speaking. Personally, Rose did not feel like her connections were that loose at all, but had not been willing to say so to Terezi. Rose wished she could change that without spitting on the Troll's culture, or her own. No one would win for that. But she could not think of a thing she could do. At least, there was nothing she could do for Terezi.

Maybe she had too much of Kanaya in her after all, but as the idea planted in her, and grew, Rose could not find it in her to sit still. Not while there was work she could do. Not if she could still, just maybe, try to forge one connection between the sixteen of them, to bring some joy. She was not going to stand aside if she could help someone else hold hand in hand together at the end of their world.

And so Rose went to talk to Tavros.

> END OF ACT 1

Chapter End Notes
Technically, the timetables/music boxes keep the Time players from "blind jumping." If they focused a little, or perhaps went God Tier if that were an option in this 'verse, they wouldn't need them. Since Dave can't guarantee he can time travel and not end up inside the slowly-spinning meteor (a good call, since the warped meteor was swallowing him even if he didn't realize it), the only thing Dave could have reliably done was freeze himself. Aradia's powers are a little different, but thinking about it, the result's probably the same in this case.

"Vriska doesn't deserve hate," has always been meant as a death threat. I was going to leave it just as unexplained in this draft as it was in the original, but decided that if I was going to explore this chapter's topics in depth, even if it meant being blunt. I really, really, really hate spelling out the Weird Alien Shit, because I feel these things have a greater impact when you work them out on your own, but I also wanted to avoid the confusion that accompanied the original draft's early chapters, no matter how much that confusion may have come from the sloppier writing of the original chapters. One of the things I decided to do with this draft was to guide the reader explicitly until EOA3 (where we left off – or rather, somewhere in the middle of the chapter after we left off) to avoid the pitfalls of the original draft. Beyond that, we'll enter the weird and wild world of personal interpretation.

First drafters may remember a time when there were no act breaks in this fic, but I added them later on. Suffice to say, the latter half of the fic is built around act breaks and the former is not, but I figured I had to put them somewhere. I think this is still the best thematic break we're going to get for a while now, no matter how little I think four chapters (no matter how long) constitute an "Act."

One day I'm going to have to come back here and list the pages and pages of crap I had to mention or mostly couldn't mention, all for the most twisted of reasons. I stand by all of them, but that doesn't mean they didn't make editing this an absurd exercise in notation and alternate drafts.

**Notes for First Drafters:** I'm going to include a few notes from time to time that will include spoilers for people who haven't read the first draft. To keep from accidentally spoiling anyone, they will be put on my Tumblr behind a Read More cut. Today's topic is Ghost Rose and moreover, that symbol of hers.
Act 1 Recap

For those curious about the delay, I've made multiple posts on Tumblr and the forums in the interim. Be warned there are a few mild first draft spoilers in these posts, but for those not concerned, I'll point out the two most notable. The first made on April Fool's day and about as serious as you'd expect and the second, made two weeks ago, explaining the delay in detail, and also how I'm going to be communicating progress in the future. Thanks for reading!

MEANWHILE, in another timeline...

Trapped. Psychologically: like a deer in the headlights. Physically: sealed in a large metal box, the lights dim and the air stale and metal shock-cold under every footstep. And there was nothing to drink. Like, not even some goddamn seltzer. Roxy wouldn't have reduced herself to drinking seltzer straight but it was the principal of the thing.

Having been forced into this situation, Roxy watched the others, as she had to admit it was easier than having to watch herself. Gossip and eavesdropping were fulfilling, and a solid distraction from the snake-whisper coming out from the titanium-wrapped, double encrypted modus-bottle she had made of her last sample of merlot (the diamond-encased, quad-encryped copy of Nintendo World Championship 1990 had already been opened and played over and again. She had held out as long as she could, but she was tough - she wasn't a god). Roxy felt pretty sure that she could alchemize more alcohol if she could just get the merlot to the alchemiter, but Janey had put her foot down, saying something about keeping polite in polite company. Not that Roxy could call them that. She was not entirely sure what the deal was with the Trolls, or how they were taking to their mutual imprisonment. To try to get some good info, she would grab them from time to time and sit them in front of Rad Racer for as long as she could keep them. Roxy had felt it was okay to waste time like that at first, thinking them safe in the lab to muck and meddle. She had not been alone, and so that was where they stayed, until Roxy had finally sobered and time had become a matter of ticks on the wall. Roxy had counted twenty-two, before Dirk pointed out that she had lost a week somewhere in the middle (she had found the station's ecto computer. Things had happened. Purrin things). Curly-Horns was never really around to ask for certain.

Damara was always away, and frankly, so was Janey, which was a bit disappointing after a life spent apart. Jane said she was just going to take a look at the lay of the land, but if she thought she was going to get away with a lie that flimsy, she had grossly underestimated the precognitive wonder twin powers of bffies 4 lyf. Roxy knew that Jane and Damara were sneaking out day for day, keeping ole Zodiac Jack and his thirteen prototypes from finding them and reaching the obvious end game. And Roxy knew what that meant. It meant that Damara ran control while Jane played... bait.

Roxy supposed she understood, to a point. There wasn't exactly some other Time player to play with Sex-Pot Megido or something, and the rest of them weren't exactly lining up to feed Meenah to let her be the new Life bait. Roxy didn't like to think of it, though. Jane was still her bff. To make matters worse, the stress was starting to wear on Jane. She was still good old stolid and serious JaCro if she caught you doing something stupid, like try to introduce Trolls to My Little Pony, now with additional expert commentary, or to alchemize just one martini, mom, but she wasn't playful any
more. The day before, Jake had tried to tickle her in her cute little gut (which was some GRADE A CHEESE CLASS FLIRTIN right there, English, Roxy had thought) when Jane had near panicked in response. Roxy wasn't even sure if it was a physical wound Jane was hiding. If it was a physical injury, it would have to be a bad one for the game's wide selection of potions to leave it untouched. If things were that bad, Roxy wished Jane would just tell Miss Gabbymouth (that one was Aranea) about her srs tummy scars and get them patched up. But it was something else, Roxy wished Jane would come to Miss Zuipperpips (that one was her) for some good old fashioned huggings and chattings and stereotypical girlchats and girlcries and w/e really just don't bottle it up like an idiot. She figured Jane probably needed that anyways. What with fighting crazy Orochi-hydra bastards and dying all the time and scaring your bffsy so bad she trained one of her new kitties to go live in your room for fuzzy cuddles to cheer you up huh, how about that?

But Roxy didn't like to think about that much.

"Engfish, if Honey doesn't Blow Up any Kids in the next five minutes, we're watching A Time to Krill even if I have to spear the DVD player."

As for the realfriend activities Roxy did get to do, she didn't mind movies, which had become a sort of gathering point for their crop of sixteen. If someone asked, Roxy would have had to admit that it was annoying how Jake had sort of taken over the gaming TV she had set in the corner of the main lab, but it was okay, really. Still, she felt she could do better. Her friends were no help in that. Jake was usually at the TV, entertaining his myriad Troll guests, and when he wasn't doing that, he was helping Aranea study some of the game lore found in the expansive lab-dungeon (wink, wonk, etc, etc; at least as far as teasing Mr. English was concerned). Even Dirk was finding Trolls to occupy his time when he wasn't trying to building his secret project in the upper levels, but his Troll hangouts were totes boring as far as Roxy was concerned. Roxy had even considered dating - "Going Outside", they called it, in a thinly veiled parlance that left nothing to the imagination and was totally Roxy's choice of words. Some of the Trolls were into the idea of Going Outside too, if only as opposed to Staying Inside And Going Crazy, but while they were cool, that didn't mean Roxy was really into any of them. Besides, she sort of figured she understood their relationships about as well as they understood hers, and wasn't quite ready to trip over that threshold if it meant a faceplant onto the muddy rug beyond.

Of course, then there was the part where her prospective dating partners were all mutating or some shit. It all started with Meenah and Aranea, and sort of spread off to both their good buddy and Roxy's, the Bangeranger (still funny). He wasn't exactly having a happy time of it, but that was nothing but compared the ladies. Roxy wasn't really sure she wouldn't swap biologies, given the chance, because Trolls had some pretty sweet stuff going on with them, but if it meant going through the moult, Roxy wouldn't be first in line. Whatever their bodies were doing to them, the three of them started getting pissy and itchy and worse. It didn't take an expert to know that that meant Meenah was going to get stabby fast. Tridents, salad forks, splayed pencils if she had to. And Aranea was never paying attention to her any more (Jake had confided that she was reading everyone else's mind to make sure no one was looking when she needed to scratch), so no one was safe from the Tyrian Stabber. And that was sort of how things got started.

After a full day of tiring attempts at hangouts, not-dating woes and the insinuation that she'd look better with a pair of salad tongs in her eye, Roxy decided to get absolutely shitfaced blotto. On top of the usual, even.

Sneaking out in the night, stealthier than a rogue in a void, she managed to make it to the alchemiter without bumping into Janey or anything. All she had to do yet was be subtle with her prizes.

"Well maybe that's because you're a hali-iv-a-butt!"
Three hours later, Roxy realized she had forgotten a step.

"Now come on, you two," Aranea said. She stepped in between Roxy and Meenah about as cautiously as possible. It was something like ten minutes to dawn and everyone was already up. Roxy supposed she had served as everyone's surprise alarm that morning, what with the singing and the sauce pans accidentally falling out of the cupboard and the bread fights. Somewhere in the middle of it - she couldn't remember how - she had bumped straight into Spidertroll and her guybuddy the Fantabulous Mohawk having a bit of a disagreement with Meenah about hell if Roxy knew. Things had degenerated from there. Somehow. Or other. Through no fault of one's own.

"Now let's just... stand apart," Aranea pushed them gently, "and talk about what's going on. Meenah, I think you'd like to tell Roxy just how much it upset you when she walked into you, spilled her drink on you and called you a 'stab-happy psycho-bitch with too much siss in your gwills.'"

"Sass in your gills," Roxy growled, and hiccupped. As she looked around, Roxy found that she now had the attention of most of the crowd. Jake was looking up from his movie, Dirk from over the top of his shades, and every one of the Trolls stared at them together. Roxy was not really sure how to feel about that. At least Jane hadn't found her yet.

"Just being accurate," Aranea said. "And Meenah, while you're talking, please keep in mind that where Roxy comes from, that might have not been meant as an insult! For example, it's entirely possible that given her upbringing with Exiles, she might consider 'sass' to be a desirable show of emotion in and otherwise unemotional society, and furthermore..."

"Oh god." Roxy clamped her hands to her ears as her stomach churned. It wasn't really surprising that Aranea was breaking out her tone. The Trolls tended to use it when they were in some of their characteristic moods, which meant Aranea's went on and on. Worse, ever since she had started her crazy-ass Troll puberty, it was doing something funky with her voice like Roxy still couldn't really believe. It was like there were two Araneas, one in front of her and one behind, and neither had anything interesting to say!

Meenah pushed Aranea aside, and immediately decided to share a piece of her mind with Roxy. Roxy didn't really pick up on most of the particulars, since Meenah's tone shot out the moment she started threatening and there really was something unpleasant about it that went beyond the echo thing, and it wreaked havoc with Roxy's gut. What Roxy did pick up of her diatribe had nothing to do with culture or the sharing of feelings, but did include at least three bodily threats, some psychological undermining, eleven fish puns, two clam puns and at least one reference to the preservative chemicals used in the canning of sardines. This girl was good. But could she top drunken mis-speakings? The greatest test. Roxy was determined to find out.

"You think you're so awesome, you, with your puns, and your golden stick, and your sexy piercings!" Wait, part of that came out wrong. "But I've got plenty of sexy stuff! I'll take you on any way you want, fishhyy!" Wait, the same part of this is continuing to come out wrong, with increasing and alarming regularity

They were eventually pulled apart by a combination of Spidertroll and Bull-Boy, whom Roxy accidentally complimented in between snips about their taste in attractive clothing. It just kept happening. Trying not to look too embarrassed, Roxy glared straight at Meenah, who glared straight back. Don't look in her eyes, the Trolls had advised. Don't stare down the devil when she's still got her fork.

"...you like my lures?" Meenah asked, instead.

"Your what?" Pause. It took Roxy a moment to think of fish hooks. "The piercings? Well... yeah!"
Roxy decided.

Suddenly, they were talking about piercings. Roxy had never talked about piercings in her life, or tattoos either, which came up in time. Sure, there was a lot of words she didn't understand, and Meenah kept threatening to perform various procedures herself, but Aranea and Handlebar Horns kept around and things went along okay. Roxy thought she heard Spidertroll say something about "If they're not at each other, I'm in favour of it," and soon the two of them were hanging out pretty comfortably too.

Roxy did not know it, but now people were trickling off, and soon the four of them would have total privacy. Not fast enough, however, to avoid Jane, who arrived tired and pained, and soon adopted a look of resigned neutrality at the situation. Roxy ignored her, but maybe Janey was justified in her stick-in-the-mud poo-pooing, considering how things ended up playing out once they all wandered out of the room to do their own thing. And by their own thing, Roxy meant more drinking.

Roxy did not stop to wonder why her three new drinking buddies were up so early, though if she had, she might have thought twice about doing what she ended up doing anyways. She should have given more thought to what had brought them to an argument before she had arrived, or should have imagined what might be going through their heads as she led them through one round too many of 99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall, but she did not. In hindsight, more than anything else she wished she had kept a better memory of her and that other Troll's eighteenth pesterchum conversation. It had been a critical quid pro quo conversation, a back and forth exchange of cultural data in hopes of stripping any future conversations of misunderstandings, like the one Roxy was about to make (even if the idea was Meenah's in the first place). Her pesterlog partner had told her that Trolls had four different quadrants, each for different kinds of relationships. That part she had followed. They had also mentioned that one of the quadrants was still pretty much like the one Human romantic relationship. That part she went over Roxy's head somehow. There had been a lot of text. Anyone could have missed it! The point being, she and her new friends had made several, honest, repeat, mutual misunderstandings, probably.

It would be a day and a half before anyone told her that kissing each of her new friends hard on the lips was the flushed equivalent of kissing each of her new friends hard on the lips.

MEANWHILE, in yet another timeline...

A Situation Recorder, Dersite, delves into the depths of a fortress lost in space and time. And with this familiar stranger: a new companion close at hand. As the Dersite speaks, she hangs on every gesture. She responds only in turn, if with a certain outright contempt for labial sounds. Wherever they go, she can always be found marionnext to the Exile.

(The Dersite is talking to a puppet.)

Open Monolog:

AC: :33 < where are we going?
SR: Down'll do it. It's at the bottom of this bottomless pit, surrounded by the corpses of an infinite number of dead mascot protagonists from 90s.
AC: :33 < but why here? why is it in a dead timeline and not a living one?
SR: Long story short, it is. It's in all of them.
SR: I just sort of figured...
SR: ...well...
SR: I mean, Hussie was just shot up.
SR: The lesson learned here is "hide from your villains."
SR: And where better than the last place they shot up?
SR: Shot, Scratched, whatever.
AC: :33 < *ac is still confused by the meta developments*
SR: Welcome to Homestuck.
AC: :33 < but why did they break the first timeline at all?
AC: :33 < i mean, why take one over the other? why scratch the first one at all?
SR: I'll be honest, it'd be easier to answer that if they were right here. They're a gabby lot.
SR: Maybe it'd be easier if you understood what was going on over there. In the new timeline.
AC: :33 < you know best! you are the author.
SR: And you're an organizational tool brought into being by the need for a foil in these fourth wall segments.
SR: Well, that or possibly the physical trauma of banging my head into stuff over and over again in this unlit place.
SR: One or the other.
SR: Either way, shoot for less existentialism, okay? We look silly enough as it is.
AC: :33 < *ac looks silly because she's been painted by a hack artist who couldn't even draw panels for the recap*
SR: Don't rub it in.
AC: :33 < *ac's horrible appearance is a constant drain on her self esteem*
SR: I'll fix it later!

As they spoke, the Dersite walked on, into the deeper dark.

"After this timeline was SCRATCHED at the end of the first draft of the fic, things were reset to the beginning of a new iteration of... let's call it 'Universe H'. Changes were made. Time passes, and before you know it, the HUMANS have reached the point of the canon storyline where ROSE went GRIMDARK and very little other changes up to that point - this in spite of the massive change that they live in a session with no GOD TIERS. Why this is (beyond that it's a factor of the pre-God Tiers original draft), is not clear, nor is how they managed to get to the same point in spite of this hindrance. Due to the lack of GOD TIERS, Aradia is still in her SOULBOT.

"Beyond the lack of God Tiers, the only change we know of before the duel with Jack was an additional PESTERLOG conversation between Rose and KANAYA MARYAM, which is being revealed piecemeal and discusses cultural differences between the Trolls and Humans. The only section of this conversation that has been shown so far confirms that the Trolls in this reality do not form longterm FRIENDSHIPS, as per Karkat's canon boast, though they do occasionally form TRIAL RELATIONSHIPS designed to find one's ideal quadrant. In a roundabout fashion, Kanaya invited Rose to such a trial relationship, in which they remain at present.

"No matter the sequence of events preceded the duel, it came to play all the same. Then things began to change with verve. It seems that at some point after going grimdark, Rose may have OPENED THE SESSION at its border to permit access for those of the NOBLE CIRCLE OF HORROR TERRORS. Why they showed any particular interest in entering is not exactly clear, but what is clear is that this spell of Rose's directly or indirectly caused the session to physically SPLIT at its edge and seeded strange plants throughout the session. Dave also made a vague reference to a 'grimdark BLACKSMITH.' As these events were going on, the duel continued, with additional changes: DAVE, a Dreamself, attributes his waking-self's death to this series of events and not a duel with Jack on LOSAF, while Rose appears to have escaped her own canon death with the help of JADE. Afterwards, the humans, along with Jack, seem to have ended up in the Troll session, where
the Trolls had somehow survived without a series of catastrophic MURDERS, and also without Kanaya having attempted to hatch a new MOTHER GRUB.

"Upon arrival, Jack presumably proceeded to destroy the Troll's session much akin to the original canon. We've learned that, through this or other means, the entire casts' DREAMSELVES have either died or become integrated as their new prime bodies (Vriska, Sollux and Dave at least). These characters that are now Dreamseives still show occasional signs of having Dream powers, along with class and element powers inherited from the game.

"Hiding from Jack, the sixteen barricaded themselves in the Troll's ECTO LABORATORY in hiding from the demon rampaging about. To give the other fourteen a chance to work on a counterattack, the two HEROES OF TIME proceeded to combat Jack through time, knowing that, should he ever see the lab and survive, they will no longer be able to prevent his final assault. To aid them, KARKAT VANTAS has ordered the others to run periodic scans of the session via their COMPUTERS and so provide the pair with data. Karkat has also aided them in hiding the truth of their mission from the others, who would probably use the information as an excuse to do something INCREDIBLY STUPID and ILL-ADvised. Like try to help them. In spite, he seems to have told JOHN, and Rose has worked out on her own. Worryingly, Jack has gained advantages of his own, gaining additional strengths from his three prototypings he had largely ignored after gaining BEC'S. This process seems to have given him TIME powers of his own.

"Thanks to Rose's experience and details only alluded at, the united players now see the Horrorterrors as a threat. The group realized that this was a threat that would have to be dealt with before sleeping, as their dreamseives remain in the control of the Terrors should they sleep. To this end, the cast prepared a FALSE PROSPIT and FALSE DERSE with their powers, which prevent contact with their dreamseives when sleeping, giving them dreamless nights. Unknown to them, the transportalizers in the lab connect them to a section of PARADOX SPACE occupied by MIDDLING GODS that serve under the HORRORTEERS. Rose has realized this, but has informed no one as she believes them to be of no consequence. No one else seems to have noticed (which I feel the need to spell out since canon!Roxy started window-jumping and made this little detail all but canon itself). During her first visit to this in-between space in the fic, Rose noticed a strange Troll present along with her and the Gods, but it was too late for either to react.

"Around a month after entering the session, Rose walked in on VRISKA having a screaming fight with TAVROS and ERI DAN, and, not knowing what was going on, Rose stopped them. We later learned that VRISKA had been upset to learn that TAVROS and ERI DAN had been casually dating without telling her, but this event was perhaps more important because it caused VRISKA and ERI DAN to believe they had been AUSPISTICED by Rose, however unintentionally, and had mixed feelings. Several days later, Eridan confronted Rose on the point, hoping to earn her and Vriska's mediated, ASHEN affections. Rose rejected him.

"Meeting with Kanaya in the lab, Rose learned she had been busy planning a SPAWNING CAVERN for when the time came for her to hatch the MOTHER GRUB. She also revealed a DRESS she had planned for Rose, and we learned that the two have not gravitated toward any sort of RELATIONSHIP in particular since their initial conversation.

"Speaking to Tavros, Rose learned about his troubles confirming his relationship with his possibly-boyfriend, and initially offered to help him before she learned he was speaking about Eridan, whom she had so recently snubbed. She felt it was best if she turned Tavros down as well, though she left him with some fleeting, generic advice. In the course of their conversation, however, Rose learned that the Trolls' DENIZENS seemed to have had ZODIAC-themed names and appearances, and were not matched with Denizens in the Human's session.
"Soon after, Rose learned that Jade and NEPETA had been attacked by UNDERLINGS near EQUIUS' section of the lab. These attacks had become frequent of late, and this particular attack featured a MIDBOSS that demonstrated game powers drawn from its Troll session prototypings. Due to its power compared to the lesser underlings, these powers were mutated far beyond their original sources, in a fashion partially resonating with JACK’S new power abuse. To make matters worse, we learn that the Humans were forced to leave their session with sub-par experience levels, making them nearly incapable of defeating the local Imps (this includes John, who, in canon, was at MAX LEVEL well before Rose's duel with Jack. Why this has changed is also not clear). Worse, Rose's grimdark period has left her with an even larger deficit and untrained Seer of Light skills on top. In spite of these issues, and largely thanks to the Trolls, the gang was able to defeat the midboss, though this battle exposed unusual cracks in their relationships: particularly Equius and Aradia's relationship (which was hinted to be VACILLATING) and also in Karkat and TEREZI'S MATESPRITSHIP.

"To help raise their pathetic game levels, the Humans agreed to join regular patrols alongside their usual data-gathering operations, and to all come to any midboss-triggered alarm.

"While on patrol, Dave and Aradia attempted to correct a disaster wherein a wild attack of Jack's had inadvertently destroyed half the lab and killed multiple cast members in a beta timeline. This event had the unfortunate side effect of causing the local beta Rose to return to her grimdark state and call on the Horrorterrors again to defeat Jack, but in spite of this (but consistent with canon), this beta, grimdark Rose was killed. When they went to leave, Dave and Aradia were distracted by the sudden arrival of a strange Rose doppelganger, with grimdark appearance and white-flush ghost eyes, who identified herself via THE CENTRAL BRANCH of a three-pronged SYMBOL, whatever that means.

"Judging from limited evidence, this ghost appeared to be working with, for, or was herself somehow related to the NOBLE CIRCLE. She attacked Dave when he and Aradia attempted to leave, and referred to herself as one of a group with mixed motives. Aradia rescued Dave from the attack, but not before his MIND had been shattered by the sight of something in the crack of the beta game session, in the typical way of Lovecraft's monstrosities. She took him to Terezi a week in the FUTURE to be healed, causing him to learn that he had ALREADY TOLD HER about his patrols sometime between then and there.

"When Dave returned to the present, it was to an awkward conversation (already in progress) in which Terezi was attempting to get him to masquerade as her new matesprit as part of a break-up prank on Karkat (this hinted at the start of Chapter 4 for anyone who missed the details). Unfortunately, when Dave realized she had genuine intent behind her prank, and was actually interested in him, he made the critical mistake of addressing her as being only a FRIEND. He left the conversation fix the timeline at around this point, and was spotted doing so by Terezi, who mistook this as a misuse of his Time powers to manipulate the conversation. Eager to fix the misunderstanding and eased by his vision of the future, Dave told Terezi about his patrols and the threat of Jack. This, unfortunately, compounded the existing problem: already hurt by the ongoing collapse of her matespritship, the collapse of her plan with Dave, the collapse of her relationship with
Dave (friendship being an impossible relationship for her) and now startled and frightened by the threat of Jack, Terezi became quickly upset and the conversation became a fight that reached the main lab.

When both participants fled to their rooms, Rose went to speak with Terezi, who tried to explain her emotions via a Troll fable. This conversation helped Rose begin to understand the nature of the QUADRANTS to Troll psychology, especially in the form of personal support: Rose later comparing Troll relationships as 'hard-forged' to the Human's comparably 'loose.' Terezi compared her fear of Jack's arrival as her relationships collapsed to one awaiting the Drones without a matesprit and kismesis. She explained how this and Dave's 'friend' comment seeded and grew a feeling of worthlessness in her, all compounded by her very bad day. By the end of the conversation, Rose may have won Terezi's respect to some degree, but Dave had lost it. However, now with a better understanding of the Troll's psychology, Rose decided she would indeed help Tavros with his relationship problems well before Jack would arrive, wanting to give him someone to 'hold hand in hands with at the end of their world' if that was how things came to their end.

Open Monolog

AC: :(( < I guess they still have a way to go, huh?
SR: We'll catch up. Sometimes it's slow going.
AC: :33 < *ac would just like things to catch up to things here in h1 is all*
SR: I know.
SR: Except not quite.
AC: :33 < i know. It'll be different
SR: Yes.
SR: And no.
AC: :33 < huh?
SR: It's just...
SR: What gave you the impression that this was H-One?
As Rose conversed with Terezi, another conversation had been going on several levels far below, in the Dormitories. "Dave Strider, you open this door right now or I'm taking away all your CDs! Don't think I can't!"

John looked at Jade cockeyed. "Really?"

Jade looked more than a little sheepish at that. "...It's the only way I know to get a reaction out of him."

Suddenly, the door opened, revealing Dave with a towel wrapped around his lower body and otherwise wet and dripping. He looked from John to Jade, as if daring one or the other to react to his partial nudity and perhaps curious which would do so first. He then said: "Listen, folks. It's time for a certain cool guy you might know to get some shuteye. Some precious beauty sleep, if you follow me. If you'll stop yelling at my door, you get one question each."

"Are you okay?" Jade spouted at once.

"Jade, that's not a very good question," John said.

"Well I think it's important!" Jade said.

"D'aww," Dave cooed. "We're getting all warm and snuggly here in the hallway. Tangle buddy-ing it up here. Hug, Harley?" He raised one arm from his towel, which drooped precariously, and that time she did react.

"Uh... no wet naked hugs," she said.


Jade tried not to laugh at the look on John's face in spite of herself. "No thanks."

"That's okay, Jade, this is pretty much the worst hug ever. Who taught you how to do this?" John asked.

"Cal," Dave said, completely straight-faced.

John pulled away as soon as he could. "Well," he said to Jade, "at least he's not upset."

"Hey, I'm cool," he replied. "Structurally: in one piece. Mentally: exhausted, but that's no big deal. Emotionally: aloof. Word of the fucking day. Use it in a sentence: Dave just blew off a cute alien chick like it was no thing, because he is the aloofest fucking bastard this side of... Skaia? Well let's be serious I'm all the aloof that's left in the universe. I'm like a non-renewable resource here."
"You call that scene back in the lab 'no thing'!" Jade protested, pointing back to the transportalizer that led out of Aradia's quarters. "That was... a-a very big thing! What did you do to her?"

Dave nodded, as he agreed with her early sentiments, but then said: "That's two questions. You don't get two questions, Jade, don't make me repeat myself the rules are very clear. Egbert, you're up!"

John tried for a moment to look lost in thought. "Oh, gee, Dave, I dunno, I mean, there's so much I could ask about but I think I'm gonna go with 'What the hell did you do?' You know. For the block."

"Alright, alright, we can do this," Dave said. "So Rez is all on me, all hinting at some weird alien boot-knocking equivalent going down when..." Dave's routine was interrupted by a frown. "...well, okay, not really. I'm not gonna besmirch the lady's honour or anything so it wasn't really that intense all at once, but—"

"Dave," Jade interrupted, arms crossed. "I said no." Dave insisted, as though it were obvious.

"Dave," John said, "I know Jade and I are both Professionally Single right now, but even we know that's not what normally happens when you tell a girl you don't want to go out."

Dave frowned again, this time not trying to hide it. "...I told her we should be friends." Jade and John glanced at one another. "...After I told her about Jack."

"You..." Jade glanced over at John, who had a strange, wary expression on his face. "...wait, what about Jack?"

"Oh, that's right," Dave said, his grin returning in spite of himself. "Hadn't told you, sorry about that." Dave said, enthused, as though he truly had forgotten. "Yeah, I've been fighting Jack like five, twelve times a day. I dunno sometimes. Time shit."

"What?" Jade shrieked. "Yeah, John knows all about it, don't you bro!" Dave said. "Guess it slipped our minds, huh man?"

"John!" Jade said. As soon as she was looking at their friend and not at him, Dave hit the button to his door and the thing slammed down. "Dave!" Jade shouted at the door. For a moment, she could only stand around frustrated and confused, and so turned back to John. "John... tell me this isn't what it sounds like," she said. "Please."

Jade was not at all reassured when John felt the need to check the hall for eavesdroppers before answering. Fed up, she quickly agreed when he asked her to go into her room for privacy. She tended to her small garden as he explained, just to keep her focus, but it only helped a little. Frankly, learning what Dave and Aradia had been doing for nearly a month and a half was making Jade angrier at Jack Noir than she had ever been at anyone in her entire life.

Rose's talk with Tavros was going well, at least up until the Basilisk got involved. That forced them into a bit of a pause as they started to talk about strategy, movement, and how not to get bitten in half instead, at least until the danger had passed. It had been four days since Rose had spoken to Terezi, and much to Rose's consternation, the Underlings had not all up and died overnight. In fact, Karkat had announced that morning that they weren't going to run out of XP fuel for months to come. Fantastic.

There was little they could do about it. The Underlings were duplicating deep within the lab, in
places they could not yet reach. It was a rudimentary sort of problem. The Trolls' lab had been divided into twelve sections by the game, each hooked to a different world and built with its own themed appearance, clues and puzzles, to ensure that the Trolls would have plenty of opportunities to create themselves no matter when they solved the games' riddles. To further enrich their experience, Sgrub had set each dungeon with auto-levelling opponents to make sure that the Trolls would be challenged no matter when they arrived across the course of the game, or in what numbers. In spite of all these measures, the Trolls had slashed and burned their way through most of the laboratory during Karkat's initial visit and their subsequent return, leaving those areas safe for habitation. That would have been the end of it, if it had it not been for one section in particular: the Underlab, home to evidence of strange experiments, vermin and disease, and to one Nepeta Leijon, extraordinaire. To tie in with its theme of abandoned mad science, this particular dungeon had brought a collection of electric lock puzzles keep up variety. A player trying to traverse it would have gone from point to point, connecting wires, hitting terminals and otherwise finding and fighting their way through the damp, rusty maze to their own birthplace. The trouble was that the dungeon had been carefully designed with all its keys and buttons placed where the player could reach them: on the side of the dungeon facing the Land of Little Cubes and Tea, not the side facing the main lab. This had left the players unable to reach most of its chambers, and those that remained could only be unlocked when Nepeta found a route through the maintenance halls, or when the constantly breeding underlings hit the buttons themselves through sheer accident, which was starting to happen with a curious frequency.

Back in the present, Tavros caught the Basilisk's attack on his lance, but before he or Rose could react further, the Underling was enveloped in a wave of blue flame. "Geeeeeze!" Vriska tisked. "'C8n't you two do 8ything?"

Rose kept her mouth shut, and Tavros followed suit. Vriska had missed Tavros' quick handling of the past half dozen underlings, some with Rose's help, but Rose did not particularly care for her opinion. Indeed, if Vriska was so busy belting insults with Eridan that she didn't notice her and Tavros, Rose figured Eridan couldn't either, and that was all that mattered at present. Besides, she liked what they had going. Tavros was all but ready to talk to Eridan directly.

"...Alright," Rose said, after taking a scope of the nearby area. "The next part of the plan is pretty simple." Tavros nodded. Personally, Rose could not remember just when her dating advice had segued into a point-for-point plan of action, but she was doing her best to keep it from slipping into shenanigans territory when it came to elements of the contrived and deranged. Any thought that entered her mind that she could imagine being said by John was immediately tossed. "I'll provide the atmosphere. You just get his attention and hold it."

"Got it," Tavros said. "And, uh... wait. wHAT KIND OF ATMOSPHERE, are you referring to, exactly?"

Rose did not want to say it out loud. She still was not comfortable with stooping so low, no matter how much she had convinced herself that it was necessary. She felt it was the only way to convince everyone, especially Vriska, to be looking the other way while simultaneously not stealing away Eridan's attention. For the present, Rose changed the subject by pointing out an Imp crawling over the rail of one of the Underlab's many raised platforms. Tavros nodded and took off after it at full speed, lance level and ready. The sound of his metal feet was not long gone when it was replaced with a similar clanging nuisance.

"Ugh! If you would just watch your blind spots you wouldn't be in this mess in the first place!" Vriska struck an Imp off of Eridan's back with her nail-claws, straight across its face. While that did not kill the Imp, it looked like it would have cut deep. For its part, the Imp reacted with a simple injured reel, but it was enough for Eridan to hit it in the shin with the butt of his rifle and then hard
with his fist into a nearby machine that proceeded to whine and hiss in complaint. The blow had been so solid that the Imp actually collapsed into grist, which seemed to surprise even Eridan as new.

He recovered fast enough. "Well maybe if a certain some-witch would give me some cover..." He snapped up his rifle and fired a shot directly over Vriska's shoulder and into a distant basilisk. She did not flinch, save to reach up, lick two fingers and check her hair for burns.

"Well!" Vriska tossed her hair once she was sure none of the ends had melted. "Karkat didn't tell me it was my job to grubsit you, why don't you take it up with him?"

Spotting trouble, Rose interrupted whatever Eridan was planning to say by opening a burst of Light just above his head. Vriska, unaffected, grinned at his yelp of pain and surprise and then outright laughed as a Basilisk dropped stunned from above and smack onto Eridan's head. She stepped just out of the way as it rolled to the floor. Rose had to wonder if she might have been able to blind Vriska as well if she put some extra effort into it, just to punish them both equally for screwing around, but that was a question for another day. For the time, she tried to capitalize on her opening by going for the Basilisk, but Vriska beat her to it with a powerful stomp of her foot.

Rose had to settle for tactics. "Both of you stop fighting each other and go cover Karkat!" she ordered. Rose might have felt a little less eager to shout orders at them if Karkat had not been demanding the same at the top of his lungs for the past five minutes.

Eridan, who was beginning to recover his eyesight, glowered in Rose's general direction. "Make us," he taunted.

"No!" Rose and Vriska protested in tandem. They both seemed almost relieved to hear each other say it, as well, and Vriska even threw Rose a look that said I know, right? Then, as if as punishment for being on the same wavelength, Vriska grabbed Eridan by the shoulder and near threw him in Karkat's direction. Put off by the treatment, Eridan opened fire as he ran ahead, and put distance between he and his ex.

The shots, wild as they were, landed near enough to their targets that the Underlings in question were forced to respond. They did so handily: two spears snapped up and caught the beams on their reflective blades, causing them to ricochet wildly to the side. One beam caught a pneumatic tank that burst and forced Karkat to double his volume.

"Flank them! Flank them, you mulch-brained ingrates! If it didn't work the first time, why would it work now?"

Eridan, having moved into position, took another shot to one of the Underlings. This shot hit the bizzare, twisted Underling in one of its multiple flank-sides, but it caught that shot with its blade as well.

Karkat revised his plan at once. "Flank them from the back!"

Maybe she had spent too much time hanging out near the two of them, but Rose could almost hear Jade shout "That's not what that means!"

The game had identified the two Underlings as Bullion Centaurs, armed with spears. They were a late-game monster that Sgrub had delivered to some of the flat, open worlds in the Troll's set, like Tavros and Nepeta's, and Rose was already not a fan. Naturally, the game had prototyped one of the pair with Equius' centaur-lusus, creating a two-bodied creature with one upper torso that could only have been appreciated by Equius himself. No matter how poorly he phrased it, Rose suspected that Karkat's advice was correct: the game was simply not going to let any attacks past the Centaur's
spears, no matter what logic would suggest.

In spite of that complication, the Centaurs were not the actual, ongoing problem. That prize fell to the Quicksilver Lich they were covering on each side, this one blessed with an impenetrable tangle of tentacles sprouting from every pore. Its voice echoed about the room, sounding for all the world like a lone priest chanting in some not-Latin, twisted but orderly and ringing with emotion. Experience with the Liches had brought Rose to understand the sound as little more than a very peculiar growling, and in a way that made it more unsettling.

As Karkat once again threw himself against the Centaur line only to be blocked at every attempt, the Lich raised one of its hands and a crop of its tentacles towards Rose and the approaching reinforcements. Its body surged tyrian purple, but this was no attack drawn from Gl'ybgolb the Screamer. The Light players turned about at once, just in time for Rose to throw up her wands as both the Basilisks Vriska had destroyed reformed and rushed her. Vriska was attacked by the lone, revived Imp, whom she rent in two with her bare hands. Luckily for Rose, the Basilisks had not been revived in good condition, and she was able to destroy one on her own, but it fell to Vriska to deal with the other. She moved fast: too fast for Rose to react before Vriska appeared behind the lizard, grabbed it by the back of the head, and drove it forward in an inopportune headbutt against Rose's face.

"...Thanks for that," Rose tried to snark, but Vriska had already turned to leave. That was probably for the best, as no one was around to hear whatever Rose had actually said past splitting headache and bloody nose. Rose left the area as quickly as she could, wiping at her face with her sleeve and hoping to be far from where the Basilisks had died before they could be revived again. The Lich continued its work, using Feferi's power rather than the prototype's, in that frustrating way that Liches could. It had been spamming the resurrection spell with such regularity that the symbol for Life had been burned into the floor below it by the power.

"So what next?" asked a friendly voice. Rose recovered herself to find that she had somehow rejoined Tavros. He paused when he noticed her injuries.

"I'm fine," Rose said, or at least fine enough not to tend to it. "What next... with Eridan?" she asked, still confused.

Tavros nodded, and began to walk with her as they tried to reach Karkat, keeping an active guard for Underlings returning to life from thin air. It was not the strangest place Rose had ever held a conversation about someone's romantic life, but it was very similar.

"I guess..." she said, trying to clear out her head still, "the plan is to go with one of John's movies. A specific one. It's less than perfect – the plan, that is, the film significantly further – but is ideal. You're going to have to keep quiet or everyone's going to be a little annoyed by you talking through the movie, which is why you should be in back. Then just... talk."

"About what?"

"I don't know," Rose admitted. "I'm still thinking." In the distance, she could make out Eridan opening fire on the Centaurs a second time. When the volley became a barrage, the Centaurs began to spin their staves in full circles, deflecting every beam. Eridan shouted something about blowholes and porpoises that Rose did not understand – nor want to – and redoubled his fire to no impact as Karkat shouted at him to "move around or something!"

"...start with a compliment," Rose said to Tavros, out of ideas. She turned to Tavros and saw him watching Eridan, a look on his face halfway between pride and concern. Rose sighed and clapped him on the shoulder. "Let's go rescue him. From himself if no one else."
As they approached, Rose and Tavros dealt with another revived Imp, but also had to put up with a hailstorm of encrypted captcha cards careening their way. Sollux was throwing them at the opposite Centaur to keep him pinned down, but by the sounds of things, he was running out of ammunition.

"Don't need that," he was saying. "Don't think I need that." Slice. "Well I hope not."

"Hey, I have an idea!" Karkat growled to him from the opposite side. "How 'bout—"

"You couldn't hit him if it was the broad side of your hive, KK," Sollux said before Karkat could even finish.

"Me! *Your lusus* couldn't—"

The near Centaur caught Karkat's blade, but he and Sollux continued bantering. Rose was not sure what they were saying, for as they continued to one-up each other, the game went into graphical conniptions to announce their fraymotif. The world went scab-red between them, and then bright red as the fraymotif split the Underlings along imaginary veins. But it was still imaginary in the end. Though all the revived Underlings dropped back into nonexistence, the Centaurs and Lich marched on at three-quarters health.

"Now *that's* not a bad idea!" Vriska suddenly clapped Rose and Tavros on the shoulders from behind. "C'mon!"

"But...!" Rose had suddenly made two separate, unfortunate observations. "I don't have any!"

"Mine'll work," Vriska said, matter-of-factly.

Tavros nodded. "Just piggyback on her Light. I don't... actually know what it'll do, though, now that I think of it."

"But..." And this was the real kicker. "...I don't know how." Rose had gone Grindark more or less the same time any of them had enough money to buy a fraymotif, and had remained so until just before they had to escape. She was not even sure if anyone but Dave had bought any.

Vriska could not seem to decide between a gloat and a groan, and instead said "Just work with me, okay?" and flash-stepped. Tavros was no more helpful, but he tried, giving Rose a jerk of his head that just might have been meant as a wink. Maybe.

"You goin' in with us?" asked a gruff voice from behind Rose. Rose was getting tired of these people popping up when she wasn't looking, and was going to complain to Eridan, but he stopped her by giving her a hard shove toward the fight. "Let's go then, we need some cover!"

When Rose turned about to prevent a fall, she found herself face to blade with the nearest Centaur, which was now the one with two sets of golden udders and one even more magnificent moustache. Her needlewands went up and she caught the blade on the branch-arms of the Quills, stopping the blow hard in its tracks. Rose shoved the Centaur off of her and dove in to attack, but sure enough, every one of her strikes crashed hard against the Centaur's impeccable spear. Rose would have been frustrated by the games' blatant cheating, but as the Centaur went wide, its lusus prototyping obliterated anything caught with spear or hind legs. Really, she realized, that she was able to block at all meant that the game was cheating for her almost as much. Another swing went for Rose's head, and she ducked out of the way. In the distance, she could almost make out a voice, but she was too focused on survival to pick out the individual words. As the Centaur's glimmering hooves raised to crush her, Rose fell back entirely, and onto her behind.

"I said 'Now!' As in: 'Pull out!' Do you *want* to get crushed?" Vriska's sneaker suddenly came into
view atop a nearby raised platform. "I guess we'll have to do this my way." Vriska tossed back her hair with one hand. "...Karkat."

Karkat risked a glance half-over his shoulder, and Rose saw his eyes go wide before he threw himself violently out of the way. "Shit!" he shouted, half because of Vriska and half the scalding radiator he had collided with in his escape. "That's not going to work, you know!" he scolded as he pulled away behind them both.

"Not the point," Vriska said, almost bored. Suddenly, her eye flashed blue and thin bolts of Light shot out toward the Underlings. For a moment, this did little more than draw their attention, but Vriska quickly followed up with her dice. The nearest Centaur halted as the Octet rolled to a stop at its feet, and it watched as the dice leapt up into the air well after they had initially finished moving. The dice struck out at the three Underlings like blades, three times each. Sure as ever the Centaurs deflected each attack, but that hardly bothered Rose as three did get through to the Lich. Finally, the dice bounced back off of their targets and straight to Vriska's hand. "Tavros!" Vriska commanded.

Tavros moved in from wherever he had been waiting for a signal, but to Rose's surprise, Vriska suddenly bolted. Rose found out why the moment she glanced back at the Centaurs, and found that Tavros was attempting to drive one of them away from the Lich, even though that meant moving it towards her. She jumped to one side, then the other, and even felt confident enough after the second jump to cut in with her wands, but that proved to be a mistake she could not have predicted as the Centaur collided with the same radiator as Karkat. It kicked out in pain, hitting Rose hard in the leg even even as she stabbed at it. Rose twisted on her ankle as she fell, her head hitting the nearest platform, and she gave a short scream of pain.

"Rose!" Tavros called. She looked up and saw him near, hand outstretched. She took it and he pulled her first close and then up. "Eridan, your turn!" he called as signal, and with a strange whine, Tavros' legs kicked him into a flash-step and on to safe ground. Despite his overt delicacy, Rose had to shout out again as her leg crashed back down to the floor when Tavros came to a stop. As an apology, Tavros even gentler than before as he let Rose go, if that were possible. As he guided her to a nearby rail, Rose felt the strange feel of the moulting skin on his arms. Where the other Trolls' were different than a Human's - imperceptibly alien in a way she was not sure how to place, rough without being truly rough, and firmer overall – Tavros' skin had become truly thick, even course where he had scratched free new skin from under the old. He started to apologize to her for the rough handling, but he was overwhelmed by the sound of Eridan's rifle.

Rose noticed what was happening before Tavros, but not by much. Once again the air distorted with a fraymotif's light and Tavros only spared a moment to say "'scuze me!" before stepping away. Together, he and his friends gathered and stood like an arrow-point as the game channeled a tornado of junk from the room toward the Centaur, and a hurricane of archaisms at Rose via the GUI, where it tried to squeeze "Breath", "Hope" and "Light" into a Divine Wind pun that made her head hurt. Whether thanks to the power of the fraymotif or the sheer number of things the Centaur was crashing into as it was pushed aside, the trio's target died, though it was a close thing. Rose was still not sure how the fraymotifs were supposed to work, but she supposed its apparent weakness made sense. They were showy things, and a waste of time by any degree, but if the combinations really went beyond two, the game would have to be frugal with damage if it was going to save anything impressive for five elements, nine, or the vaunted twelve. But one step at a time, and one step backward, as the Lich quickly revived the Centaur. The Lich was unable to bring its guardian back in any position but where it had fallen, luckily. Separated from its partner, the healthy Centaur roughly but correctly shoved its charge back against the nearest wall so that it could protect it solo.

For its part, the revived mutant Centaur charged its killers the moment it returned, a rush of gold
come from thin air and not soon to be stopped. As they were about to be run down, Vriska and Eridan dove aside, but to Rose's surprise, Tavros stood his ground and caught his opponent with his lance. This the game ignored entirely, flagrantly throwing out all pretense to enforce the Centaur's frontal defence. Realizing he was in trouble, Tavros reached out and caught the thing's spear with his hands. Rose and his friends watched gobsmacked before Eridan recovered his countenance and shouted: "Careful, Tav, we'll get behind 'im!"

Seeing they were all right, Rose choked down another one of John's repulsive gushers and endured the strange feeling of her painless ankle setting itself right again. "One of these days," she said to herself, "everyone's going to come to me with body horror dreams and they're not going to remember where it came from." By the time that had finished its ugly work, Rose concluded that Tavros and his friends had things better in hand than the others, and so went to join Karkat and Sollux.

"That was a valuable heirloom, jackass," Sollux was saying to Karkat, probably referring to a severed encrypted card lying half by their feet and half kicked to the opposite side of the room.

"I don't care if it was Her Imperious Condescension's pearl-handled fin chiseller, I'm gonna take the shots I can get!"

Sollux actually growled. "But you can't make any shots if they block everything you throw at them!"

Rose darted in between them to take a few shots of her own, just as fruitlessly. "How did you deal with these things in the game?" she asked.

"They were usually outside," Karkat admitted. "Walls kind of ruin the whole 'blocks everything but the rear' gimmick."

"What about area attacks?" Rose asked. The gusher had filled her with good health and adrenaline, and somewhere deep inside, the Seer in her itched to strategize. "Like Vriska's dice, if we could rely on them. It's time to widen our net, with literal nets necessary, but seeing as we don't have any... Sollux, you're a Mage. You have any relevant spells?"

"The Imp's using FF's defence spells," Sollux admitted, and his tone slowly slid into place as talked number crunching and game mechanics. "It'll only going two take one-quarter damage from spell and... half from fire or 2omething 2tupiid liike that untill it clear2 out. ii've only got one spell that'll do that."

"Would it be enough?" Rose asked. Behind her, she heard the other Bullion Centaur burst into grist, but the Lich was now devoting all of its power to keeping the players split, and it was restored at once.

"No..." Sollux trailed off, and Karkat scowled. "but... liife ii2 antiithetiical two doom."

"Oh," Karkat said with a roll of his eyes. "This."

"What?" Rose asked. "What is it?"

Karkat shook his head as if he hoped that would dissuade her, but Rose was adamant, and after Karkat had pressed back a renewed counterattack from the Centaur, he answered. "Look, you all bailed before you spent much time chit-chatting with your Denizens. But you talked to Cetus. She waste much time calling herself the, I dunno, 'Prawn of Shade' or something?"

"No..." Rose admitted. To be frank, she did not much remember her talk with Cetus at all. She did not much like to remember it at all. She remembered the look on Jade's face when she found Dave dead, John shaking and she with her skin scorched black by the void, and she did not want to press
the memory much further. Jade had made her thoughts on the matter perfectly clear, and John had backed her up when he got to his feet. It had taken Rose some time to see reason, even as the skies were going dark above them. In the end she had gone back to her world, into depth and pressure to find a cave under the waves and learn a way to soothe her mind and body. But she did not remember how.

Karkat ignored any look of apprehension Rose might have given him "Well my point's this: when Miss No Respect For Property Rights over there fought Scorpio with her brownblooded dice-caddy, I bet you Diamonds to Build Grist Scorpio spent half her time babbling about 'stagnation' and the other half about being 'the Lash of Shade.'"

"Counter-elements?" Rose supposed.

Karkat nodded as a captcha block flipped haphazardly over his head and toward their opponents. "And you won't think that's trite once your skin starts splitting whenever they cast a spell. Ever see Equius use his powers?" Rose thought back to the fight with the Adonis, and several of the ones she had seen while on patrol, and could think of no such instance. "Well that's because you're always hanging out with Kan, or Nepeta's hanging out with Jade. He'd start ripping them apart. Actually, I've told Harley to stow it too, but god knows we need to teleport more often than we need a fucking black hole in the middle of the floor. Heirs. Subtlety of an pneumatic asphalt randomizer."

"I can't imagine where you'd get the impression for such a blanket statement," Rose said.

"Hey, quie—"

But as they had been talking, they had missed the enemy move. The Centaur, its hooves replaced with blonde-furred cat paws, making it look not unlike a hippogriff, pounced into their midst and scattered them. Rose held back against it as Sollux retreated, but Karkat was faster on the uptake than both of them. He charged for the Lich as it was left alone, and at first Rose thrilled to see it. But for all the fuss they had made about engaging the Lich at all, they had forgotten the plain and simple fact that it was a competent foe on its own. Though Karkat cut the thing once, it seized the arm with its web of tentacles Karkat himself by the throat with a free arm. Rose's elation fell to panic as the tentacles began to wrench his shoulder.

"Oh, god fucking dammit!" Karkat shouted. "Sollux, fuck! Don't be an ass about this!"

Sollux seemed more than a little hesitant. "KK, I'm talking about Unconditional. If I'm wrong, I'm out and so are you."

Rose was heavily pressed, but knew well what that meant, even without a Doom player in her session. The name gave it away. Jade's was called Unlimited. Dave's, Infinite; John's, Final; and Rose's own Pinnacle. Each, the game had uselessly tagged, "Learned at Level 99."

The Lich's chanting growl had begun to rise in fervour as it worked harsh, personal work on Karkat's arm. He fought back with all his free limbs, though the Lich did all in its power to grab those as well. The sole saving grace seemed to be that it needed one hand free to direct Feferi's powers to the weakening double-Centaur. "Does this situation look like it's improving with you doing shit?"

Karkat barked to Sollux. "Am I missing that part?"

Sollux hesitated, but only for a moment. He and Rose both saw as Karkat plunged his hand into the nest of tentacles to throttle the Lich, committing them both to action. Sollux began to focus for a moment, and whispered "Doom." And saying so, he flexed his hand.

Rose, who could see him at the edge of her vision as she danced with the Centaur, thought she saw
his eyes flash in the way they did when he fired his usual beams of power, but the flash abruptly stopped. In their stead, the world flashed bright colours instead. For a moment Rose's eyes blinked with afterimages, but then the pulse came again and seemed to consume the world in flat, dark green. Rose could not even see her own hands, but she could hear as the air seemed to be drawn out of the room and Eridan whispered. "Oh, fuck, not again."

Only Sollux and the Underlings could be seen clear, Karkat a dim shadow in the Lich's grasp, still struggling. Sure enough, the Lich's skin seemed to peel – Karkat had not exaggerated about that. With effort, it seemed, Sollux raised one arm towards Rose's Centaur. The room shook for a moment until, in the blink of an eye, the Centaur became covered in screaming, torn flesh. Rose recognized them at once as what Kanaya had once referred to off-hand as "our native necrotic fauna." The bodies of animals and beings thrashed about the Centaur in an assault from nowhere, dozens of the undead drawn raw as the essence of Doom itself.

A second gesture from Sollux had the second Centaur under siege, and a third, the Lich, which thrashed about as its health was assailed by both the creatures and the sick green air, though a film of fuschia light seemed to coat it as every blow was struck. Rose could barely make out the individual zombies in the dogpile. Desert creatures, forest, Trolls, Carapaces, Human, moving in and against one another, striking past and through one another to their true targets. Their faces, uncanny and lifelike, bit down for some and stared in odd directions for others, with white-flooded eyes. Even the Centaurs could not move for the weight of the things, and the revived Centaur collapsed underneath them. Rose watching as the creatures that had assailed it melted into the ground like red-white foam on the beach of green.

Sollux held his hands high, toward the remaining Underlings, and as he did the Lich began to topple. Karkat continued to work in the midst, his friend's attack leaving him untouched. His weight dragged the Lich down, but he was so faint in the green that Rose only realized his impact in afterthought. For her and the others, and Sollux as well, it was as though the Lich were falling in weakness and death the Underlings would never truly know, and if by weight then only under that hundred foul and biting things. And as it fell, it reached past Karkat, towards Sollux, in gesture or search of purchase Rose did not know. Sollux's arms began to droop, to fail him under the straight, but he held them shaking toward the Lich. And the Lich's paean scream, now so at odds with its condition, rose even further in zeal and soared in pitch, until Rose could almost understand the beast as it went on raving, singing blessings of Life to the Sovereign Slayer and praise to the Throne of Derse, until the end. The fleshy swarm fell away towards them, and Sollux's arms gave out.

Karkat, who unlike Rose had knew exactly what was going to happen, rushed forward against the Centaur, who did not even seem to notice the sudden disappearance of its assailants. The Underling rounded on him as ever, before he could even close the gap, and so they began to duel.

"I'm fine!" Sollux called to Rose as he caught his breath. Rose needed no other instruction. She stepped behind the Centaur as Dave had once taught her and stabbed it deep with both wands, finishing it. She met Karkat's eyes as the golden beast disappeared between them, and saw as he let the weight of his sickles finally win out.

"Did you level?" he asked, as if that would at least have made things worthwhile.

Rose's heart sank a little as she thought about it. "...No." Karkat growled and walked away. In the distance, however, Tavros gave Rose a thumbs up. Rose could not help but notice that he had to remove his hand from Eridan's to do so. For his part, Eridan kept a wary eye on Sollux until they were long out of the Underlab. Rose never did learn how he had first experienced the spell.

"Hey," Karkat said to Sollux. Sollux, whose eyes were screwed up tight, shook his head only
slightly. Karkat snapped his fingers in Sollux's face and Sollux jolted, and fell against him. Karkat righted him as Rose approached to see if he needed help.

"Hey," Karkat said. "Hey. You were right." He shook Sollux lightly, perhaps to encourage him to stand under his own power. "Just dropped it exactly, with your fucked up math brain. Didn't he, Lalonde?"

Rose did not have to lie to know how close it had been, although she could not help notice Karkat downplaying his own involvement. "Just made it," she said. Looking over Sollux's shoulder, Rose saw Eridan edging towards the two for a closer look. Rose warned him away at once.

"You and your fuckin' fiduspawn elemental weakness crap," Karkat said. "It's been forever since that came up. What reminded you, Feferi?" Sollux ignored him. Karkat, looking somewhat haggard by this, grunted and said: "What, you kiss her funny or something?"

Sollux, gripping Karkat's arm, slowly pulled himself up. "...I don't kiss FF with Doom, KK."

"I'm just saying!" Karkat said, and he slowly turned Sollux about and began to walk him back toward the transportalizer, one step at a time. The others followed, Vriska bumping herself in between Tavros and Eridan en route. As Vriska decided to start talking to Eridan, Tavros stepped away, and up towards Rose. Politely, he handed her a towel that she used to clean her face.

"You know," Rose said, casually as he approached, "jumping in front of a charging Centaur coming for you and certain friends shows a certain pathological disregard for your own safety."

Tavros blushed slightly. "Um... well, getting trapped behind a Centaur being attacked by, someone else shows a certain pathological desire to,,, uh,,"

Rose patted his arm. "Nice opening, at least," she consoled.

Tavros brightened. "Thanks."

Rose returned the towel. "I have to admit, I can't stop thinking about the Lich."

"He was sort of, stubborn," Tavros said.

"Yes," Rose admitted, "but more at the end. I had never really thought of it before, but the Underlings serve the Dersites as a sort of ancillary force they're only allowed to direct at us. But even though they're randomly generated, they still seem to serve the structure, have you noticed? They're still a part of Dersite society, or at least they think they are, if this was any indication. And now I can't stop thinking about the Dersites! Imagine! An entire culture dedicated to the destruction of all current culture and the cessation of further! And yet, they have a strict and solid feudal society, in spite of themselves: a necessary price to pay, maybe, for the end of progress and creativity? And while the Dersites have personalities, the Underlings are programmed to be loyal from spawn to despawn." Rose's mind began to work overdrive. "...What was it you said your Denizens were saying every time you met them?" she asked. "I'm starting to consider this in from the perspective of an organized, apocalyptic religion. Liches and Bishops serving them for preachers, with Knights and Centaurs as the bodyguards, enforcers... martial elite of the religious order? ...Or maybe I'm being misled by what we saw of the Centaur today. Perhaps I should be seeing them as the martial elite of the whole society? Good question: Is the Dersite loyalty, artificial or otherwise, tied feudally, to the Throne like the Lich said, or theologically, to their anuracidal supercult?"

Tavros looked as though some of his brain had fused. Rose was familiar with the expression. "...Like the Lich said..." he struggled, "...what?"
"Well..." she started.

"No," he said, cutting her off. "I mean... the Lich said what?"

*Oh,* Rose realized. *The senses thing.* The Lich's coherent scream must have only reached her specially tuned ears. "...Never mind," she said, though she gathered her thoughts all the same. It was clear she had lost her audience anyways. To them, the Lich had simply reached out, screamed and bowled over.

They continued to walk, and Sollux was silent for some time, before he muttered: "...Kiss you with Doom."

"Pah," Karkat grunted.

Sollux chuckled. "You'll be all 'Oh no, this was a terrible idea, I'm being pulled inside out by Doom but I'm still gonna say one last raving, idiot thing before I die.'"

"Look, I'm not Life, it wouldn't happen to me. I was talking about mechanics, you limp ass-snake."

He had to heft Sollux up as he spoke.

But Sollux was enjoying himself now. "Oh, come on, KK, your waste track is coming out backwards through your side, you can do better than that for last words."

"You want my vivisected epiphany splayed all over your face with my candy-rot mutant veinspray? All right." Karkat hefted Sollux's arm up over his shoulder properly, and he used his freed hand to unlock the door they had sealed to keep the Underlings from bolting. "It's I, Karkat Vantas, being of sound mind and inverted body, do hereby will all my computer programs to the Human, John Egbert."

"Oh god."

"That's right, fucker," Karkat said. "If I'm gonna die from your shit kissing skills, I'm taking you all with me in a programming disaster like the world has never seen."

"We won't last five minutes. You magnificent asshole." Sollux shook a fist at Karkat.

"Well," Karkat said, "if we're all gonna die, we at least shouldn't have to die without a good last meal. I'm-a go wake the chef." This was greeted with a certain excitement from those gathered, even Sollux. "Then we can all cram the crap into the lab and watch shit on the TV until we're sick. If Lalonde starts rambling about Carapace psychology again, we'll aim for her."

"You're just provoking me, you know," Rose taunted.

"Wow, Kar," Eridan said. "Just gonna go throw a whole fucking party, huh? We should get someone to hit their head or something every time you're on shift."

"It could be you," Sollux mumbled.

Eridan rolled his eyes, and as they had arrived at the transportalizer, gestured to his friends. "C'mon guys," he said, and led them out.

"Hey!" Karkat shouted after them. "You tell the others! I sure ain't fucking doing it!"

"Just so long as he doesn't have to tell TZ," Sollux commented, and then: "Ow!" He laughed at Karkat. "That actually hurt!" he said, pushing Karkat's grip off of his arm. Karkat did not entirely let
him go, considering he would have fallen, but adjusted his grip. "Sore spot?" Sollux asked, ironically.

"What Terezi wants to do with her time..." Karkat started, but then seemed to remember Rose was there. Rose could see him coming up with an order the moment he met her eyes and briefly considered making a run for it, even back where she had come. "Lalonde," he said, too soon. "Listen: today's Nepeta's hunting day, which means she's cavorting around the Underlab like a cavetroll straight out of the stone age. No computer." Just because Nepeta lived in the Underlab had not forced her to go on all patrols.

"Really?" Rose asked. "I'm surprised you're so invested in her schedule, Karkat."

"Hey, shu— Both of you shut up!" Karkat rapped Sollux on the head when he had begun to laugh again. "I know everyone's schedule, all right?"

"Oh yeah, because that's not creepier at all," Sollux said

Karkat pretended to ignore him, though the intent did not reach his face. "Look, Rose: just find her and tell her to get her fuzzy behind up here with the rest of us or I won't hear the end of it. She'll probably want to eat whatever rabid thing she finds down here, but if you're hungry, I'll make sure the kitchen stays open."

Rose was half tempted to refuse to order, especially because Karkat's movie plans played wonderfully into her and Tavros', but Rose resisted. She could convince John's selection of film via pesterchum as well as any other means. "All right," she said.

"Third door on the right, left, second right," Karkat said. "After that, I have no idea. She's probably pretending it's a goddamned jungle with climbing trees. Keep your chat open," he added as he took Sollux through to the transport pad. "If there're any other loose Underlings, sound the bell."

"What a delightful thought to have before throwing me somewhere on my own," Rose mused as she left them. Karkat ignored the jibe and instead began to help Sollux through the transportalizer. When Rose was out of normal hearing range, she heard Sollux speak again.

"KK," he whispered.

"WHAT?" Karkat shouted. Clearly Rose had missed an even softer whisper.

"Shh!" Sollux cautioned. "Look, it's... forget it."

"Oh... for fuck's sake, you're not doing this," Karkat said. "C'mon, out!"

"It's nothing," Sollux tried, and stepped backward, though by the sound of things this just caused him to trip over the platform.

"Oh, now you see that?" Karkat said. "That's not nothing."

"That's me being a clumsy ass, that's not the... thing, okay?" Sollux and Karkat shuffled about for a bit as they got him back to his feet. "Look, it's just... the Lich." Sollux lowered his voice, to the point that Rose could not hear him as clearly as she would have wanted. "I just think I have to talk to AA." A footstep. "Just gimme some room, okay?"

"...Yeah," Karkat confirmed, and Sollux used the transportalizer. Rose knew it was him because, after he had gone, Karkat added: "...whatever that means."
Karkat left soon after, and Rose pressed on, taking the route she had been given. She was distracted, her mind wandering from Sollux, Aradia and Karkat to Tavros and Eridan, and the battle that had just passed. By the time she had found the entrance to Nepeta's apparent hunting ground, something odd had occurred to her. She came to remember Eridan and Vriska's reaction to Tavros catching the Centaur, with his bare hands no less. Rose had to admit, that had been impressive, certainly, but had not seemed strange at the time, given that all the Trolls had demonstrated feats of strength with their game levels. It was as Rose searched the ground for Nepeta's footprints or any other sign of her having been there, Rose hit on it what had so shocked Tavros' friends: the plain fact that the Centaur had been the one prototyped with Equius' lusus, and had very near his strength.

That simply didn't fit with what Rose had seen and understood of the game's powers. It didn't follow the trend. While she could imagine Equius himself, Aradia, or perhaps even John stopping the charging Centaur (John taking after his adoptive father in the strangest ways), they were where Rose drew the line. Not Tavros. Certainly not. He had never been that strong. At least, certainly not before the moult.

As it often did on the issue of Trolls, Rose's mind drifted back to Kanaya, who had once called the levels a multiplication of natural abilities, not power spun from thin air. That had implications. It meant that, though he did not seem to have much changed, in his moult even weedy Tavros had grown stronger: stronger than all but the strongest of his fellow-players. What did that mean for Eridan and Vriska? What did that mean for Equius? Questions spilled from there as Rose searched. As instructed, Rose kept her chat open, but it was another pesterlog that she kept in her mind.

Jade Harley was going to do it. She had barricaded herself in the wedge between Karkat and Sollux's desk in the corner of the main lab and had wallpapered the corner with tall sheets of brown paper that soon became covered in sketches, equations and notations that spilled onto loose-leaf papers stacked ramshackle about the floor. She had even set up additional desks that she used to extend her domain: more to cut everyone else off from her than to use as a writing surface, though that came with time. Some would later question why she was working in the computer room at all, as opposed to one of the hundreds of empty rooms in the laboratory, and she would answer them by dragging them into her realm by sleeve or collar and not letting them leave until they had answered a series of complicated questions that painted no clear picture of her end goal. But Jade's end goal was simple, underneath the details. She was going to take Jack Noir out behind the woodshed and blow his head off.

It had started with Dave. His door had only just shut behind him the day after his tidy escape when Jade had stepped out of her own room, pushed him back into the door and demanded to know everything he knew about Jack. His reply (after "Uh... whoa," and the inevitable dive off the rails in that direction) was the basis of Jade's initial brainstorming. Jack still preferred to fight with his sword. Marial abilities: check. Left arm still missing. Fantastic. Energy beams: Jade supposed this was a power borrowed from Bec. Noted, plans to counteract forthcoming. Time travel. That was bad business, and not just on its own. That meant Jack had the Lich-like power to use the prototype's player's Element as well as the prototype's itself. Definitely bad. He had not used Breath or Light powers, or anything derived from the other three prototypes, but only "not yet." Next up: he could teleport. Teleportation was also probably a First Guardian power, but it could also be a Lich-style derived Space power from her. Jade was not certain, but she knew that even if it was one, he could probably access the other, so both would have to be accounted for. And so it went. Over time, the plans became less of a hypothetical dragging to a hypothetical woodshed and more a hypothetical attempt to pluck Jack's hypothetical feathers one by one before the dragging could commence (plucking literal feathers was struck through as a "pretty stupid idea!"). She might not have liked the way her plan was going, or even the very idea of so carefully arranging Jack's death, but Jade Harley was going to do it. No one was going to hurt her friends on her watch again.
It was to this end that she booked an appointment with Aradia. There didn't seem to be any sense in scaring or cajoling the robotic Troll into helping her no matter how well it had worked on Dave, but just like Dave her time was at a premium and she was even less likely to share it with Jade. Jade set up the meeting just as Karkat and Rose went out on patrol, and she and Aradia sequestered themselves away from the other occupants of the room for a good two hours. Aradia answered all of Jade's questions, though she seemed somewhat surprised by how much Jade seemed to understand. Jade didn't understand why everyone seemed so surprised by this. It wasn't that hard, really, when you were the granddaughter of a mad scientist, or when your powers gave you the uncanny knack for tracking precise distances in whatever units of measurement you chose.

In time, the sheets filled up and while Jade was still not quite sure of the particulars, her base plan was coming to light. Aradia seemed to agree with her conclusions as they went on, but especially on the fact that neither of them actually liked the plan, even if it might work. No matter their efforts, they could not come up with a way to do away with Jack without getting near him. When the meeting came to its unintentional close, they had just shifted gears altogether. Now they tried to find a way to make sure Jack could not be anywhere but near them.

It was in the middle of this discussion that Sollux arrived through the central transportalizer just after Eridan, Vriska and Tavros. Aradia acknowledged him at once, or rather her eye lights blinked, but they had for everyone else as well, and she simply continued with what she had been saying. When Sollux did not step off the platform, Jade looked up and noticed his condition.

"Are... you okay, Sollux?" she asked.

"I... uh..." Sollux wobbled in place. He was looking at Aradia, at first, but as Jade watched, his eyes flicked to his computer, and he took one stumble towards it.

Aradia let out an aggravated sigh and turned to him, suddenly showing more personality than she had the entire interview with Jade. "Sollux, if you want to talk to me..." she started, irritated, before she finally got a good look at him. Even Jade could see something had happened down in the Underlab, and she was no robot. "...Unbelievable," Aradia said. "Has Karkat let this get that far out of control?"

"Oh, thanks," said the man himself as he arrived. Almost eager to ignore them, he took an interest in Jade's work, instead, and pushed between Sollux and Aradia to reach her. "Why the hell," he said as he approached the other desks, "is there twice as much written on your crazy-board than there was when I lef—"

Jade grabbed him by the sleeve and pulled him into her office. "You are so rude!" she told him, and then pulled him even further. "And stupid, even."

"Hey, I just hauled his ass out of that scuzz-farm Nepeta picked for a house! If she wants to start something—"

"KK, shut the fuck up," Sollux said. He guided Aradia in the opposite direction. As they went, Jade heard him say: "AA, I can't do it any more, we've gotta talk about it."

"Since when are you this good at math?" Karkat said, in his usual overt speaking voice, as he peered at a long column of figures.

"Shh!" Jade hissed. "For your information," she repeated from a similar discussion with John, "I've always—"

Karkat rolled his eyes. "Look, Lady Shush. I don't want to eavesdrop on those two, so I frankly don't
see why I should be helping you."

"I'm not eavesdropping!" Jade whispered. "I'm trying to not talk over them like a jerk!"

Evidently, her insult was loud enough as it was, as Sollux raised his voice as he shouted to Aradia. "...I'll maybe I'm upset it's because I just roasted an Underling with my matesprit's element alive in mine, but all I could think about was, oh, hm, what was that? Very familiar. Burned someone alive with elements, they fell down dead screaming... It's on the tip of my tong—iit'2 what ii diid two you!"

Everyone else in the room looked up at the shouting. Compared to them, Aradia was almost unresponsive and did not so much as flinch. "Sollux, you are not going to hurt Feferi. I know that must be an awful thing to think about but—"

"I don't care about FF right now...!" Sollux trailed off and then shook his head as if to wake himself. "You know what I mean! We have to talk about this. We have to talk about this, and you can't just walk away and pretend not to be dead like you did on Alternia, or that you're busy, or whatever crap you're doing with your time! It's all you ever do!" In his sudden rage, Sollux seemed to fixated on a new issue. "You just wall people out when they want to talk to you, or when they need to... and who even knows why, huh?" He pointed to Jade. "Because I don't know! You plug yourself in and that's all anyone gets! I don't know so much as two things!"

"You never asked," Aradia said, a small trace of emotion sneaking back into her voice. "Oh, well, I can't imagine why I wouldn't do that. Problem solved! It's got nothing to do with you turning into a bitch and pushing us all away, god knows," he said.

"Sollux, what are you angry about?" she asked. "The Imp, my death--"

"I want to talk about your death and I'm angry because I can't talk to you about anything because you're so busy or some shit! What the hell is this you're doing, anyways?" Sollux stomped away from Aradia and pushed past Karkat and Jade – even though they had given him more than enough room – and began to take in the calculations and sketches. A few quick glances had him saying: "This a weapon, or a shield? For what?"

"Sollux," Aradia said, not leaving her spot. "I want to talk to you and I think you want to talk to me, but if you're going to be like this, I'm just going to wait for you to switch modes because this isn't getting anything done."

"That? Is exactly what I'm talking about," Sollux said, pointing at her. "That is the exact... the exact..."

Jade looked to Karkat as Sollux trailed off and then began to stare closer at her tiny handwriting. What enthusiasm his counterattack had given him to continue the conversation quickly burned up, and he began to take in the blueprints at length. Half-way through his search, he turned to Jade. "...you're insane." He turned back to the prints in a daze. "tz come2 to me wanting to talk to the human2 and ii think 'oh, they look harmle22 and 2tupid,' 2o ii hook her up, but no! they're ab2olutely fuckiing crazy!" He glanced at the next page, and was so repulsed at the idea of looking at more that he began to pace away. "thii2 ii2 all my fault. we're 2crewed."

"Yeaaah..." Karkat said, guiding him out of the corner. "You go ponder that, why not. You!" he said to Jade. "...What the fuck is this? I think I deserve an explanation that isn't being lisp-ranted!"

Jade decided it would be easier just to answer him instead of telling him off about Sollux. "It's for
Jack," she said. When that did not scare him off, she sighed and explained: "I was listening to Nepeta
talk about today's hunt the other. And I was angry..." she explained, watching Sollux go, "...because
of something Dave said. And I thought, 'Geeze, she has item generators, fifteen friends with all the
power in the universe, and her own. If she'd just use it all, she'd be done already and she could help
me think of something to something about Jack.' But then I thought... well, maybe I should be using
all our powers and tech." Jade pointed to the most complete diagram of her plans: a large, hypothetrical container. "...It's a rat trap."

"Hm..." Karkat took a look at the diagrams himself, but it was obvious he had no idea what he was
looking at. "And how are we keeping him from break out of said trap? He says, waiting for the soul
crushing news?"

Jade sighed, watching Sollux pace back and forth. "We've got a backup plan, that's about it," she
said, pointing to the sheets that had set Sollux off.

Karkat followed her eyes. "This is a bad backup plan?" As he paced, Sollux muttered something
about Jack tearing them apart, one by one. Aradia reached out to halt him, but he swerved by.

"Yup," Jade answered Karkat.

"And is there any chance at all that any better else is going to work?"

"With our luck?" Jade asked. "Let's be honest here. We've been trapped in this box for a month and
a half our extra lives are gone."

He sighed. "This is alo the only plan we've had in a month and a half. Let's hear it, then."

"If we can get him in the trap?" Jade said, "he'll lose most of his critical powers. We'll be able to fight
him in person."

"Still waiting for it."

"But if we stop distracting him for any length of time, he'll use the Red Miles to tear apart the trap
with us in it." Karkat was about to make a smart remark, so Jade decided to finish talking. "Anyone
who makes it out won't have so much as a platform left to fight on if they can't float. And either way,
we won't be able to retreat."

Karkat growled, a long, extended noise to let Jade know just how he felt. "...And now my day is
complete," he said, shaking his hands at the paper. "We have the perfect cover to strike out and hit
the bastard but the only plan we have to use it is to build an excuse to leave it!" But Jade knew he
felt the same way she did. It was the only idea any of them seemed to have.

"Sollux!" Aradia said, finally breaking her statue-stance to grab hold of his arm. He gasped sharply,
as if pulled from the water, and looked, confused, toward her glassy eyes. "Look, I know the news isn't good but don't you trust any of us to pull it off?" She shot a glare at Karkat as well. "...Look,"
she said to Sollux. I'd rather you shout and blow up at me than dig a rut into the floor ranting about
doom! I'm tired of doom, I've been trying to do something about it." She gestured toward Jade,
though Jade knew this was a bluff. Still, she was touched. "We're still alive, okay? And we're staying
that way!"

To Jade's surprise, Karkat actually smiled, but Aradia did not notice, as Sollux's eyes began to well
up. "Oh... god," she said. "Sollux, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. I screwed up when I got
angry about your moods and I know they aren't your fault and—"

You sound like yourself again," Sollux interrupted, sounding more gruff than Jade would have
expected with him in tears. "...When the fuck did that happen?" he added, with a laugh. "I thought it was buried under one count of dead and a half ton of horsefucker tech!"

"...i d0n't know" she said, and as she was focusing on it, her emotion failed. "A while. It takes some effort some times. Sometimes it doesn't take any effort at all."

"I thought you were gone," he said. Sollux's voice faltered. "I guess you're right. I didn't think you could... AA, I wanna talk to you again."

"We are talking," she said, but the emotion was back and she seemed happy to mean it.

"I mean more than this. I mean... we kind of screwed up what we used to have, whatever that was gonna be."

"What was that going to be?" Jade asked Karkat. He shook his head and made a gagging noise to reply.

"And I know I'm sort of an asshole," Sollux had been saying when Jade interrupted. In response to Karkat, he added, "and I know I'm sort of tied in with a lot of assholes." Karkat flipped him off. "But I wanna start from scratch," he said. "I'm sorry about being a dick just now. And about everything... else. Can we be friends again?"

Jade, who understood enough about the Troll's trial relationships to think she understood what was happening, tried to take special interest in her drawings. Karkat, seeing her, said "Oh, is it suddenly awkward? If only we had talked over them!"

Aradia, however, had a concern. "I don't have much time these days," she said. Sollux looked forlorn, but nodded. "But I would like to. Give it a second shot."

"Oh, god, she forced a two," Karkat said, and reeled with feigned nausea.

"Thanks, AA," Sollux said, and for a while the two of them did not seem to say anything at all, though Jade was not certain as she did her best to ignore them. Sollux answered her unspoken question when he laughed and said: "Well I guess we've got a lot to talk about!"

"Sorry," Aradia said. "I guess I don't do much these days that's worth talking about."

Jade felt like the moment was somewhat marred by Aradia walling Sollux off from the truth about Jack, even if he did not seem to notice himself. "That's okay," he said. "Doesn't have to be a big thing, after all. Just say hi and shit, right?"

"Right," Aradia said, though as Jade watched in spite of herself, it was clear the lie had cut to her somewhat. Strangest of all, her voice seemed to be clearing from the static.

Sollux stepped away from her somewhat. "I'll just get back to work then," he said. "Lots to do. KK's throwing me some kind of pick-me-up party I've got to pretend to like."

"HEY!" Karkat snapped. "YOU EXPOSE MY WEAKNESS, I'LL EXPOSE YOURS!"

Aradia laughed, even that clearer than before, but the poor mood her lie had put her in still lingered in her eyes. "Sure," she said, and started to walk away, toward the transportalizer. But a few steps away, she stopped. Jade was not certain, but it seemed a blue, oily tear slipped down her cheek. 

"...You're not an asshole, Sollux," she said. "you never were!"

In spite of herself, Jade looked to Karkat for confirmation. "Did that sound... different, to you?"
"Different, fuck," he said, "you want to know what these two were going to be? Right here, it's the same as ever. Disgusting and schmaltzy to the very end."

"Well, I think it's cute!" Jade said. "They're on the way to somewhere they'll be really comfortable. Moirails, right? What with Feferi... and Equius, I guess, maybe?"

Karkat just grunted. There was something decidedly noncommittal about the response, but Jade could not really place it. Was it possible it was just him? As she tried to work out her mystery, there was a bustle at the transportalizer that distracted her and delayed Aradia’s exit as first Equius, then Nepeta and more stepped through. To Jade's surprise, Feferi was with them, along with Rose. Jade realized she did not have much time to ask Karkat a question before there would be a whole room full of people to overhear. "...Karkat," she asked, "how long have you and Sollux been friends?"

"Speaking as the person in this lab best equipped to know," Karkat said, "it was ever since he slimed his way over my back and starting trying to eat my second-left leg."

Jade giggled at that. "...But seriously," she said.

Karkat shrugged. "I dunno," he said. "Dick's been around for a while."

Jade was not sure what to make of that. "You're a strange Troll, Karkat," she said.

"What are you talking about?" he said, as he glowered out at the crowd. "I'm a fantastic Troll, is what I am." Jade did not think that answered her question either, and continued to ponder. Karkat, however, grew bored of the topic, and had no idea she was even still pondering it. He glanced over to her and, given what followed, mistook her expression. "Hey," he said, and tapped the paper on the wall so that it rustled. "...Strider tell you?"

"Yeah," Jade said, looking down. Her questions about Troll culture – or possibly just her one strange Troll friend – were immediately dashed as she remembered about Jack, and Dave, and doom. "I miss talking to him, too."

Karkat waited a long time before speaking again, as though he were as afraid to commit to saying anything. Finally, he said, simply: "Sorry."

Jade reached up to squeeze his shoulder, and only got a short bark of complaint for her trouble. And while that was nice, in its own way, it was not about to make things any better.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is wondering about the Arthour-prototyped Centaur, the answer is yes. Very yes. Well, maybe a bit less tall.

This chapter was going extra-long, so I split it in two. Another update in the next few days, and then back to work on the rest of my life. You know where to find the updates. Or, if you don't, it's in the story footer just below.

As I already told the people on the forums, a lot of this chapter was just a desperate attempt to spell out the H-Universes' game mechanics before Andrew josses any of them. Which is kind of silly, because there aren't going to be near as many fight scenes for the next stretch. They were always going to come, even in the first draft - but as they
weren't in the first draft, well, I have to get most of the first draft out of the way first, don't I?

First Drafter's Club update! This update covers the act structure, the Centaurs (oh yeah, there are Centaurs in the first draft all right), the need to front-load these game mechanics as best I can explain without spoilers, and the Sollux and Aradia relationship/storyline. Big one, and it's right here.

Also, I'm going to be asking AO3 First Drafters for some feedback about AO3's four Archive Warnings and whether or not (and if so, how) they apply to this fic. Major spoilers folks, and potentially triggering ones but that's the point of discussion - I'm obviously hoping not. The points of discussion are here.
Never Be Sad Again

Chapter Notes

The pesterlog colour errors in this chapter are the result of an AO3 bug. I'm afraid I'm not 100% sure how to fix them without encountering the bug again, so please forgive the dust while I wait for their feedback department to respond.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

TT: The question I wanted to ask concerns the conciliatory relationships.
GA: Fair Enough.
TT: Since we entered the game, I find that I have been in infrequent contact with arsenicCatnip.
GA: Nepeta
TT: Thank you.
TT: In one of our few conversations actually directed at me, I learned a good deal about her moirail, Equius.
GA: She Was Willing To Use His Name But Not Her Own
TT: She insisted to me that she was "one of [my] human cougars".
TT: Surely you aren't insisting that one of my human-cougars have names, are you?
TT: Because I would know.
GA: Of Course How Silly Of Me
TT: My curiosity stems from the apparent nature of their relationship.
TT: Prior to our most immediate discussion, I would have called the relationship one of "best friends."
TT: But obviously my terminology has gone foul.
GA: Well Not Entirely Foul
GA: The Pale Quadrant Is Often The Home Of The Closest Relationships
GA: While Trolls Have A Fixation On Our Rage There Is Still Something To Be Said For Maintaining One's Self-Control
GA: And That Is After All The Duty Of The Moirail
GA: But Such Entries Are Unusual At A Young Age Even Though It Is Not A Sexual Quadrant
TT: If I am keeping proper track, your group had three at the start of this game.
GA: The Princess Attracts Unusual Allies
GA: And Of Course Qualifies Herself
TT: You're hinting again at the Insurrection you mentioned earlier.
GA: Indeed
GA: While We Encompassed A Number Of Related Circles In Our Extreme Youth
GA: We Came Together At First Temporarily Allied Under Cuttlefishculler
GA: In Preparation For Her Insurrection Against Her Imperious Condescension And Her Allies Forces Fleet Army Air Force Not To Forget The Church Other Alien Forces Still Resisting Or The Giant Psychic Space Squid Playing Both Sides
TT: Until you were interrupted by foreknowledge of this Sgrubian burp in your plans?
GA: Yes And The Empress With A More Literal Burp
GA: The Irony Was To A Certain Extent Palpable
GA: That Is
GA: In The Form Of Our Black King
TT: Unfortunate.
GA: Yes
GA: But Forming A Group Of Dangerous And Gifted Persons Tends To Result In Moirails
GA: And Explosions
GA: With Cuttlefishculler And Caligulasaqarium As Our Nucleus We Were A Touch More Hostile Than The Average
GA: Though Equally Bound To Hold Together In Times Of Internal Crisis
TT: And from your hints about internal strife, I assume you're referring to…
TT: arachnidsGrip?
GA: How Astute Its Almost As If You've Encountered Her In Any Way Even Briefly
TT: I can make assumptions, but I'm still learning. For example: conciliatory breakups appear to be just as bitter as concupiscent!
GA: I Don't Know What You're Talking About
TT: Yes, fascinating.
TT: So Equius and Nepeta's relationship can be somewhat explained by this poorly explained Insurrection you're planning to explain at a more dramatic moment?
GA: No
GA: They Are If Anything The Most Normal Pale Relationship In Our Lives
TT: All right then.
TT: Nepeta repeatedly referred to her moiral as "strong."
TT: Should I thus assume that he is "strong" enough to be dangerous, and thus necessitate a moirail?
GA: Yes But In Practice The Distinction Goes Largely In The Reverse
GA: On A Normal Day Equius Is Placated By His Own Recreation
GA: Battling Robot Droids Though I Believe The Idea Was Nepetas In The First Place
TT: So Nepeta is more dangerous than Equius?
GA: Not With A Fist
GA: But Imagine If You Will That A New Sgrub Players Initial Status
GA: Level 1
GA: Is Based On Previous Combat Training And Abilities
TT: I can picture Strider easily enough for that.
GA: Good
GA: In This Regard Nepeta's Real-World Combat Training Far Outstrips Our Own
GA: Her Physique Is Peak And Her Approach Trained And Measured If Animalistic In Approach
GA: Those That Even Approach Her In Combat Abilities Besides Equius Gained That Previous Experience Largely Through Artificial Combat
GA: Or With Powerful Weaponry Where Nepeta Used Only Claws To Tear Down Equal Opponents
GA: Her Training Makes Her Game Level Representative Of A Much Stronger Troll Than Those Of Comparable Level
GA: Though Class May Edge Others Nearer As Hers Is Support Focused And Not Combat
TT: Remarkable. I had not struck her as any notable threat whatsoever in our conversations.
GA: I Also Think She May Have Trouble Controlling Her Anger
GA: Equius Had Often Counselling Against Her Participating In These Same Artificial Combats
GA: With Some Enthusiasm
TT: Even for him?
GA: You've Talked To Him?
TT: Once.
TT: He demanded to know my mother's annual income.
TT: This went on for a while through various attempts, before he suddenly said something about exchange rates and disappeared.
GA: Curious
TT: So you suspect he is containing a particularly aggressive personality in Nepeta?
TT: I find this hard to believe.
TT: She's a doll.
GA: I Don't Mean To Mar Your Impression Of Her
GA: The Nepeta You've Known Has Been Strengthened By Her Relationships As Much As You've Been By Yours
GA: And While It Wouldn't Kill Him To Learn Some Manners In How He Handles These Things
GA: I Think The Love Of Her Moirail Makes Her Stronger Still
TT: Which brings me back to where I began.
TT: Is this kind of close, amicable moirallegience a common one?
GA: Not Uncommon
GA: Though Such A Relationship Has A Good Deal Of Pros And Cons
TT: Such as?
GA: Well What Would You Say Is The An Important Duty Of A Moirail When Their Partner Gets A Kismesis
TT: I'm not sure I'm qualified to make that kind of distinction.
TT: Is it important? I can only make guesses as to how these things interact.
GA: I'm Implying Its Important Arent I
GA: And That You're Supposed To Answer My Questions
GA: What Do I Have To Do Here Rose
TT: Use question marks?
GA: ???????????????
GA: Scatter As Necessary
TT: I will!
GA: So Are You Going To Answer Or Not
TT: ?
GA: Yes Just Like That
TT: Can I get a hint?
GA: Generally The Quadrants Do Have A Sort Of Hands-off Approach For One Another But Thats Mostly To Prevent A Kismesis From Using Those In Other Quadrants Them As Targets
TT: That's not allowed?
GA: Its Impolite
TT: Attacking people generally is.
GA: That's Because You've Never Been Attacked Politely
GA: Ill Pencil You In
TT: Forewarned.
TT: Nevertheless, knowing about this little dividing line, I suspect you're saying that the moirail is supposed to keep their partner from going overboard and doing something stupid, same as usual, but with a new, constant thorn in their side.
GA: That's One Way To Put It
TT: And who better to talk about relationship troubles than someone you're close with?
GA: Though I Believe In This Regard Nepeta Has Her Greatest Failing As A Moirail
GA: As I Cannot Imagine Her Being Willing To Directly Interfere With Equius And His Kismesis
GA: Given Her Personal Distaste For Blackrom
GA: So Can You See A Serious Con Of Being In A Close Relationship With Your
Moirail When You Also Have A Kismesis
TT: No. Enlighten me?
GA: Remember That Kismesis Is A Sexual Relationship
GA: And So In Many Senses Stronger Than The Platonic
TT: "and so"?
GA: That Is The Unspoken Sense Of It
TT: ???
GA: Dont Use Those Up Im Not Giving You Any More
GA: Also No That Was A Statement
GA: I Guess What Im Saying Is That To Me I Presume The Sexual Relationship Would
Be Stronger By Default
GA: Its Just The Way Its Portrayed I Guess
TT: That's strange coming from you.
GA: Why
TT: I suppose it doesn't match my mental picture. The long history of auspistice, past
statements, gut feeling.
GA: Perhaps You Dont Know Me Very Well Internet Stranger
TT: Fair enough.
TT: As for your question, the answer is "Resentment."
TT: It would be a shame to ruin a strong relationship with your moirail when they are
simply doing their duty.
TT: Even if that duty is to cockblock you.
TT: Or perhaps to keep you from getting off on a spaded murder, situation depending.
GA: Great But Only Half Of The Picture
TT: I'm afraid I'm having trouble coming up with a second situation.
GA: I Would Hate To Interrupt You Now
GA: Youre Proving Conciliatorily Apt
TT: Why do I have a feeling that's not really a thing?
GA: Low Self Esteem
TT: ?
GA: No That Was A Statement
TT: Ouch.
TT: Another hint?
TT: Regarding our actual topic and not our aside.
GA: Imagine Yourself As A Moirail Trying To Prevent Your Partner From Committing
An As You Said Spaded Murder
GA: How Would You Go About It
TT: I suppose I would attempt to talk him or her down
GA: Which Effectively Avoids The Pitfall You Are Searching For
GA: But As Certain Moirails Have Found In The Past This Technique Runs A Certain
Risk Of Failure
GA: And I Fear Your Moirail's Kismesis Has Just Lost Permanent Use Of His Legs
GA: His Spine Is Irreparable Its All Very Sad
TT: Vivid!
GA: And Now Your Moirail Is Out Of Your Control
GA: And Will Fall Into A New Misguided Moirallegience With Some Other Troll
GA: That Perhaps Harboured Some Other Kind Of Feeling Towards Her At The Time
GA: And Thus Will Only Continue To Murder
GA: Dont You See What Youve Done Rose
TT: And now suddenly out of hand.
GA: Sorry
TT: Back on topic.
TT: I suppose the next technique is direct intervention.
TT: To get in and fight them away from their kismesis, physically or psychically.
GA: They're Not Going To Be Very Happy About That
TT: ...
TT: I walked into that as well as any of them, didn't I?
GA: I See You've Grasped It
TT: Yes, certainly.
TT: I can see how jumping from sexual relationship (Kismesisstitude) to sexual (Matespritship) could occur.
TT: But to jump, in a single bound, from platonic to sexual seems far more...
TT: Unstable.
GA: I Suppose We Are All More Afraid Of The Drones Than We Are Of Discovering Negative And Sexual Feelings For Our Moirails
TT: Certainly not all negative, if you were attracted to them.
GA: Well Consider This Though Perhaps It's Just Me
GA: I'd Rather Discover Negative Sexual Feelings For My Moiral Than Positive GA: In The Midst Of An Attempt To Gut Them For Getting In My Way
TT: Have I mentioned,
TT: In the name of continued cultural understanding
TT: that I find your kismesisstitude utterly terrifying?
GA: You've Implied It
GA: Past Statements Gut Feeling
TT: But I mean it. It scares me. But it's fascinating. I can't help but wonder where it comes from. Is it a natural urge, or a taught one?
GA: I Can't Say For Certain Our Business Is More With The End Of The Process Than The Beginning
TT: Oh, it is on now.,
TT: Underhanded snark at five paces!
GA: One Two Three Four Five
GA: You Look So Much Like Your Mother She Must Be So Proud
TT: G. A. S. P.
TT: Your natural association with the ashen quadrant is a reflection of your lack of self-confidence to be in a relationship involves a greater amount of personal intimacy!
GA: Through The Heart Madam
GA: The Others Find Our Bodies The Next Day Steaming In The Sunlight But Never Did They Know The Horrors The Felled Us
TT: Tragic. Sublime.
TT: So tell me, enemy mine.
TT: Have you ever felt Calignous feelings for another Troll?
GA: Not Yet
GA: Jade Green Blood Does Not Spill Lightly
GA: Except Perhaps In Pointless Passiveaggressiduels In Deserts Or Whatever That Was Just There
GA: But I'll Find Someone Worthy Of That Beautiful Excess In Time
TT: Poetic.
GA: There's No Need For Sarcasm
TT: Do you see this?
TT: This is me sticking my tongue out at you.
TT: It is a human gesture of respect and not at a juvenile response to being caught in the act.
GA: Heh
TT: No offence, but I don't imagine that once I've found my spot in your life that I ...urm.
TT: will be the one making a beautiful mess of your blood.
GA: Disappointing
TT: Oh dear.
GA: Heh Heh
TT: A joke?
TT: From you??
GA: I Can Make Jokes
TT: I'm afraid if you were trying to coerce me to spades that I find this new sense of humour more endearing than hated.
GA: A Shame
TT: ...moving on...
TT: Your turn.
GA: Thank You

As the pesterlog ran off into another topic in Rose's mind, real-world circumstances forced her to admit that she no longer liked to be underground, if she ever had before. The dislike had started somewhere during the trip from Cetus' cave back to the world above, and was not calming down as she pulled herself out of a slick gutter in the broken old lab. The Under-Laboratory had every trapping of danger one could imagine in an old ruin, along with a full orchestra of gloomy ambience set to drip, clang or rattle almost exactly when you wanted it to least. Rose also had no idea where the lighting was coming from, and that bothered her. There were no bulbs in the Underlab.

It also bothered Rose that she really had no idea what these halls had once been used for – or what Sgrub was trying to pretend they had been used for. She tried to distract herself by pestering John about the night's film, where all was still going according to her plan, but that only lasted so long. Soon she could not distract herself from her surrounds. There were scummy old vats lined with rust and acid-splashed steel. There were whole tubs, like chemical pools in two rows of three, a set piece of the game's she found time and time again, but each with different stains. Old observation chambers overhung the rooms, their window panes having long since collapsed to the floor below. Last of all, Rose kept hearing noses of a less ambient sort. The small Alternian creatures that had been smuggled into the lab by certain Trolls moved through the walls like a living wave, and, at one point, Rose was certain she heard a door she had closed behind her snap shut again a minute later.

Rose did not like where her search was leading her. The further she went without finding Nepeta, the closer she got to the vault where they had first found live Underlings, not long after the Humans' arrival. As Rose passed into a room filled with large silos, dented from heavy blows and then crusted with age, the voice started. Muffled at first, barely reaching her thanks to the acoustic nightmare that was the Underlab's echoing pipe system, Rose had no idea where the voices could be coming from, and no idea what was being said. She proceeded deeper into the Underlab, a ghost on her shoulder pleading incoherencies.

After a time, Rose found her footsteps changed beneath her as she stepped onto a plastic mesh placed to let liquid flow into troughs on either side of the hallway. She was in a chemical shower, perhaps, though much of the plumbing had long since collapsed or been knocked away. Beyond, she found a huge, metal door, which she pulled open with hands stained brown from all the rust she had gathered since the morning. Beyond, she stepped into a clone lab, long buried under the newer development.
in Karkat's section. A proto-body still floated in an old tube, obscured by a cloud of smoky, dark yellow water mixed with visible debris.

As soon as Rose had opened the door, something beyond the door stopped moving.

Rose froze and listened carefully, scanning the room from top to bottom. There were dead computers, data banks and tubes everywhere: more than enough places to hide. Drawing the Quills of Echidna, and Rose entered slow and cautious. As she went, Rose cast a wary eye towards the observatory lounge that overlook the room, as she could now pinpoint the muffled voices coming from that direction, but her mind was not on them now. Rose found the ground nearer the large cloning tube to be slick when she took to it, a small leak perhaps, and she walked as careful as she could, hoping not to inform any pursuer that she was weak-footed and headed for a spot on the right side of the room that seemed less accessible to ambush. She kept her pesterchum window to John ready and open. And then: the sound of scuffling to the right, but also the sound of a fallen chunk of glass tinkling to the floor further to her left.

Rose made a careful step back to solid ground, and put her back as close to the wall under the observation lounge. Not the best position, but it would have to do.

She made a point to mind the glass, and as she did, she cast the occasional gaze to the wall behind her. No Imp was going to be able to come from that angle, but a determined Basilisk…

As she approached the wall, Rose realized she knew the voices. "…no idea... dealing with. She will never know w…"

A soft, crunching sound. Rose wheeled to her right, quills high at the ready.

"…looks in the opposite direction, and the mighty huntress makes a deadly pounce!"

Rose hit the ground just as she had started her about-face. A weight pinned her down safely away from the glass, though with her face inches from a brackish chemical bath. A rain of slaps from an overlarge overcoat lashed across Rose's back before the weight shifted and her captor began to gnaw on her shoulder, teeth sheathed behind her lips.

"N—" Rose swatted at her. "Nepeta!"

"But her prey has survived the initial impact and is fighting back!" Nepeta decided this warranted another jacket flogging.

"Argh!" Rose had no choice but to raise her hand to defend herself when all at once Nepeta stopped and scuttled off across the floor towards the centre of the room on all fours. Rose rolled slightly to have a better look at her, and saw her squatting on tiptoes, one hand down for balance alongside the tip of her tail and the other held frozen in the air as she looked about the room. Her eyes slid slowly from the left and then toward the right, and then back, even slower again. At last, she perked up, shook back her sleeves and extended her weapon-claws before bolting away at top speed. Her paws hit the ground in total silence while she shouted "the graceful beast races off in search of easier purrey!" at the top of her lungs, as if to let Rose know where she was going.

Rose, more than a little dumbfounded, pushed up with one hand in hopes of righting herself but fell back to the ground with a wince as a shot of pain rain down the arm. Checking, she found that a shard of dirty glass had embedded itself in her lower arm. Rose gritted her teeth and pulled out the shard before moving carefully to drier ground, where she fumbled through her sylladex to find the branch that had held her stash of weaker healing candy. She popped one and felt the wound close on her shoulder, but jumped again when a rattling sound started from just to her side. She looked down and saw a lumpy Alternian hard candy lying not far from her.

"You should take an antidote just in case," echoed a voice from above. She looked up to the
observation windows. "It would be foolish to let it get infected."

"Not really sanitary on the ground like that," she noted.

"Not truly. It may be covered in any number of dangerous germs but it will also kill them in your bloodstream."

Well, thought Rose, if that isn't a mash of Wonderland nonsense. All the same, she picked up the gnarly lozenge and wiped it on a clean patch of sleeve before sticking it reluctantly in her mouth. It tasted worse than she had expected, and she tended to like Alternian candy. Looking up, Rose caught sight of a pair of glinting, broken shades that were all she could see of her Cheshire cat.

It took her a while to make her way to Equius, seeing as how he had moved on to continue his close watch on Nepeta. It helped that she was soon able to hear the voices again, one of which she recognized as his. As for his partner, she could not guess, at least not at first.

"…you what I think," she said, "I think you're living on a little island in your little head with Nepeta, Vriska, Gamzee and Aradia, and you think that's going to work, don't you? Why? You don't even like two of them."

"You are the last person who would know—" Equius started.

"I'm not even sure you like her!" said the other. "You two were screaming at each other last night. What was that about, was it what I think it was? What did Aradia say? Something about a chip you installed? Is she even attracted to you, or is that just something you programmed her to do?" Equius tried to speak up at this, but his partner began talking fast to overcome him. "Because I'm not going to stand for that! I don't think the rest of us will either! She's a person, Equius! Nepeta—"

"That's a lie!" Equius finally got out about the programming, and he smashed something nearby with what was probably an absent gesture (Rose had seen Equius smash things intentionally: it was louder).

His partner ignored him entirely picked up where she had left off. "Nepeta looked like she was going to break down in tears at the both of you! For the both of you. You have a sweet little moirail and you don't so much as look to her for advice. She told me 'thank you' this morning just because I told you both to shut up and get out!"

"Don't you dare insinuate that my petty fights with the rustblood supersede my concern for Nepeta! And the details of that exchange are none of your business!" Equius snapped. "As for the details, I advise you forget them, as Miss Megido and I have made our peace on the matter. It would be the only favour your kind have done any of us since this began."

"My 'kind'?” she balked. "What, is Eridan responsible for us being trapped here? Did I miss that part? Or did he just knock over a glass of milk in front of you. Because I wanna know if you're stupid or just irritable."

"My problem is with you!" he snapped.

"I'm not trying to hurt you, Equius! I'm trying to talk to you and make things right."

"Right? Make them right? Is that what you call your trying to sneak into my sector via the maintenance tunnels?"

"I'm looking for the pumps!" Feferi shouted. "I told you I'm looking for the pumps! I asked you to help me with a map so I'd be done!" She let out an incoherent scream of frustration just as Rose
pulled open the door. "...You used to be helpful," she told Equius before she noticed the door had opened. "What happened to you?"

"You used to be useful."

Rose had found them both in another observatory, connected via a door to Equius' own Office section. Equius she found hunched over a window smashed by the imps that had once lived there, looking down over a room filled with steam boilers that clicked loudly every twelve seconds, but seemed otherwise completely empty. Feferi stormed about the room at random, or at least had been doing so before she caught sight of the new arrival.

Equius bowed his head to Rose, unperturbed by the argument. "Ms. Lalonde."

"Hi Rose," Feferi said, still seething in anger, but at least polite.

"I've been looking for you," Rose said to Equius by way of greeting. A bit of a bluff, but close enough, and Rose figured it best not to be involved in the fight, even by so much as allowing it to continue. "Karkat said Nepeta was going without a computer and I wasn't sure if you were with her or if she was going to have you play along."

"She has, in the past," Equius said. "Though not this time. Does this have something to do with our lowblood leader requesting another set of silly vanity repairs or have Nitram's legs failed again? Either way, he should feel ashamed for sending someone of our calibre down to play messenger."

Rose was never really sure how to respond to Equius once they had first met in person and always phrased her words very carefully. She was well aware how his determination to set the four humans on the hemospectrum had led to his conclusion that income created class divisions on earth more than any other factor. Her mother's income had landed Rose somewhere near the Blue bloods; similarly, Equius had decided Dave was an Orange or Yellow, far below his contempt, and John a Yellow or Green (the system seemed to lack a certain precision). But that was just a taste: Terezi had whispered something to Dave a few weeks prior regarding the final stages of Equius' research. Apparently, once he had computed just how much it would take for one to buy their own private island and ship research components, heavy firearms and radioactive food processing units to it, he had immediately left the room to take a cold shower.

"...Actually, he's having dinner made special," she explained. "Making an evening of it. John's also putting together a movie," Rose said. "Knowing the film, Nepeta would probably enjoy it. You might, Feferi, but I can't say for sure."

"Maybe, Rose," Feferi said, clearly not interested enough to break her train of thought.

"Hmph," Equius said, returning to his overlook. "Then I would most likely not."

Rose joined him at an adjoining window, where the pane had fallen out entirely, and looked about in hopes of finding Nepeta. "What's she hunting?"

"Ratlings," he replied. "Scurrybeasts of unusual size: small, that is. The average scurrybeast weighs in at a hundred fifty pounds."

Rose took this in with some concern, not knowing if there were any proper scurrybeasts among the other animals living the lab's basement. The ratlings hardly bothered her; she had seen them before. They were a sort of white-furred rat with a tail covered in microscopic blades. They often snuck into the lab to steal food, every few days or so. As Rose understood it, they had been teleported in with the surroundings of several of the Troll's hives, along with an assortment of other creatures that had
palled along, largely in what had been called "Feferi's zoo." Something of the more fertile creatures had bred during the Trolls' month in the game, and had followed them into the lab.

"Where—" Rose started.

Equius pointed, and following his finger, Rose saw a ratling trying to sneak around one of the steam boilers. It ran along the multi-branched causeway that made up the "floor" of a room that truly ended storeys deep into the underground, and stopped near a cloud of leaking steam coming from one of the boilers. The boiler squealed and hissed before cutting off in its cycle, and as the steam began to clear, Rose caught a glint of steel break through its haze.

"...lowered close to the ground, knowing its purrey couldn't see or smell her..."

Nepeta barrelled forward, the hanging metal of the causeway swaying this way and that with an awful din as she banged into support beams. The ratling raced likewise for cover, and the whole room below echoed in a chaotic scramble of claws on metal. They went first this way, then another, the rat clearly lost and Nepeta hot on its tail. Rose lost them too in the obscuring cover of the boilers and steam, but soon they charged back from around a corner, the gap between them all but closed, and bound for a dead end facing a bare wall. The ratling froze as it reached the end of its escape route, and could only turn back and stare in horror as Nepeta struck the ratling, snapping it into her paws, and momentum carried her and the causeway smack into the wall, sending a gong ring about the room as the causeway rattled and shook.

Rose look up and saw that Equius had already started his descent down to meet her. She picked up the pace to join him, Feferi slowly bringing up the rear. They met up with Nepeta in the hallway, where she sauntered out of the causeway on her knuckles, her victim clutched neatly in her teeth. Its blood-stained coat dripped out over her lower lip and onto the ground; proud and graceful, Nepeta deposited the ratling at Equius' feet.

"Nepeta," he ordered, "cease this 100dicrus gift-giving e%ercize at once."

Nepeta turned her nose up at him, retrieved the ratling and deposited it at Rose's feet instead. She could not help but look down at it. Its hind legs had been broken in the impact of the chase and a muddied yellow tear ran from its neck to its belly, its left foreleg hanging loose with nothing left to hold it fast but the skin. She had seen worse, thanks to her mother's typical response to a childhood interest in farm life, but that did not make her want to stare. Nepeta beamed up at her with a lemon smile and giant eyes.

"You know perfectly well that no one here is interested in dead animals but you."

"Hmph," Nepeta puffed. Feferi giggled in spite of herself as Nepeta began to pout, and she patted Nepeta's head, though Rose noted she kept her eyes off of the ratling. Finally, Nepeta gave up, picked up the ratling with both hands and started off down the hall on her feet. The others followed close behind.

"You knooooow..." Nepeta said after a few steps, leaning into Equius until he was practically carrying her weight. "These hunts would be way more fun if a certain someone could come with me."

"Out of the question," he replied at once. "The under-laboratory is a deathtrap. It's pathetic enough that I let you run about down here."

Nepeta, taking to her feet proper, replied gracefully by sticking out her tongue at him. Rose shook
her head and kept walking. There was a long way left to go to get out of the underlab, but she was not about to provoke their debate just to liven it up. At least, not if she could help it. Feferi kept quiet on her own, clutching her arms to her chest as if cold. After a few minutes' walk, Rose ventured a question.

"Why are you looking for pumps?" she asked, not wanting to touch on the other thing.

Feferi looked happy. Rose had done so. "I live in the Gym," she said. "There are actually lots of pools! Big pools, little kiddie pools, hot tubs and diving boards! But most of them are filthy and the rest are still pretty gross! I guess I'm not helping, swimming in them anyway." Feferi laughed at her own expense. "I figure if I can get them clean, we can all have a big pool party!! But the pumps are one of the hundreds of things that aren't hooked up to the computers. Sollux thought they might be near his room, but Karkat doesn't want us poking around each other's dorms at night, so it's been slow."

Rose knew she meant "us" as in "everyone" but also knew that Karkat had meant "us" as in "them, specifically." "...I don't know what they're doing. I don't care what they're doing: they're showing up tired first thing in the morning, and they think they're going to get away with it—!"

Terezi had interrupted him then with a bit of an overt, personal counterproposal, probably more to make him blush than out of any seriousness. Since they had been doing far better at the time, he had almost reneged, but he turned out to have been as serious with his claim as she had probably been not, and the rule had been in effect ever since.

Not wanting to bring that up, Rose instead asked: "But how did you end up in Equius'?"

Feferi smiled and pointed off somewhere to the up and left. "Sollux place is right about there! And mine is right over there!" she said, to the right. "I know, sometimes they seem like they go on forever, but once you've been crawling through the ducts a while, it's actually all one big piece!" She thought for a moment and then snorted a laugh. "I guess me climbing in them isn't making the pools any cleaner, either!"

Equius, who had been pushing ahead after Nepeta, suddenly spoke up. "I insist you prepare that thing properly before consuming it," he ordered her.

Nepeta, her mouth full, only managed to reply "Ah'll cook it later!" before something occurred to her and, with an energetic jolt she jumped immediately in front of Rose. "Rode!" she shouted, as though only then realizing who else was there with her and her moirail. Stopping, she held up a finger for pause as she walked backwards, and swallowed before repeating, pleading eyes looking up almost a full head's height up at her human friend: "Rose! Please tell me you aren't going to be Eridan and Vriska's auspistice!"

"Nepeta!" Equius said, shocked. "You shouldn't talk like that! Rose should feel..." He stopped, his eyes drifting in another direct. "...erm..."

He pointed at the ratling in Nepeta's hands, and she looked at it cockeyed, cupped up in such a way that Rose could not see quite what was going on. Lowering her eyes, she grasped the ratling, gloved, by its bladed tail and indignantly smacked it up against the steel wall, which rang like a toneless steel drum hit by a broken stick. Rose cut short a gasp with her hand, and Feferi fell back a half-step. Equius made no obvious reaction one way or another. Satisfied, Nepeta smiled up at them both, all plump baby-faced dimples and wide eyes, as her moirail picked up where he had left off as though nothing had happened. Nepeta broke her polite silence only to begin picking things out of her teeth with her tongue.

"As I was saying, Rose should be leaping at the chance to be of such an intimate service with one of
her social equals, even if it is with a seadweller. To volunteer would be a service to the community, and no doubt a rewarding experience for all. Especially the seadweller."

"Reward so you can double-cross them," Feferi grumbled, and Equius glowered at her. "Well that's what you mean! Tell me the last time you did something for one of your 'social equals' and it wasn't to double-cross them? But believe it or not, I'm on your side here," she added. To Rose, she said: "I mean, I think you'd like being an auspistice if they'd stop being so… you know. That's the impression, that I get from you, is all."

"I'm not worried about them," Nepeta said with a roll of her eyes. "I just want Eridan to stay with Tavros!"

Rose could not help but notice how Equius' mouth seemed to hang open even wider as he began to fully absorb what had been thrown in front of him. A trickle of sweat beaded up by his "…What did you say?"

"Yeah, yeah, scandal of the century, we know, Equius!" Nepeta wagged her rat at him. "Oooo, the seadwellers are awful, but even they still shouldn't be dating so far below them! Terrifying! But Rose, you can't get in their way, please! Eridan and Tavros have to get back together. I don't think Kanaya will either, but would you talk to her just to make sure? I already told Kanaya that she shouldn't, and she said 'sure, whatever,' but I wasn't sure if I got through to her? She wouldn't listen when I tried to tell her how cute they are! rose, they're so kyoooooooooot! 'tavv did i evver tell you that i'm havving such a great time wwith you' 'wELL, uH, dID I EVER TELL YOU THAT YOU'RE SO HANDSOME, eRIDAN,'"

Nepeta gestured with her fists as though equipped with puppets. Tavros was the one with the rat hanging out from under him. "'come here my handsome muscletroll' 'bUT WHAT ABOUT FEFERI,' 'forget about her my lovve is noww only for you my browwn-blooded stallion!'" And she began to mash her fists together, making kissing noises.

Equius wiped away sweat from his face and raised a hand to object, but it was clear from his voice he was not entirely sure whether he actually believed what he was objecting to. Feferi was trying not to break down laughing, and she occasionally repeated the words "browwn-blooded stallion".

Equius finally found his tongue: "Nepeta, have you… been spying on the private affairs of these two… gentletrolls?"

"No!" Nepeta said, and hid her fists away from him, rat and all. Looking up at Rose, she blushed, and smiled shyly. She mouthed, "They're in my head," to provide a dearly-needed bit of clarification.

"Uh…" Rose was starting to wonder if she was really a part of this conversation. "Nepeta, I'm really not—"

"Rose, please? Please? Pleeeeeeaaaaaaaaaa--zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz—" Nepeta managed to endear herself to Rose just a little by managing to walk a perfectly straight backwards line as she continued to squeal. "—eeeeeereaaaaea-ea-ea--zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz—" Indeed, she probably would have kept endearing herself if she had not walked straight into the wall when they reached a junction. Jumping with a squeak, Nepeta rounded on the wall as though confused as to where it had come from.

"Nepeta," Rose tried again. "I'm not going to be their auspistice, and I've talked to Tavros. Those two are going to be just fine."

Nepeta held up her hands to her mouth and made a squeak that slipped off the top of the register.
"That's good enough for me!" she said. A moment later, she realized that despite holding up both hands straight and flat, the rat still dangled from one, snagged by its microscopic blades in the fabric of her glove. She glared at it and gave it a shake, but when it did not detach she clenched her fist, forced it down into her sylladex and then ran off down the hall.

"Oh…" Rose said, "I hope her inventory isn't full of those things."

"As do I," Equius said. He was towelling himself off, and that was a visual Rose kept with her as they reached the transportalizer. Rose stepped aside as they arrived, allowing the others to go first.

When the pad reactivated a few seconds after Feferi left, Rose followed, and soon, once again as ever, Rose found that she brought to that space between worlds, into the hall of the learned infinite, the Middling Gods.

"Friends of yours?"

Rose stopped in mid-thought, and looked about. As she did, she realized a strange feeling not quite warmth but of the absence of the void's usual cold. The hall of the Learned was somehow less alone, less empty, and as she turned about, Rose discovered the Troll she had seen days prior, standing before her.

"The boy in blue, I mean; the seadweller; and the girl in green, with the tail."

Her voice came to Rose's ears in the strangest fashion, if it came to her ears at all. Though, to Rose's eyes, the woman stood just out of arm's reach, she seemed a mile away, and her mouth moved before the words were heard. Rose got the impression that, if she tried to touch the stranger, she would never reach her.

"E-excuse me," Rose said as she tried to figure out what was going on. And sure enough, there was a pause before the Troll replied by nodding her head. "I'm not sure if I'd call them that," she answered

"Why not?"

Despite the invisible distances, Rose heard the Troll crystal clear, her voice dominating over every other sound in the chamber. Rose wondered how she must have sounded in turn, and tried to suppress the urge to shout to cover the distance.

The stranger was a grown Troll woman, sturdy and tall, with the build Rose had only begun to see in Vriska, and streamlined in a way Vriska was not, as the woman was a seatroll. She was older, that was clear at once, perhaps in middle age for whatever that implied at her blood. Like Feferi, she wore clothing built around a swimsuit, hers made of cloth; on top of that garment, she wore several pads of a leather decorated with or made from the scales of a white, aquatic lusus species. The leather was worn about her torso and on arms and legs, aiming for freedom of movement, with several additional bands of the stuff having secured a harpoon to her back and a net folded by her hip, with several empty leather thongs on her legs. The rest of her was grey skin and bound feet: Rose was struck by the mental image of a diver equipped for spear-fishing. As Rose examined the stranger, she realized that they were standing, such as it was, at eye level, but also that she was shorter than the woman. In the strange ways of paradox space, Rose noticing the discrepancy seemed to fix it, as if that had informed the void itself of the mistake. Gradually, Rose found herself being lowered or compressed until she and her companion stood with their feet on the same invisible ground.

The woman seemed to regard Rose's interest with a certain light humour before speaking again.
"It's not often I meet someone that can still see. Would you like to stay and talk?"

Rose could already feel the first touches of the transportalizer at the other end of the line. Soon, she would be pulled through, and her ability to focus on the few brief instants she had spent in the void would fail her. Curiosity won out. "Yes, for a little while."

The Troll woman smiled, and all at once the feeling of being drawn through the transportalizer ceased. So, too, did the bizarre sense of separation between Rose and the stranger, who now leaned somewhat to the side, almost as though she were leaning on the harpoon she left on her back. When she spoke again, the sound was far more normal. Indeed, Rose had trouble hearing her over the sound of the nearest God, which murmured to itself when inhaling and stayed silent when breathing out.

"I'm afraid I might not be the best conversationalist, my dear," the woman apologized. Her voice was refined and measured. "But it's been so long since I had someone to talk to."

"Are you trapped here, then?" Rose asked.

"Call it exile," said the woman. "Those Trolls," she asked in turn. "Do you know them, at least?"

"Yes," Rose admitted.

Though she kept cheerful, Rose noted a certain sound of worry in the woman's voice when she asked: "Do you know what year it is?"

"Actually…" Rose said, hesitant. "I don't. It's become a bit of a non-issue. In fact, it's only just occurring to me that the question is in any way peculiar."

"Seems your situation isn't all that different from mine," she said, tipping her head. "I won't ask. Why ask what I wouldn't tell myself?" She sighed. "But I'm being rude, forgive me. You look exhausted."

Rose supposed she must, given the strife and Nepeta's impromptu pounce. "Please, have a seat. I'd hate to keep you up and about."

"I really shouldn't be gone too long," Rose insisted, though she was both not sure how the time would really compare in the real world, nor was she sure where to sit in the first place. The woman nodded her understanding and took up a flask to offer to her guest. "Kelp wine," she explained. Rose refused that as well: while this was partially out of knee-jerk reaction to the product itself, Rose remembered that the woman had said she had been exiled here, and found herself struck by thoughts of Persephone and Izanami-no-Mokoto, and would not likely have touched the drink nor food, no matter how curious or politely offered. After she had downed the drink, the woman seemed to recover her bearing somewhat and seemed all the taller. With their feet now at level, Rose found herself being dwarfed by the woman in a way that felt almost appropriate in the circle of Middling Gods. But she smiled at Rose and a laugh creased at the edge of her eyes. "Sorry," she said. "It can be different for everyone, but I find it dry in the air."

Rose nodded, but she continued to examine the Troll's eyes, as she remembered how they had caught her attention when they had first caught sight of this strange woman from the void. In many ways, her eyes were what Rose expected from a Troll. They were orange about the iris, but as Rose looked at the iris itself, she saw that there was only a thin corona of black there, wrapped about a bright star not of colour, as she expected of the adult Trolls, but white. Rose was reminded of Sollux's dead things for only a moment, with their full-white eyes, before the orange and black pushed that image from Rose's mind. This was different. This seemed almost as natural as it was unnatural, in its own way, impossible as it was clearly there. Rose scoured her knowledge of Troll biology for an explanation.
"You've been alone?" Rose asked, to deflect her interest. 

The woman nodded. "And yet, not quite," she said, gesturing above, toward the gods. "And I have some different neighbours, of a sort. They're fair company from time to time. But they've been here as long as I, and as a matter of speaking, we get tired of one another."

Rose laughed in spite of herself. "I know a few like that."

"Those Trolls?" the woman repeated from before.

"Sometimes them," Rose said.

The woman's smile fell somewhat. "Do you know…" She seemed to change her mind. "How is the Empire?"

"Not well, I'm afraid," Rose said, not wanting to upset an adult Troll with news of her own species' near extinction.

Indeed, the woman did not even seem that put out by the fact she had been given, and rather said: "Well that could be anywhen." After a moment of private griping, she concluded: "Poor ancestors or poorer descendants."

Rose nodded, if only to be polite. When it was clear the topic had exhausted, as far as the woman was concerned, Rose said "My turn," out of habit with Kanaya.

"Certainly," said the woman, in surprise.

"You said you don't want to say why you're here," Rose opened. The woman nodded. "But what brought you to this void, specifically? You don't seem to mind it here, but frankly, it's not exactly the safest place I can think of." As Rose asked her question, she felt a slight tugging, ghosting again at the surface of her skin from the transportalizer in the real world. Rose brushed at it. "…With a certain brevity, if you could."

The woman looked up and around the void. "I think… I disagree," she said. "I think… this is the safest place I've ever known." She then smiled down at Rose and leaned into the haft of her spear. "My turn?" Rose acquiesced. "What's your name, young one?"

"Rose," she admitted, intentionally forgetting to give her last. One never knew in a place of magic like there.

"You?"

The woman set a hand on her chin. "…you know, I don't remember."

"It has been a while, then," Rose suggested, half-jokingly but not at all believing the woman. She wondered if the non-answer was a passive-aggressive response to her half-answer. But as Rose tried to ask another question of her own, hoping to gauge when the woman had left Troll society for the void, the nearest God began a rhythmic diatribe in its strange inhales. Rose only understood a part, but the Troll woman laughed to hear the rest. Rose picked out a few choice words, but among them, a repeat she did not understand.

"'Mirann'?" she asked the stranger.

"He's reminding me of an old story," she said with a smile. "I suppose your arrival interrupted our conversation, in a sense."

"…Can I call you 'Mirann'?" Rose asked. "Seeing as how you have no other name." And the Troll
woman looked at her with sudden warmth.

"Of course, Rose darling."

The pulling force from the real world was dramatic now, stronger than before, and soon, Rose realized she was going. She raised a hand in goodbye, and Mirann returned the gesture.

"It's been so nice, to have someone to tal—"

Rose returned to the real world, in the hub. There, for just a moment, Mirann's voice lingered in her ears, or perhaps her mind a second time. Rose took a step forward, toward the hub's spoke, and nearly slipped off her feet in a daze.

"Whoa!" came a voice, and Rose found herself caught by John. "Okay there, Rose?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said. When she looked up, Rose saw that she had returned only moments behind the other Trolls. Seeing Feferi still waiting for Equius to clear the opposite transportalizer pad, Rose tried to smile reassuringly, and she smiled back until she had left through the spoke.

"Whoa, look at you," John said before he started to laugh, himself. "Sure you're okay?" He touched her face, worried that a smear of blood may have been a cut.

"Fine," Rose insisted, brushing him away.

"If you say so, Rose. Just remember," he said, and then, in his best soap opera voice, he added: "I am a doctor."

Rose laughed, which was tiring. "Oh good, your clown college degree came in."

"Hey, Rose, don't knock clown college," John said. "The Troll Juggalos actually knew a lot about, uh, anatomy."

"Ugh." Rose knew John probably knew what he was talking about, seeing as how he actually had been hitting the books lately. She was surprised by his interest, but either out of concern for his friends or a genuine hankering, it had become a useful hobby for the entire group. John was responsible for the batch of healing candy they all kept on them those days, and had had his nose in textbooks and ectobiology equipment since they had arrived. Rose felt he had started in hopes of finding a way to beat Jack, but she had heard of no progress since that day. A small, budding part of her was preparing a set of tasteful "doctor" jokes if he kept up the new interest, but she had a feeling he was always going to be "John" to her. Indeed, he ruined his own impression by adding, "Geeze, Rose, if you can't even trust your own midwife, who can you trust?"

"I'm fine," she insisted, She took his wrists and freed herself from his examination. She then realized what he had said and added: "My what?"

"You know," he said. "Like, when we were all babies! I helped bring us all into the world! ...I'm using the term wrong, aren't I?" Rose nodded. "Well, I mean, I suppose, with a little bit of studying, I could—"

"Just digging yourself in deeper," Rose interrupted, and he hung his head. Rose laughed. "Look, John, I'm tired, I've been fighting all day and I just chased a wild jungle cat through the great, Rusting Amazon. Just help me move it along here. Did you find…" She couldn't remember at first, and shook her head to clear it. Something about… right! "…the movie?"

"Just going there now!" he said, moving toward Aradia's portal. "See you there?"
"Well, it's not for me, so to speak."

"Iiii know who it's for," he said, winking.

"Don't do that," Rose insisted. "And you're wrong, it's for Tavros."

"Huh, really?"

"Yes," Rose said, getting onto the central hub. "See you when you're ready, John," she said, and left. Rose slipped back into the void, and was almost glad not to see Mirann on the opposite side. "I've been spending entirely too much time in there," Rose commented as the void pulled her on. Soon, she was back among her allies in the main computer lab, amid the familiar sounds of conversation, and the not-too-infrequent attempts to shout over one another. Jade ruminated with Karkat in one corner, and not far from them, Sollux lingered by his computer. The rest of Rose's group lingered just off of the transportalizer pad.

As Rose took in her bearings, she noticed that Aradia was with the rest of her group, and saw her take Equius' arm and lean in close enough to speak just above a whisper. Those at the edges of the room were ignoring them, but Feferi could not help but overhear, and Nepeta, casting them a worried look at first, soon stood guard nearby as if trying to casually enforce a perimeter.

"Look, if you could just…" Aradia was saying. She sounded curt, but not in her usual, mechanical fashion. Rose could not help noticing the thin, somewhat blue-stained streak on her metal face, and how she looked caught between joy and… "…half hour… fifteen minutes, come to my room. Casual." …And hurt. "…Please."

To Rose's surprise, Equius accepted ("Of course.") at once, though he did ask one reasonable question: "But what about the Humans?"

"My room's not near theirs, and I'll lock the door," she said. Rose was sure she'd send Dave a message as well just in case. "It's just got to be mine, Equius, your place is infested with Imps and… and cats," she said, almost joking but not quite able to get it out. "No offence."

"She wouldn't interrupt," Equius insisted, having perhaps caught the concern on Nepeta's face the moment Aradia had approached. "…But I wouldn't want to lock her out, when so many of her things are there…" It was a poor excuse when even Rose could tell that Equius simply thought it was wrong to lock Nepeta out at all, and if Aradia had looked any less upset, Rose might have felt less favourably towards her. As for Nepeta, she was trying to look smaller by the second. Unable to actually shrink, she soon gave up and started to walk away, toward Jade and Karkat. Her quiet abscond was summarily ruined when she tripped over the leg of Sollux's chair, pulling the chair down with her and slamming his arm hard into the desk.

"Ow, fuck!" Sollux shouted. "Fuck!" Rose almost could not hear him. The small silver lining on the situation was that Nepeta had fallen into a fit of giggling at her own clumsiness. That everyone looked up to see, as Sollux swore loudly at his injury and Nepeta, still on the ground, was now trying to keep from outright laughing as Sollux steamed up bright yellow, his overwrought emotions provoking her own. Finally, realizing they were the centre of attention, Nepeta got up and tried to leave, only to knock aside his keyboard and mouse with her overlong sleeves.

"Fuck it, Leijon!" Sollux sat back at his desk and began to readjust the keyboard until it was perfectly parallel to the edge of the desk. Nepeta, unable to contain her laughter any more, mustered a quick "—I'm sorry!" before covering her mouth and running away to Jade.

Equius winced all the same, but answered Aradia's original question: "I'll be there."
Aradia gently squeezed his arm and stepped away, shuffling toward the transportalizer. Rose stepped off it as she approached: in doing so she passed near Feferi, who had remained near the middle of the room.

"I don't believe him!" she said. Rose was confused, and so looked towards Sollux, wondering if Feferi was referring to him, instead.

"How do you mean?" Rose asked.

"Equius!" Feferi hissed. "I just…" Feferi gestured to where Equius and Aradia had stood, though one had gone and the other was pretending to be interested in his computer. "They were trying to publicly humiliate each other last night, and now…" Feferi shook her head, fighting for words. "There are just so many mixed signals here and I've been here, and… and you don't want to be here in a relationship. You don't."

"Eridan?" Rose asked, instinctively.

Feferi waved a dismissive hand, but then corrected herself to say "Well, lack of communication, yes, but not what I mean. Vacillation. And they weren't my quadrants so much as my allies, it was… it was complicated. I mean…." She glanced around the room, and then sighed when she had confirmed that the volume had dropped and she could be easily overheard. Her eyes closed in thought, as if trying to decide whether or not to continue. Feferi then pushed some of her hair behind a fin, which almost seemed to transform her somewhat, from the happy, bouncy princess to a serious one, politics and all. Somehow familiar to Rose, she seemed all the taller for doing so.

"Look," she said, her voice measured, not unlike Kanaya. "You're an observer. Seer of Light, psychiatrist. And you listen. I see it." Rose was not quite comfortable with that label, but Feferi continued. "I saw it because I had to observe everyone once, and I guess I can't break the habit. I had to do it all the time, or somebody would kill me. Either because they were gunning for me, or because sometimes I couldn't even say something simple without making them so… so angry, that they'd want to. I'd have to keep an eye on them, had to figure out what counted as something worth killing over for them… Look," she said, facing Rose. "what do you think just happened here, just before we got here?"

Rose took a look around. Everyone just seemed to be going about their business. Karkat, Jade and Nepeta were talking in a corner. Kanaya, who had greeted Rose with a nod earlier, was now simply attending to her business without fuss or distraction, such as from Vriska, who was having a very enthusiastic conversation with Tavros about something on his computer screen. Gathering what she knew of Aradia, Rose refocused, checking Sollux. Though Nepeta had turned back to him and was saying something new, he was straight-up ignoring her, smiling, and even humming to himself. "Did he and Aradia… I mean, they used to, or so I've heard."

Feferi nodded. "Yeah. I think they hooked up again." A smile played at the edge of her lips. "He hasn't talked about her the whole time we've been together, but look at him! I can't even do that, sometimes. She must have really been important to him."

"But…" Rose shook her head. "Why was she upset?"

"Wouldn't you be?" Feferi asked.

"Well, no," Rose replied. In the distance, Nepeta slammed her hands down on Sollux's desk for reasons unknown and walked away to harass Karkat and Jade.

"Think about it," Feferi said. "Imagine you're Aradia. Someone you like wants to be with you again,
but he's tied up in flushed!"

"So you think Aradia and Sollux were flushed for one another, or at least she was?" Rose asked.

Feferi shrugged. "He never talked about it. And if they are, yeah, that's sad, and I feel like a jerk to be in their way."

"You're joking," Rose said, but Feferi did not look like she was joking, even if she did look like she was upset. "Why theirs over yours?"

"Because they have more history?" Feferi said, but she didn't seem quite so sure. "I think I got off on this wrong. I'm not saying I'm going to dive out of my own relationship, Rose, just that I feel bad. I guess we haven't been focusing on each other. He's got his things, and I've been... well, just worried that..." She took a look around the room at those present and seemed to be running the variables in her head. "I wouldn't want to be in the way of someone like that if they don't want me. Would you? Well, unless they deserve it."

Rose laughed. "Okay," she said, "I'm getting the blackrom jokes. Steady progress from Team Human."

Feferi seemed to appreciate that. "Y-EA)(!" she said. But then she added: "But even then, you gotta agree with the people you're in the black for." She again adjusted her hair as she watched Sollux and the others. This seemed to somehow restore some of her confidence. "So I guess... there's talking."

She sighed, but then returned to the conversation, and to possibilities that probably struck her as brighter. "And maybe it'll turn out that Sollux and Aradia were pale and things will be even better, you know? Or maybe they weren't anything at all yet and it's just me! But things have changed. Ugh." Unable to keep up even her own disposition, Feferi shook her head. "I'm sorry, Rose, I'm just hijacking you here for a sounding board."

"It's all right," Rose said. "Like you said," though I hate to admit it, "I'm an observer."

"I guess I do count, too," Feferi replied with a giggle. "Okay. You wanted to know why Aradia was sad. Here's another possibility. Imagine being Aradia again. You've got a guy in your life you're attracted to, Equius this time."

"I don't particularly want to picture my love life with Equius at the moment," Rose cut.

Feferi chuckled at that too. Rose made a mental note to keep up the jokes with this one. "Okay, but just like Equius, with this guy or gill, you don't know one day to the next whether you like them or want to throttle their stubborn necks! Then you get your old flame back, and you're so happy to have something normal in your life, when you realize... you've only got one free quadrant. 'If this screws up...'"

Rose knew enough from Terezi to fill in that blank. "Well, maybe Aradia's being proactive."

"How do you mean?"

"Maybe she's breaking up with Equius?"

Feferi half sighed, half groaned. "Not those two. They're too stubborn to solve their own problems." She shook her head. "That wasn't fair. I'm such a beac)( tonig)t, Rose," she said, slowly regaining her usual countenance. "Ah... some days, don't you just wish it would all give you a break? Just... curl up with your matesprit and ignore everybody else swimming about, smashing things up. Just you and them and nobody else in the whole world? Be just a little shellfish for one day? Is that wrong?" She smiled toward Sollux, her hands again holding her own arms.
"I wouldn't really know, not having a matesprit," Rose pointed out. "I think you're fishing at something."

"No, I just mean, you can imagine it, right? Well… it's nice." She glanced over towards Kanaya. "You're actually really lucky you've got each other the way you do right now," she said. "Better this than vacillating, for starters," she said with a quick laugh to their previous conversation, "but relationships can be… heavy. Sometimes, no matter how good the rest of it is, the extra stress… Oh, no, don't be worried!" she hurried to add. Rose's eyes had been drawn toward Kanaya as soon as Feferi had started hinting, hesitation even plaguing her response. "I mean…" Feferi seemed flustered to amend her own statement. "Maybe it's not always. But I think once you two get into one, it's going to fit together so perfectly."

Rose was not sure how much of Feferi's reassurance had been out of obligation rather than actual assessment. Her and Kanaya's month and a half-old promise to pick a quadrant seemed almost forgotten some days, and she was not sure how she felt to have it brought back up.

"Sorry, Rose," Feferi said. "I didn't mean to put it badly, really."

"It's all right," Rose said. "If you're so concerned about stress, don't worry about me. I'll bounce back."

"Good," Feferi said with a laugh, though her face fell over time. "I never wanted to be a schemer," she said. "…Well, whatever you want to call it, that we're doing here. It just crops up some days. GbG told me that I didn't have to be Condesce, one day, and I guess that was sad in its own way, but it meant I was done! And she said I was supposed to be a Witch, and I figured I'd make up for all the good work I was going to do as Empress as a Witch! …But I don't think I ever really became one," she finished. Distant, she stared at her own feet, and shifted her weight. But before Rose could speak up, she added one more word: "…C)(-EAT-ER"

"What?"

Feferi raised a hand toward Rose and shook her head, and then immediately walked away before Rose could stop her. As she went, she neared Sollux, and Rose watched as she put on a smile to match his own, and said hello.

"Look at you!" she said, cupping his blushing face. "You're like a bright, healthy coral!"

Sollux smiled. "Yeah, I guess."

"Soooo…" Feferi said, resting her arms on his shoulders as she stood. "What haaappened?"

"Is it that obvious?" he asked.

"Yes," cut Karkat, ignoring the conversation he was taking part in to get in the jab.

Sollux casually flipped him off, not breaking eye contact with his matesprit, though he curled his finger after a moment and Rose did not think it was a coincidence when one of Jade's long sheets of paper suddenly lost its sticky tack and draped over Karkat's head. "It's not much," Sollux said. "AA and I talked and… well, we're gonna start over, you know? After all that's happened."

Feferi's gasp almost seemed legitimate. "That's so great!" she said, and hugged him. "This is so great! You've got your old friend back, and you're going to have a moirail again—"

"Well I don't know about that," Sollux said, somewhat bashfully. "I mean, we're just testing the waters again, is all."
"Of course, of course," Feferi chirped. And as his smile seemed to brighten with her encouragement, Rose noticed a strange change in Feferi's own: it faded, not to sadness, but from a stage smile to a genuine, as she saw how much this meant to him. "...I'm just so happy for both of you! Aradia really needs someone there for her, I think, who's... constant." Rose could not help but notice how she seemed to have forgotten that Sollux was not always that constant himself. "So!" Feferi said, as a change of subject. "Tell me about her."

"You know about her!"

"But I wanna know MOR-E!!" She clapped Sollux on the shoulders. "Only going to be one step apart in quadrants!"

Sollux started to talk and from there, Rose slipped away, across the room and slowly, naturally, towards Kanaya, where it was quiet. She flopped down onto the desk beside her friend.

"...Nepeta didn't make you chase her, did she?" Kanaya asked after a pause. "I can only guess that's where you've been."

"No, though she did jump me," Rose said. Rose filled Kanaya in in brief, from the Strife to meeting up with Nepeta, leaving Feferi and Equius out of the picture.

"Bleeding," Kanaya said. When Rose looked up, she pointed just under her left ear. Rose reached up to the same and found an extended red smear, though the point of origin had long-since cleared.

"...Who even knows?" Rose said with a sigh.

Kanaya clicked her tongue. "This plan of Karkat and John's is so half-baked. If He Would Just Assign You A Regular Bodyguard You Would Be In Less Danger"

"Are you volunteering?" Rose asked.

But Kanaya was actually so emotional, she hardly seemed to hear. "Your Capabilities Are The Games Fault I Don't See Why He Insists On Taking It Out On You" As she spoke, Kanaya reached her hand down towards her mouse, perhaps aiming to return to work, only to find a small chastity key lying against the side. She glanced at its handle, nodded, and used it to retrieve a small bundle of packaged wet napkins from her sylladex that looked like they had been taken from a Prospitian restaurant.

"Don't ask," Kanaya said, as she stood up to clean Rose's neck.

Rose caught her hand just as Kanaya reached her with the napkin. "Don't mother me, please," she said. Rose's mind was now elsewhere on the subject of Kanaya, and mothering cut at it the wrong way, especially given her personal experience with mothering. Kanaya at first refused to release her hold, but Rose would show her just how stubborn she could be if Kanaya insisted on otherwise. Finally, Kanaya relented, and Rose set to work cleaning her own neck. As she worked, Kanaya kept standing, perhaps not willing to give up that ground as well.

"...What have you been up to?" Rose asked, to distract from the awkward pause.

"Karkat's had me checking the nearest meteor sensors for damage, for some reason. Very adamant," she said. "I tried to hold a discussion with him about the bucket issue, re- the Drones and all, but just panicked a bit and then said had to go on patrol, which was at least half true. Said he would get back to me around now, but he's off talking to Jade, and I hear something about a party?" She pointed toward Eridan, browsing the internet on his own. "Do you know why?"
Rose nodded. "Sollux almost dropped on us after the fight."

Kanaya clicked her tongue again. "Karkat," she tisked again. "Sometimes I just don't know."
Kanaya shook her head. "I can only hope this evening's entertainment is up to par, or I may just have to start researching buckets on my own."

Rose smirked. "Oh, I think you'll like the film," she said. "I'd hate to miss your reaction, honestly. Of course, I'd hate to miss your reaction to the buckets either, so I suppose you have a tail for the night one way or the other."

Kanaya scoffed. "'HEY, KANAYA,'" she mimicked, slightly off-tone. "'SO LET'S TALK ABOUT THIS BUCKET SITUATION BEFORE ANYONE ELSE REALIZES WE'RE SAYING THE WORDS 'BUCKET SITUATION' AND THIS TURNS INTO A CLUSTERFU**K OF EPIC PROPORTIONS.' 'How About We Hold Off On That,'" Kanaya replied, as herself, "'And Instead Discuss How Poorly You've Been Treating Rose—'"

Kanaya had to clear her throat, and then continued: "'And he interrupts, 'WAIT, WHAT THE HELL KIND OF AMBUSH INSUBORDINATION IS THIS?'

"'And I say 'As It Happens I Just Told Her How I Felt About Your Behaviour But As A Response She Asks Me To Go Watch Porn With Her 'SHE WHAT.' 'Exactly. And So I Was Wondering…
The Filthy Kind Or The Really Filthy Kind? Your Thoughts'"

"'You wouldn't know which was which,' Rose taunted between laughter.

"'Neither would you!'" Kanaya confronted. "So we're just going to have to wait for my modus to give me the key for the stack of Barely Eight and a Third magazines I found along the way, and that will tell us what's what."

Eridan, who had been passing, raised an eyebrow high as he carried on at doubled pace. The girls both took to staring him down, straight-faced as they could hold, until he fled from them. The laughter got worse when Vriska looked up at him, asked what was going on, and he replied, "'i dunno, it turns out they're fuckin crazy pervverts is wwhat's goin on" Rose fell back onto the desk as she laughed, and Kanaya had to lean her weight on Rose's shoulder to stay up herself. After a moment, they both locked eyes, as if daring the other to laugh first. And it was during this staring contest that Rose finally slipped out of the drama of the past few conversations, and remembered her conversation with Mirann. She looked close at Kanaya's eyes, past the orange and deep into the iris, but saw no trace there of Kanaya's rare, jade green.

"'Kanaya?'" she said.

"'…Yes?'" Kanaya asked. She stepped closer, or had earlier, Rose was not sure which. It was clear from her expression that she was confused as to what Rose was doing.

"'Trolls have their blood colour in their eyes when they've grown up, don't they?' Rose asked. She half reached up toward Kanaya, but then touched her own eye. "Is that part of the moult?"

Kanaya paused, and then took her hand from Rose's shoulder and held it to her eye. "The last moult," she said. "Why?"

Rose had a brief moment of epiphany. "Karkat did say these three were in their 'penultimate' moult, didn't he? I don't really know what to think of two."

Kanaya nodded, smiled nervously and stepped back to her chair. "Why do you ask?"
While Rose had initially wanted to talk to Kanaya about her encounter in the World Between, the thought of actually saying it suddenly brought the whole plain to a stop in her throat. Explaining Mirann meant explaining the Middling Gods, and that would be trouble. "I just…” Rose said the first thing that came to mind: honesty. "I realized it will look good on you."

Kanaya seemed surprised at first, but then put on a modest smile. "You're sweet," she said.

Kanaya’s reaction to the past few seconds caught up to Rose in those final moments. She suddenly realized just how close she and Kanaya had been standing, touching, staring, and all the thoughts that might have passed through her mind if she had not been distracted by her big mysteries caught up to Rose all at once. Rose began kicking herself, but was not really sure for which reason best of all. She then noticed that Kanaya, too, seemed distracted. Oh shit, oh shit, Rose started to think. She’s thinking about it too. Did what I think just happen, happen? Is that… good? Rose was not sure if that was good thing. What would have been "good," anyways? Trying not to show any outward sign of panic, Rose began to internally address the weighty and substantial subject that was goodness. Gooditude. All but beginning to pace, she tried to decide whether or not the preceding development weighted more favourably or unfavourably toward the future of a relationship she had not actually considered going further at this precise—Did one of us just try to kiss the other or not? she demanded of her memory. And the perhaps more despairing and pathetic question: …Which one of us was it?

Kanaya did not give her much time for self-flagellation. She gathered up her sketch pad, which was open to a new, half-complete map of the spawning caverns. "I know you plan on 'tailing' me today, but uh… this movie tonight. This is actually part of your plan with Tavros, isn't it? To, well…” Rose nodded. "Well, in that case...

Kanaya pointed toward Tavros with the back of her pencil, and Rose realized that Vriska had left him alone, disappearing before Rose's eyes in the transportalizer. Rose gathered her thoughts as fast as she could. "You're a godsend," she whispered to Kanaya, who smiled as she picked up work on a sketch. After all, Rose thought, turning to Tavros. Priorities. Priorities and distractions. She took a deep breath, as much for one problem as the other, and was off in a flash. Tavros took her in after a startled jump, and they were soon conspiring straight until dinner was prepared – Rose never even noticed as Kanaya put aside her sketch pad and headed toward the far corner.

Jade, and much to his consternation, Karkat, got front row seats to Nepeta's attempt to simply walk past Sollux. She was still giggling and shaking her head when she walked up to the both of them, and grinned up at them, bouncing on her heels.

"What's up?" she asked them. She had seen the diagrams already and had accepted that Jade would not tell her what they were for, but took a moment to skim the new drawings on them all the same, just on an artist's principle.

"Oh, nothing," Jade said, nonchalantly. "You're just screwing up a tender moment."

"I'm what?" Nepeta laughed, and then looked around to see what she was missing. Seeing nothing at first, she started, and then peered Karkat and Jade with wide-eyed suspicion. Slowly, like a cat going for a toy, she raised a questioning finger toward them. Karkat grabbed it and turned it toward Sollux.

"…Ohmipawd, Aradia!" Nepeta shouted, having put together the pieces. "Sollux, I'm so, sorry."

"It's fine," he grunted, obviously hoping she'd go away. Jade could not help but notice the lingering smile on his face, though it blew straight by Nepeta.
"No, really!" she insisted.

Nepeta continued to babble as Karkat whispered sidelong to Jade: "That was mean."

"No, it was funny," she replied with a giggle. "This is funnier, though," she added, as Nepeta, slumped to her knees to be at eye-level, went even lower out of submission and made little whimpering sounds between begs for forgiveness.

"I would never, efur stand between you two, Sollux, I just want you to be happy and you've just gotta talk—"

"We did!"

"—And I won't get anywhere near you, you can have all the space you want—"

"Good! Leave!"

"You're right," Karkat said in a normal speaking voice, and he turned up the sarcasm as he eyed the ceiling: "This is hilarious. I can't believe you're messing with them like this. That's so hot."

Nepeta slammed both hands down onto the desk and glared over her shoulder. Sollux and Jade both took their own turn to laugh at her rage. "Youuuuuu," Nepeta said to Karkat and Jade. "You're nowhere near each other on the shipping wall and you both know it!" She swept her hands overzealously back and forth between them both. Turning back to Sollux, who was still laughing, Nepeta crashed herself down to the desk, head on her hand, and threw him an impromptu roleplay of a street tough: "They're tryin' to fuck with me!" she said, before turning up her nose and going to leave.

"Nep!" Jade called, and she stood on her tail to prevent her from leaving.

Nepeta turned back and collected it. "Fiiii~ine," she granted, but then added: "Besides, I have to tell you about my hunt!" She then plunged into a description of the deep jungle in the basement. Feferi arrived to talk to Sollux as Nepeta babbled, and with two conversations going on around him about things he didn't care about, Jade knew Karkat would soon try to seize back control of the conversation, and she braced herself when he finally picked a question.

"Wait a second, why the hell aren't I on your shipping wall?"

He lowered his eyes at both girls. "I asked her not to ship me with anyone red for serious," Jade said matter-of-factly. "I'm not interested right now."

"the official shipping wall commends itself on its adherence to established fact," Nepeta said officiously. She then leaned over to Karkat and, behind her hand, whispered, "On the other walls she's with Gamzee and Tavros. Don't tell anyone."

"Gamzee?" Jade shouted, surprised.

"He thinks you're cute!" Nepeta insisted. "i ran a survey" She then coughed and added, "Only Gamzee answered."

"Oh, god," Karkat muttered. He waved a hand in his air to dismiss the subject and then said. "Look, Gamzee also thought Troll Martha Stewart was both cute and a valid option, so I think the evidence we have here says something about his taste."

Jade, who had been touching up some of her equations, turned around and threw a pencil at Karkat.
"And why aren't I on your wall, huh?"

"Because I asked her to take off crazy bitches that throw fucking pens at me," Karkat said, retrieving the pencil, throwing it back, and denying he had made a mistake.

Nepeta cleared her throat again. "As you well know, Jade, Karkat is suffering from a deep and personal hurt," she said professionally. "He's not the type to just go off to the next pretty face he sees!"

"As you well know, Jade, Karkat is suffering from a deep and personal hurt," she said professionally. "He's not the type to just go off to the next pretty face he sees!"

"Lacking the true professional decorum she playacted, Nepeta began to sway on her stationary feet. "Any other eligible bachelors or bachelorettes will just have to wait for all those bad f33lings to calm down from their boil and make the flushed quadrant nice and ready to swim in again!" She began to tip closer and closer toward Karkat.

"Yeeeah…" Karkat said, and he carefully pushed swaying Nepeta away from him with one finger. "You just leeeaaaaaan the other way when you do your thing there, okay?"

Nepeta, who Jade recognized was just teasing Karkat about her crush for fun (if only the once), leaned over-far and toward Sollux and Feferi. "You guys, help!" she cried. "He's shipping me your way!"

Feferi laughed and held up a hand to push Nepeta back. Sollux did not even look up. "Fuck off," he added.

"Bluh!" Nepeta balked, and then remembered herself and changed it to "Hsss!" She then then "leaned" toward Jade instead, in what was little more than one of her usual glomps. It was as Jade started to pat Nepeta on the back to acknowledge the low, rumbling sound she was making that Kanaya arrived.

"Karkat I Need To Talk To Someone" she said, obviously flustered.

"In a minute," he said. "I need some information now that people have stopped fucking eavesdropping." Jade suddenly understood why he had been waiting around with such uncharacteristic patience: the room seemed to have returned to its own business after latching on to the new arrivals from the Underlab. No one seemed to so much as notice his comment, save for Sollux and Feferi. "I can't so much as get a fucking meal if the Harley/Leijon sister act don't break up and tell me why we're all..." Karkat turned to Sollux and Feferi, to address them personally: "dooooooomed!" he said, perfectly. "am ii doing that riight?"

"Asshole," Sollux muttered.

"As far as I can tell" Karkat said, ignoring them in the end, "what with the lead engineer telling me about backup plans, is that these are five zillion pages explaining how to shine a big flashing light that spells out 'KILL US PLEASE, WE ARE RIGHT HERE'. Just let me confirm and we'll talk."

Kanaya sighed, crossed her arms, and actually turned toward the nearest desk to wait. She started to bite down on her lower lip.

Karkat watched her with astonishment. "Whoa, okay, what? Did your ear for sarcasm just rot off? Since when has Nepeta been part of my strategic council, honestly, you'd think this would be obvious. You can talk!"

Nepeta looked up from Jade's shoulder, her horn rubbing up against Jade's cheek. "Did something happen with Rose?"

That would be your guess, Jade thought, but all of a sudden Kanaya went shifty-eyed, taking in the perimeter of Jade's makeshift office and those around it, and herded Jade, Karkat and Nepeta further
"Hi guys!" The entire group turned to see John, who had just arrived holding a DVD case. When he saw Kanaya, he immediately stashed the case in his sylladex, and as a result it took him a while to tell that he was not wanted. "...what's going on?"

"I dunno, Egbert," Karkat said. "Drag this out and we'll see."

"...No," Kanaya decided, and she led John in. "I'd appreciate the insight as it is."

"Uh oh," John said. "This is about Rose, isn't it? Yeah, okay, we need all the insight we can get. Jade: get the Rose translator."

"Right!" she said, grinning to John, seeing how he was trying to lighten the mood. She called up her lunchmuffs. "This is the biggest thesaurus I have!" she said, projecting a holographic book to the floor, but having no real intent to use it. After all, there was a time for silliness and a time for seriousness, and after a little levity…

The Trolls seemed to agree. Nepeta initially played along with Jade by sitting at her feet and batting at the lunchmuff's holograms, but as Kanaya lingered trying to muster the nerve to speak, Nepeta slowly came to sit still, then straight, and then began to lean towards Karkat as though about to speak to him herself.

Karkat had held his lazy slump during the whole affair, but acknowledged Nepeta's approach, and so spoke: "Well, come on," he said to Kanaya. "Out with it."

She swallowed. "...Well, as you all know—"

"Exactly, Karkat said. "So move on."

"Wait, hold it," John said. He then called out: "Rose!" just above speaking volume. They all looked, but their friend did not look up from her animated talk with Tavros. "Okay, we're good," he said. "I dunno, sometimes I think she hears things."

Kanaya lowered her eyes somewhat. "...We aren't settling into a quadrant and it's driving me crazy."

The entire group had their own reactions, all supportive and measured, but Jade could not make any out but her own as Karkat growled: "Oh, god dammit, you can't pick one, you mean!" The others were overwhelmed by him as well and stopped what they were saying. "Look, I get that you, at least, are all crammed to the metaphorical aquatic breathing slits with the fuzzy feelings, but look at you! You got so caught up in your little vampire melodrama that you forgot to actually decide if you were going to fucking bite her or not, didn't you?"

"That's not fair, Karkat," John said. "I mean, if Rose and Kanaya are going to do a quadrant… well, she's definitely going to 'bite' her. It's just two different kinds of bite! Or maybe a different place to bite?" John seemed to ponder this for a moment. "Look, my point is—"

"The point is you don't understand this issue half as well as you think you do," Karkat said. He then opened his mouth, made a sound as though pained, and instead said: "...okay, fine. Kanaya, would you like to hear the Peanut Gallery's opinion before their heads explode all over the fucking blueprints? Or should we just cut to the one person who has an informed opinion here?"

Jade had to admit that she was eager to speak, not that she had anything more than the generic to say. Nevertheless, Kanaya took one look at the other three, all eager and ready to go, and told Karkat, "...yes, maybe you should go instead."
"Good," he said, "Now that we've accomplished a proper speaking order, let's get one last piece of info out. Harley, Egbert. Has Rose said anything to you that will make this a lot easier?"

"I dunno," John said, honestly. "Rose is really cagey sometimes. She could be married for years one day and I wouldn't really expect to know about it until the fourth anniversary."

Jade nodded. "Then she'd probably list out all the hints she had dropped."

Kanaya squirmed at the sound of the word "married", and Karkat clapped her on the shoulder. "Hey, customs issues later, advice now. Back to the topic of hand and my gold-pressed diamond-class advice, as your leader and your friend. You listening? Look me in the eye and say you're listening, before I turn you back to the savage, blunt claws of the unwashed and uninformed." Kanaya nodded, and so Karkat supplied: "KISS! HER!"

And that, it seemed, was all that Karkat had to supply. Before Kanaya's surprise could actually sink in, he had pointed to Jade and said "NEXT!"

Kanaya barred her teeth at him. "Karkat, that is not advice!"

"That is world-shaping advice and I'll prove it by contrast! Harley!"

"Thanks, Karkat," Jade said. "Really. Kanaya, I know this is probably really hard for you to pick, but really, you and Rose have been talking every single day about everything ever since you got here! I think you'd be happy in either quadrant, you just have to relax and not stress it, is all!"

Kanaya blinked. "...you're right," she said. "That is awful advice."

"Thank you," Karkat said.

"Well if we've got to cut right to it," John said, trying to look sympathetic for Jade, "I think you two would be better as moirails!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake!"

"Karkat!" Jade protested.

Karkat backhanded John on the arm as if hoping to pass on the punishment to Jade. "Oh, no, I'm sorry, then! Harley wants me off your case! So how about, instead of shoving your rank, dripping, moron idea back up where we all know it came from, we'll put it on display! Open-air! So all can smell its glory and think of you. Hell, why let it stink on its own? Let's get some more droppings to flank it. Leijon! I want a ten-page essay on Rose-spades-Kanaya on my desk by an hour ago."

Nepeta glared at him and made uncomfortable cat noises. "Harley, you eat your limp-wristed 'everyone's happy' scenario before you leave the table or you're not getting any dessert, and yes: this is still a shit analogy. Then go convince Eridan to hang out with Rose until she screams for Little Miss Auspistice and we'll have covered all three of the worst possible quadrant suggestions."

Even Kanaya looked offended at that, but Jade came to realize that someone did not seem to care about Karkat's opinion in the slightest: John. Jade almost felt bad for Karkat when he noticed as well. "Wow, you're just gonna keep going, aren't you Karkat?" John asked. "Or are you done? I can talk again? 'Cause you can finish your shipping wall if you want, I'm sure we're all glad to hear it! No? Awesome."

Karkat fumed, which prompted Nepeta to laugh and say: "This is great... can I talk about my shipping wall right now, because I think I ju—?" Jade, seeing where she was headed, plucked Nepeta's hat off of her head and began to scratch her. Nepeta did not realize she had been thoroughly
distracted until it was too late, and blew Jade a raspberry for spoiling her fun. She didn't much complain about the scratching.

"The way I see it, you guys," John said, "is that Kanaya was the only one looking after Rose when she was grinddark until the rest of us found out what was going on way too late. She even saw what I didn't, and I was right there!" While his speech started out enthusiastic, as he carried on to the next point, John began trailing off. "And then she went down after Cetus and… well I didn't even go with her then, but I know you two talked a bit, Kanaya! I know I was busy looking for the thing, but…" John absently held on to his right arm. "Thanks, I guess is what I'm saying. You're good for one another."

"John, don't follow up the melodrama by pouring on more melodrama," Karkat said.

"That's not what that means, Fuckass," Jade muttered.

As ever, Karkat took to anger at the sound of his nickname. "How is that not what that means?"

"Oh, I don't know," Jade said, "maybe I just think it was regular drama when Dave died, our Sprites died, and Rose was gone and Jack decided he'd rather come to your session and kill your dreamselves than stay behind, in a session that was trying to eat us!"

Karkat coughed. "Look, let's just back the train back to the original tracks here. Here's the issue: Kanaya latches on pale to people where she's supposed to go flushed. It's a problem and I think we'd all be happier if it stopped right about now!"

Kanaya sighed, and told the other three: "This is true."

"So you do like her?" Jade asked her. "I mean… are you attracted to her?"

"Well, yes!" Kanaya said, as though it was no notable thing that someone would be attracted to Rose Lalonde, even her. Even John could see that was a non-answer. "But do you want to… I dunno, kiss her?"

Kanaya looked somewhat ill at having to answer these questions in front of everyone. "… Sometimes? I mean, just now, we were joking, and standing close, and… she looked into my eyes I just wanted to step forward again and… and… I lost the moment." She began to blush jade. "A-and then I came over here."

"…THAT'S HOW YOU KNOW!" Karkat bellowed. "Unbelievable. Just… You!" He pointed to Nepeta. "Stop grinning!"

"I can't," Nepeta said through a smile, "it's precious."

Karkat continued to fume. "You were right there making porn jokes with her but the second – THE SECOND – you thought of doing even the littlest, chastest grubcrush thing, you fall apart like a stack of abstinent bricks!"

"I'm not afraid of kissing, Karkat," Kanaya insisted, somewhat cross. "I just don't know if that was the direction I wanted to go. I mean, just moments before, Rose and I were talking about her in combat and I felt… uh…" And then, all at once, Kanaya remembered. "You," she growled, and advanced on Karkat.

John's reaction to this was: "Uh…", which was also how lost his chance to intercept.
"This debacle in the basement!" Kanaya snapped. "Three Underlings hold up the entire group, Sollux comes in looking half-dead and Rose openly bleeding—"

Karkat rolled his eyes, the only one not particularly concerned by Kanaya's sudden outburst. "She was not 'openly' bleeding."

Kanaya stepped right into his personal space. "You've been leaving the Humans utterly undefended in every one of these mandatory excursions. The only reason Rose is safe right now is because she was having a talk with Tavros, and I don't want to be the negative one here, but we both know that that was a stretch."

Karkat took to Kanaya's invasion by holding up a hand to push her back by the collar. She did not budge. "If your girlfriend told you anything today, it's that her little splash of blood came from messing around with Nitram! Yeah! I noticed! Because I look out for my fucking squad!"

"Your Squads Are Tired And Fed Up" Kanaya said. "The Humans Are Being Exhausted By Their Exposure And It Is Going To Cost You. If You Looked Out For Your Squad—" Kanaya grabbed at Karkat's wrist, but as she gave him no ground, he gave her no leverage, "—You Would Be Covering The Humans So That You Don't Have To 'Look Out' For Them One Day And Find Rose Dead In A Drain Pipe"

Jade flinched when Kanaya said the words "Drain Pipe", and she lashed out behind her with her left arm, hitting the wall. Karkat could not help but notice that. "I…" Jade was not sure. Why did she do that? "I thought there was… behind me…" She turned and glanced at the wall, only a few inches away, and then back to Kanaya with realization: "…Sorry."

Karkat was lost in thought for a moment, before he pushed Kanaya away when she was not expecting it. "Fuck, you are pale for her, too. If you two pity vacillate, you're gonna hear it from me, you got that? …Shit, why've you got to be backwards, Maryam?"

Kanaya's anger faded into confusion. "I-I'm not following."

"Some people find someone they're bonding with and then go 'Oh, shit, you're going to hurt someone.' Or maybe they are sort of like you, and they go: 'You're a problem, let's can that,' and then they bond later. But you!" He shook his head. "You're a cracked diamond, is what you are." Kanaya looked hurt at that, and angry. "First you find someone you're attracted to. But then you're all… 'You have a problem. We're gonna fix that, but not for you. I want to fucking tame that action.' You never get to the bonding, because it's never been…" Grunt. "Real."

Kanaya broke away, but Karkat followed with his arm. "Hey," he said, clapping her on the shoulder to re-establish a non-violent physical contact. His voice was calm again, even comforting. "I put everyone off bodyguard duty because the faster the fights end, the less risk everyone's at and the less tired they'll be. I know we fucked up today. Is it going to happen again? Probably." Kanaya nodded, sad but calmed. "And when it does, do you know what I'm going to do? " She turned back to meet his eyes. "I'M GOING TO KEEP DOING THE EXACT SAME FUCKING THING BECAUSE IT'S THE RIGHT PLAN!"

Kanaya pushed him away again in a huff, and Karkat turned back to the others. "Moving on! Leijon! We know you wanna! You've been very quiet; wish you'd do it more often, but now's your time! Dazzle us with your over-romanticized kawaii stock plots!"

"Thank you, Karkat!" Nepeta said with a grin. She then scooted over toward Kanaya, who had plopped herself down against the nearest desk. "Kanaya…" she said, resting her paw-gloves up on Kanaya's knees. "I want you to know I think it's really special that you've got pale feelings for Rose.
And I think that this is important to you too." She reached toward Kanaya with a drooping sleeve, to touch her face the way cats do, or possibly to wipe at tears not quite there. "And I think that's something Rose would really like to hear, that you care for her like that. Because the Humans don't have relationships like ours and sometimes it's going to be hard to understand! So I figure, if she knows how you care, you should tell her, and that's going to be more important to her than all the old pale gestures for a while. Real important." Nepeta glanced over toward Rose. "And she trusts you, I think. And if you think she needs someone to look after her... I think you know best, and I think she'd want that, because I think she wants you closer one way or another, like Jade said. So you should."

John and Karkat took in the scene with outright astonishment. Jade caught them gawking and clicked her tongue. "Silly! Of course she can talk about moirallegience!"

Nepeta ignored them, except to flash a small smile probably meant for Jade. She then rested her head against Kanaya's knees as well. "But you've got to think about what you want to be for you, too. Now, I don't want to take Karkat's look at your moirallegience with Vwiskers at face value if that's not what it is... but I know I thought you were red at the time..."

Kanaya shook her head. "No. He's right. ...you can brag," Kanaya permitted.

"I was so, totally right," Nepeta crooned. She then drummed Kanaya's legs. "Okay, but seriously. It really sucks that that went bad," she said.

"Thanks," Kanaya said.

"I think..." Nepeta started, "that when you're talking about matesprits, if you sometimes picture yourself kissing, or touching, or..." and she coughed. Kanaya could not help but mimic her. "...Or really just talking to her! I think that's a sign that you might want that. I know that probably doesn't help, but if you think about those things get all filled with all those big fluffy feelings of whatever it is you want inside, then you're half way there! You get to say 'You make me so happy, and I wanna make you happy too!'"

She paused. Kanaya was not meeting her eyes. "But with your moirail, it's not 'I wanna make you happy too.' It's a different feeling. Really. I think if you'd had one before, you could tell. You've gotta be able t'..." Nepeta reached out and turned Kanaya's head toward her. "You've gotta be able t' look them in the eye, and be filled with this feeling that says..." Nepeta swallowed and spoke without her usual cutsey lisp. "'I don't want you to ever...'"

And then, in spite of her attempt to keep Kanaya's eye contact, it was Nepeta who looked away, up and aside. Equius was still in the room, eye still on his clock. "...I don't want you to ever be sad again," she finished. And then she sighed, catching her head in her hands. She seemed to have lost utter track of what she was saying, and became lost in thought. She was not missed: Kanaya was already pondering the situation in her head.

"But! But..." Nepeta said. "That's just me stating the facts! Now, if you want my opinion! I just know that if you had Rose over to your place, set up some candles, maybe some lavender, maybe some purretty mewsic... classical, jazz, some slow dancing... you could get all dressed up! and rose would be all dressed up too in her shiniest— Gyack!"

"Annd sorry to interrupt the fanon," John said, pulling Nepeta off of Kanaya, "but I think we know where this is going."

"You would both be so pretty!" Nepeta shouted to Kanaya as she was yanked. "You know it, too! Do iiiiit!" She then began a throaty growl. "John," Nepeta warned, and when she had been pulled
fully back to the line, she snapped: "John Egbert!" John set Nepeta back down at Jade's feet. "Don't you interrupt me when I'm shipping, John! We'll have words!" She then flashed a spade at him with her hands. "the shunned fangirl reminds the silly human of her darker side! Ow!" she added when Jade tugged her hair. "I'm just kidding!" she insisted. "...the shunned fangirl'll remind you of my darker side..."

"Nepeta?" Kanaya said with a bit of a laugh.

"Yes!" Nepeta said, almost surprised to be addressed.

"Thank you," Kanaya said. Nepeta bowed. "So the vote is hearts two, diamonds one?"

It seemed, in fact, that everyone was against a vote in general, but the kerfuffle was interrupted when Nepeta suddenly got to her feet. She hopped out of the room and toward the centre, where she flagged down Equius mid-way to the transportalizer. "Kanaya," she said by way of farewell, "if you're worried about empty quadrants, don't. I can think of some other good suggestions! But I still think—hey! You!" she called. Equius had left without her. "We still have to talk, you know!" She ran after him, stumbling over her tail as she went. As she disappeared, Jade noticed that Nepeta had cast a worried glance toward Feferi before leaving, and that Feferi had nodded.

"Okay, let's just get this voting thing out of the way," Karkat said, "by which I mean, not touching it at all. Listen," he said, dropping to a crouch and pointing to Kanaya. "I know this is messed up, in your head right now. I don't know if you believe me, but I think you do. But there are only two people that can decide this for you. Me," Kanaya rolled her eyes, "Or you with the help of her."

"That's three."

"It's two sets of two. How much do you think my vote is worth? Look, either you two sit down and have one of your dullfuck conversations and pick a quadrant together, or you decide and make a move like you obviously want to do! Like I wanna see you do!" he added. "She'll fill in the rest."

"He's right, Kanaya," John said. "I mean, what's the worst she's going to say? No?"

"Yes," she replied, and not alone. She had said it, sad; Karkat, derisively; and Jade as well, somewhat absent, her mind drifting back to Aradia and Sollux's estrangement and the way that Dave had lingered on how he had told Terezi that they should be friends before he had mentioned talking about Jack at all.

"All the better to go in there kissing or restraining straight-up, you know what I mean?" Karkat ask. "Can you do that?"

Kanaya shook her head at once, though she said: "I don't know."

"Okay," John said. "I do have another idea and maybe this one will actually work." He too squatted down, next to Karkat. "Rose's next day off is coming soon. No surveys, no imps to flush out." John and Karkat shared scheduling duty. "You only have surveys that day. She's gonna hang out with you like any other day. When that's done, you two go hang out at your place."

"This is starting to sound like Nepeta's plan," Karkat muttered. "Five steps to privacy and five more to the bedroom."

"I can't help the size of my sector, Karkat," Kanaya protested.

"Well sure, Karkat," John said, "why not have a private relationship talk in the middle of the lab, then?"
"Is that where this is going? Because it doesn't sound like that's where this is going."

John rolled his eyes to Kanaya. "Here's my point. You've got all day to talk to her. The plan? Don't let her go until you've told her how you feel."

"Don't…" Kanaya started.

"You don't get to go either," John said, with authority, though he summarily added: "Well, I mean, if you have to go to the bathroom or something, but… not my point! My point is: in a few days, you're going to tell her no matter what, and the next day, you're going to be matesprits, or moirails, or…"

"Or dumped," Kanaya said.

"I was going to say 'Or maybe surprise auspistice buddies,' I don't know. My point is: you're going to be happy and you'll be in whatever quadrant you want to be most or I don't know Rose. And that's going to feel great. To have it out in the open and be able to… well, I guess it depends."

"Now it sounds like Nepeta's," Jade said. "But I like it."

"There's no one like John Egbert to get straight to telling them how they feel," Karkat griped, "but if it gets you out of this funk, I'm for it. Can you do that, Kan?"

Kanaya looked at her hands, shook her head and then said, "…I'll do what I can."

"Good," Jade said, but then she sighed. "This is why I'm not dating. Just not interested… and just not big enough for it."

"Why is everyone so fucking afraid of dating?" Karkat said. "You, John, I haven't heard a honk from Gamzee, and I hear something's up with Ampora too, not that I give a rat's ass. All a pack of cowards. No Drones around and everyone suddenly decides it's time to sit on their thumbs. Well I've got words for that!" he said, and started out of the corner. "…But for now, I'm going go wake the chef like I should have half an hour ago. Haven't seen him in forever, he's probably fallen off a cliff for all I know. John, I need you to go get that cinematic masterpiece of yo—"

"Rose told me," he said at once, and produced the DVD.

"Was that what that was about?" Karkat asked, and snapped the package. He turned it instinctively to the back cover, ignoring the front, and the synopsis thereon. "Isn't she useful. Why, someone should date her." Kanaya snorted. "…Damn," he said as he read on. "This was practically chosen for you, Kanaya. Reserve a double blanket."

"What are you talking about?" Kanaya asked, reaching for the DVD.

"Aaactually, Karkat," John said, "Rose didn't so much say as imply, but…" he pointed toward his friend and Tavros.

"…Tavros," Karkat said. "Tavros and…" John, Jade and Kanaya all pointed down the aisle. "…Oh, you've got to be kidding me," Karkat said. His shoulders drooped, but then tensed up in a fit of rage. "I can't… I… this is a good thing!" he called out, as if to reassure himself. "If it shuts Eridan up… and Vriska doesn't murder anyone… Rose has made a good call." He returned the DVD to John with one hand, and he fish-hooked Kanaya's bent horn in a farewell tug.

"Hey," he said as he walked away, "Harley, I wanna know what this jumble of yours means in detail, tomorrow before lunch. Egbert, you're with us."
"I have survey tomorrow, Karkat," Jade said, annoyed.

"You have survey and a meeting with your co-leaders! Ta-da! Multitasking! It's like I'm trying to work you all to death, and yet somehow, you'll survive!" He then turned back to the door nearest the television, down toward the cafeteria and kitchen.

"Sorry Jade," John said after he had gone.

"It's all right," she said. "You have to go too."

"Yeah, I don't think he'll let me forget it, either."

In the distance, they heard scraps of a conversation Karkat seemed to be having in the hall that led to the cafeteria. What stared with in a relatively civil tone ended with a bout of maniacal, teal laughter, and Karkat stormed off as Terezi returned to the room and a couch covered in scalemates. The three all cast a look at her in curiosity. They had not been seen much of Terezi after her initial explosion, save a mandatory Imp flush she had spent in brooding silence, but she had been up and about the lab since the morning, and appeared much improved as she set to her toys.

John coughed to clear the air. "For now, Jade, can you help me get this room set up? I need someone to go fetch some blankets and pillows."

"Try my room," Kanaya said. She reached down to her lap, casually, but did not seem to find what she was looking for at first. She then swept the nearby floor, before having a spark of realization and reached up, toward her ear, where she retrieved the thin key she had been looking for. Using it, she retrieved her laptop and unlocked the transportalizer.

"Thanks Kanaya," John said, and then he reminded: "Two days!" He then playfully tried to catch her with the same fish-hook tug as Karkat, only for her to calmly deflect him.

"Good luck, Kanaya," Jade said as she passed. Kanaya nodded her off, and Jade stepped aside toward the central hub. As she left, Kanaya watched her watching Rose, openly now, clapping fist into bare palm in thought and frustration.

John rubbed his hands as he stepped forward. He took in the room, and Jade did so as well, seeing it covered in dirt and rust flakes from the underlab, not to forget old bits of food and waste. "Okay!" he shouted to everyone else in the room. "Needs to be blown straight out, don't you think?"

"Uh-oh," Jade said, cluing in. "John, don't you dare wipe out my notes!"

"Oh!" he looked over and chuckled. Kanaya, cluing in same as Jade, had a look of panic in her eyes. She took to her feet and started across the room. "Okay," John said. "I promise."

Realizing he was serious now, Jade shouted: "Run!" to warn the others. Kanaya took off at one, and Jade ducked out the transportalizer, accidentally forcing Kanaya to go around. The surprised shouts of her allies as the rust and junk took to the air could almost be heard through the floor.

Karkat's get-well party for Sollux, now having lost its purpose with Sollux being well and fully rested, went off without a hitch all the same. Somehow, he managed to cram everyone present through the thin hall to the cafeteria, where they ate a meal of sweetened, cooked cluckbeast that had been prepared in some Alternian style that all three Humans present found they quite enjoyed.

Dinner went off without a hitch, better even, Rose felt, when Eridan invited Tavros to sit with him (no more remarkably than "Hey, Tav," and a wave to the nearby bench, but it was a start, and they did talk the whole meal through). Even better, when John sat next to Vriska, she showed no sign
whatsoever of bothering her two friends: Rose almost wished she had thought of using John in the first place. Rose sat next to him, and overheard Vriska say that she had gone to her room to bathe out the sweat from the strife and to "change clothes". With Kanaya on her other side, Rose watched for a reaction to Vriska's not so subtle hint that she had alchemized a new set and tossed the old, as ever, and was not disappointed.

The only downsides to the meal were the ones Rose could have well predicted. Nepeta returned in the middle of the meal, grabbed her plate and sat down next to Jade in a huff. Later, reassuring but perhaps more predictable, Terezi stood up on the cafeteria bench and shouted: "The noble Pyralspite has been kidnapped!" This was clearly the conclusion to the investigation she had been running the entire meal, sniffing under tables and poking diners with her cane. "Snatched away from this very dinner table not an hour ago. I am aghast! Vagrants! Justice will fall upon you! Justice!" Last and most predictable of all, Dave, Aradia and even Equius were nowhere to be seen.

Slowly, they began to funnel back out into the main lab, which John and Jade had perfectly prepared with Kanaya's multicoloured cushion pile and a selection of blankets from the unused dorms. Karkat was in first, leading Sollux, and he turned back to the half or so of the group immediately following him.

"ALRIGHT FUCKERS," he said to his tailing audience. "I AM STARTING THIS SHIT RIGHT NOW. EVERYONE TAKE YOUR SEATS AND DON'T WASTE TIME FUSSING!"

He vaulted the collection of DVDs he and John used as a tea table, and was soon fiddling with the DVD player. Sollux followed, and after he had dimmed the lights with his computer's master control program, he took a seat on one of the blankets nearest the television, if only to have a front-row seat to Karkat telling off the electronics. Jade sat across from him, and Nepeta next to her, still eating the remnants of her late-started meal, while Rose took a seat on the couch, which had been pushed far to the back by her friendleader on a windy impulse. John took to the floor, just beside Vriska, with whom he was still talking, and Tavros, as instructed, sat as far away from her as he could, even pulling out an office chair so he wouldn't be spotted dragging a blanket. Eridan, confused by this behaviour, did the same, and Rose overheard him say, "So, like, what the hell?" as he sat down.

The rest of the party took some time to arrive, which worked just fine for Karkat's attempts to outsmart a ten year old piece of electronics. Feferi eventually sat down curled up next to the guest of pseudo-honour, and it was to the sight of them cuddling into place that Kanaya arrived. She took a look at them and then sat next to Rose as planned, but perhaps a bit further apart than she would have on any other day. Even Rose noticed that. Next, Gamzee came down the hall just as things were coming together with the player, a slice of cake on his plate that had definitely not been at dinner, and last of all Terezi, who arrived after some delay with cake of her own.

"…Well if he gets one," she said, as Karkat tried to glare her down.

"Nobody else gets any god-forsaken cake!" Karkat ordered. "Siddown! I'm starting this no matter what you dips want so you better all be good and comfortable. Today's movie is…" he double-checked the box. "Well, it's a Human movie, so of course I don't know the ending, but from what little research I got to run in between Egbert's ill-advised dust storm and then dinner, I'd probably call it something like Innocent-Teenager-Emblematic-Of-Intended-Core-Demographic-But-Peppered-With-Largely-Superficial-Flaws-Falls-In-Flushed-Relationships-With-A-Supernatural-Undead-Being-Similar-To-A-Rainbow-Drinker-Despite-Conflicts-With-Other-Supernaturally-Charged-Creatures-Especially-In-Sequels-With-Additional-Conflict-Caused-By-General-Societal-Distrust-Of-Such-Mythical-Creatures-And-Later-A-Relationship-With-Another-Paranormal-Being and I don't know, stuff happens, it doesn't say."
"You know, I wondered how you'd take this," Rose admitted to Kanaya, who was laughing.

"I can see why everyone thought this was meant for me," she said.

"I said you'd like it," Rose joked back. "That's all."

"Well, I think so," she said. "Because I actually can think of a movie we have like this, and it's wonderful."

"Oh, dear," Rose said. "Trollight exists. Now I have to see it, don't I?"

"You do."

"Damn."

There was a notable pause, during which Karkat took a seat at the opposite end of the couch, and Rose heard the crescendo of company logos go by on the screen. She did not watch the film. Instead, her eyes were on Tavros and Eridan, who showed no sign of starting their overdue conversation. Karkat let the film run its trailers, partially because he always hoped to spot something else worth watching, but also out of punishment for the Humans, since they forced him to show them the propaganda the government attached to all of his films.

The movie began in its fair time, and Kanaya and Nepeta were soon very deep into the proceedings, almost from the moment the romantic leads were both on screen. For the longest time, however, it seemed like there would be no drama between Tavros and Eridan. Rose felt her heart sink a little, and was surprised at how affected she felt by it. She supposed she had just gotten her hopes up.

The rest of the room was less quiet. People talked, shot clever or rude comments to the screen as was their want, and Vriska, who had already been laying down, lay her head down on John's lap. It was a casual move, so casual in fact that Rose felt bad calling it a "move." She suspected because, well, it was Vriska, but at the same time, it didn't feel like a Vriska stunt simply by its subtlety. After all the time she had spent watching Vriska and Eridan tear themselves apart, Rose could not deny that if the Spider Troll was going to make a move on her friend, she would be more ostentatious about it. This seemed just plain... friendly. The way John reached down to gently play with her hair seemed just as natural – indeed, he was so absorbed in the film that Rose thought that it could have been her or Jade in his lap and he might have behaved much the same. Terezi, who was lying on her back, sniffed towards them and made a face.

They were not the only ones mucking about. Terezi set aside her empty plate with more than a clatter, Gamzee's fell straight from his lap, forgotten at the sight of a shimmering vampire, and Sollux shifted his weight. "Sorry," Feferi whispered, and she sat up on her own. She then stayed off of him, which seemed fair at first. Rose saw her cast a look back at him a minute later, but she did not come any closer; Sollux soon cast a questioning look back, but neither noticed the others' concern. Fed up with the stalled drama all around her, Rose sought her own comfort, and leaned into Kanaya. She found, to her surprise, that her friend had already gravitated part way back her way. Before Rose knew it, she was snug against her, and soon, she was waking up. She had not been asleep long, but in the time she had, Kanaya had tucked some of her hair under the headband to keep it from falling over her face, and Eridan and Tavros had started talking.

"wOW, eRIDAN, i NEVER SAID I THOUGHT OUR RELATIONSHIP WAS DEAD," was the first interesting thing Rose heard in full.

"Really? Not even to Roz?" Eridan sighed. "I hear things, Tav. Through my network of crack informants."
"You mean Vriska?"

"Okay, maybe."

As she listened closely, Tavros and Eridan's voices in one ear and Kanaya's funny, double-pulse Troll heartbeat in the other, Rose was having quite a bit of trouble even pretending to pay attention to the screen. Apparently so were some of the others, as Rose noticed them glancing in the direction of the pair from time to time. Her plan to keep attention off of poor, nervous Tavros was failing, but if Tavros and Eridan didn't notice, it might… just…

"Tav, I swear, I don't know where you got that idea, but I never wanted to come across that way, 'cause…" Eridan looked to his hands. "Because you're the best thing there is in this place, you know? I don't know how everyone else does it, trapped in this box if they don't got you to talk to."

Tavros was taken somewhat aback, but Eridan chuckled. "You're the only one who's funny, an… honest. Telling it how it is, you know?"

"Oh, I don't…"

"Sure ya do," Eridan said. "Maybe you've got some trouble getting it out sometimes, but that's just because it's always right, is all, and some people don't wanna hear what's right." Eridan seemed particularly displeased at those sorts of people. "But I know it it's right. Gam knows it too, hell even Vris knows it. We've got you to sort us all out. And with me, you've really… I mean, after we started talkin'…"

Past the movie, Rose did not hear a peep from the rest of the room, save someone who shifted their weight just so before deciding this too was too much of a risk of noise. In spite, Rose sat up on her own, feeling her muscles cramp in protest. She smiled at Kanaya as she got up, and Kanaya seemed to understand, though she seemed disappointed. Perhaps it was the mood in the air, but Rose realized that, with Tavros and Eridan tended to, her own relationship had moved to the top of her priority list, without her leave. For the time, Rose went back on her watch, though her mind remained elsewhere and her hand edged up against Kanaya's leg, until Eridan returned to speaking and her focus, at least, sharpened.

"…What I'm saying is…" Eridan cleared his throat softly. "…there ain't nothing in the wworld that would stop me from showwng you howw much you mean to me, tavv. Its fuckwdn i screwed up an made you think this was dead. if i kneww you wwere that concerned i'd havve been right there on hands and knees to showw you just how y… what, what is it?"

Tavros, even timid, sleepy-eyed Tavros, was laughing. "I'm sorry, you're just so over the top." Eridan, deflated, crossed his arms and tried to shrink away, to which Rose expected Tavros would recant, but he did nothing of the sort. Rather, he held out his hand to touch Eridan's leg, and said, "It's perfect 'you."

A muffled noise started up across the room: the barely recognizable sound of Nepeta squealing into her cuff. To her left, Rose heard Karkat say something to the effect "Oh for fuck's sake…" before retrieving his crabtop and distracting himself with the power of the internet.

Eridan took Tavros' hand in his own and leaned forward to whisper: "Tav, I'm…" But he cut himself off and pressed forward into a kiss, unpractised but enthusiastic both, and Nepeta exploded into a burst of sound before collapsing to the ground.

"Uh…" said Jade, on whose leg her head had landed. "Are you okay?"

"Don't touch me," Nepeta squeaked, dreamily. "i died."
Everyone was more or less openly spying on the couple at this point, but it was not all peace and voyeurism. "Hey," John whispered to the girl in his lap. Where he had just been casually playing with her hair before, John deliberately combed it back to get a better look at Vriska's face. Rose did not need to see it to know she was livid. John set a hand on her shoulder and, in reflex, she snapped her own hand up to seize it, but when she met his eyes she seemed to calm somewhat. With a tip of his head, he made a suggestion, and soon they had both left via the transportalizer, first her, and then, apprehensive, John. Rose did not see Vriska again that night; John, she only heard return to his room just before she fell asleep. She did not ask how the talk went the next day, but he looked very tired.

The movie went on, but when Eridan broke the kiss to hug his matesprit, Tavros did not seem much interested in returning to it. "Eridan… I was running around all morning, and I think I'm going to fall asleep on your shoulder."

"Tav, don't do that, we're in roller chairs, we'll just go sliding across the room."

"Heh, yeah."

Gamzee shot them both a thumbs up from across the room, tongue wagging out the side of his mouth, but as for the rest of the audience, they were all soon back to the movie. Rose even restrained her snark, happy to have been of use, happy to have Kanaya shift over and lie on her lap (lying against her shoulder proved a liability with horns), and that she let Rose rest her hand on her arm. She was even happier her friend and would-be whatever kicked off her sandals and began to poke Karkat in the gut, pretty much whenever he told someone off for getting in front of the screen, or when he told off a certain couple for necking, or told her off for poking him in the gut with her toes. She was less pleased when the audience clamoured to see the sequels as well. *Trapped, Rose Lalonde*, she thought. *Trapped in a trap of your own devising.* She promised to be less cruel in the future.

Chapter End Notes

Don't lie, Kanaya, we all know what porn you have in your stash.

First Drafter's Club for this chapter talks about Mirann and little bit about Feferi

If you First Drafters didn't catch it last time around, I'm trying to get some feedback on the fic's warnings and rating. Please, read this (keeping in mind that this is a discussion about warnings and reasons for them, and thus may very well require warnings in and of itself… depending on your opinion) and send me your opinion: I've got nothing here and if the current trend continues, I may have to do something arbitrary. C'mon, none of us want that.

One of the first pieces of fanart I ever received was for this chapter's analogue in the original! You can take a look at the piece, by Beep, right over here, which I'm hoping is Beep's actual Tumblr (but you never know). I wanted to reblog the piece for additional praise and visibility, but that's going to have to wait as there's a spoiler concern, what with my Tumblr being used to announce the chapter! For now, I will just link you the post directly.

I do have a small folder of some other bits of fanart I've been lucky enough to find, so I'll be happy to highlight those I can still find when their chapters arrive: I just wanted
this first one to be first! If you have a piece you'd like to share with me and others – or just as important, if you'd not and are afraid you're in my little folder – drop me a line!
"Oh no! The ambient temperature is above the levels expected even by the local Caribbean flora and fauna!"

"The what?"

"It's too warm!" shouted the tiny, yellow Squiddle, who edged oversized cokebottle glasses up his noseless, earless face. "If we don't do something soon…" Dramatic close-up. "It will be summer all year long!" Crescendo. Commercial break.

Kanaya looked up from her laptop, sighed and shook her head. "The introduction of these younger characters ruins the dynamic of an already floundering program."

"You're worried about the integrity of the Squiddles?" Jade asked. She had spent most of the morning cleaning up the "theatre" from the night before and was glad to have someone to talk to about her choice in background noise. "I'm touched! But do you hear yourself talking?"

"I stopped being interested in their integrity when they began to intercut used Season 1 footage with the new," Kanaya said. She pointed absently to the screen and then flourished as a shot of Rasberry and Mint flashed by as if to prove her point, its sparkling, first season anime style clashing dramatically with the sharp but poorly restored second season footage, with its Western-styled, Asian-produced look. The Squiddle… couple? were scouting out the location of the villainous Colonel, with the help of the local animals. Jade was not sure if she would call the two a "couple," really, but she was edging that way. The new season had dropped the anime-driven Unresolved Tangling Tension between the two in favour of just plain making them T-Buddies, so there was that, but Jade could not help but think that her urge to call tangle buddies a "couple" had more to do with the quadrants than anything else.

"You're not looking at it the right way," Jade said. "You've gotta think of it like a grub! Am I saying that right?"

"Depends on what you're saying."

"Well, I just mean, this season was a big hit with us Humans!" Jade said 'us' but really meant the 4-8 demographic of the early 90s. But also herself. "Squiddles!: Kids! was how we all learned to 'fall in love with friendship!'"

Kanaya gave Jade a look over her laptop. "…sometimes I get the impression that you four aren't my best reference for Human behaviour."

"Technically," Jade said, "with everyone else gone, our behaviour is Human behaviour."

"I know. I'm concerned."

"Oh no!" said a talking scallop. It was one of the new animation company's attempts to cannibalize the animal sidekick trend of the Disney renaissance, then ongoing, and was accompanied by two barnacles and a series of marching ants. Just after the scallop's warning, a tank made of coconuts and bamboo bulldozed its way through the treeline, pumping smog into the sky so thick that you could almost see it staining the script with invective warnings against acid rain.
"Localizers missed a spot there," Jade said. "Like: the whole tank! Type 97 Chi-Ha Medium. A World War II Japanese tank," Jade rattled off instinctively. "Well, in bamboo and coconuts." Goodness knew Grandpa would never have let her get away with not knowing. Jade double-checked her fact in one of her holographic windows just to keep in shape. Between her and Kanaya, the air about the couch was filled with flickering holograms, and they both frequently tapped at the other's programs by accident. "Of course, like most tanks: completely land based, so it shouldn't be here at all. Not that the Japanese didn't have amphibious tanks—" Kanaya was not listening, "—even during World War II if the artists were going for a 'somewhat out of date' feel, but if you're going to stick a British Tank Commander parody in the driver's seat and—" she gritted her teeth, "—localize the show to the Gulf of Mexico, you could probably show some variety."

"Whatever you say," Kanaya droned.

The tank's Tarsier commander (seriously, it's like they weren't even trying) popped the hatch and took a look around, completely missing the technicolour Squiddles that jumped out of his way. His voice actor (the late Aidan MacDermott, always the anecdotal bridesmaid at the BAFTAs for his more qualified productions) began to rattle off his master plan in his best Jim Cummings impression, fully detailed so that all the children in the audience could neatly file the details in their minds for the remaining fifteen minutes of programming.

"Oh no!" called Mint (also MacDermott, though it didn't show). "We have to do something! He's going to destroy the whole atmosphere with fluorocarbons!" The whole atmosphere.

"Those are dangerous chemicals that will change the temperature in the air!" shouted Raspberry, all but gesturing to charts with corroborating data. Her voice was now under control, compared to the first season, and almost aristocratic from the lips of her newest voice actress. It was quite appropriate, given what the show's third studio would do to her character at the start of Season 3. "We've got to stop him! Quick, we've got to find the others!"

Jade, eager to dispense pointless trivia as she had been doing all day to no complaints, looked over from her screens and saw that one of Kanaya's screens facing her with a back of solid colour, rather than transparent. Jade found this curious: either Kanaya was looking at a red rectangle or she had somehow figured out how to private her windows. "How do you do that?" she asked.

Kanaya looked up and coughed. "Oh, that. Well, I suppose you, uh…" She began to stammer. "You put your legs, uh, over your partner's, uh…"

"Oh my god, you're actually are looking at porn," Jade said, wide-eyed.

Kanaya shrunk back into the couch. "The private window is working, isn't it?"

Jade began to laugh. "I wanna see!" she said, and lunged toward the hologram window to spin it her way.

"No!" Kanaya cut off her hand, and tried to jab for the window's Close box. "What do you care?"

"Because it bugs you!" Jade said with another laugh.

"Jade!" Kanaya swatted Jade away again, "Don't— you— have— a cage— to build?" She changed tactics and grabbed Jade's hand out of the air, closing the box with the other.

"Aww," Jade said.

"Ugh…" Kanaya flipped errantly through several windows to vent her frustrations. "Why is everybody so obsessed with my porn-watching habits?" Kanaya demanded.
"Probably because most of us don't have any," Jade said, laughing still but feeling bad for her behaviour now that she could see Kanaya's reaction.

Kanaya harrumphed and returned to her work, at first, but when she saw Jade's puppy eyes (taught by a real puppy!) it was only a matter of time before she continued. "...It's a Grown-period woodcut," Kanaya admitted, "more artistic than anything." She began to go jade as she tried to explain. "I'm just trying... to divide what's actually necessary in our breeding process from what's an Imperial invention. People have been raising concerns." Kanaya's lie told on her hands as she twiddled her thumbs with some urgency. "...All right, people have voiced concerns and I've been fussing them into mountains to the point of self-parody."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean several people have raised concerns about Drones, and lethality and... consent," she squeezed out at the end. "Rose on one hand, Strider's jokes, and I've had the impression in the past that some of our own..."

"Feferi," Jade said, without even thinking about it.

Kanaya nodded. "I've never had to think of it that way before. This whole sort of thing, really. I've dedicated my life to it, but I don't understand it!" She flicked a window closed, more forcefully than usual. "I'm in charge of a morally questionable institution and have to work out where to draw lines, and it's stressful," she confessed through her teeth. "Especially with you and yours."

"Us?" Jade asked.

"I just have to make sure that there are no cross-cultural issues," Kanaya said. "Misinterpretations. God forbid, accidents."

Jade laughed. "Well, I don't really want Drones knocking on my door one day in the future, I know that!"

"Exactly," Kanaya said, "but that's easy, I just have them leave the right pheromone trails away from the Human colonies."

"Right," Jade agreed at first, but then: "'Human' colonies?"

“Well, wherever you and the Human ectoclones are all living in the end." Missing Jade's true concern, Kanaya changed the subject. "I'm also trying to work out what I can modernize and what needs to be the way it is. So I'm looking at the oldest surviving things I can find without the help of the fleet archives."

"Oh," Jade said, realizing Kanaya wanted the subject changed. "What did your porn show, then?"

"...S-stuff?" Kanaya's blush returned. This was clearly not the direction she had been hoping they'd take. "Troll nobility and landed highbloods. A few engravings of assorted..." and spat out as fast as she could manage: "...pottery."

Jade stifled a giggle and tried to make her disruption up to Kanaya. "Did you learn anything?"

"Not really," Kanaya said. "...Well, nothing on topic." Kanaya had put her heart into it just to make the joke, so Jade was happy to laugh at it. "It's just work," Kanaya reassured, as much to herself as Jade.

"You're just reading it for the articles!"
"If you're trying to get me to agree with your prank answer: I'm afraid I know that joke." Jade blew her a raspberry, and Kanaya shook her head at her. "I wish some people would take it more seriously, seeing as how it has to be done."

"Just curious!" Jade reassured. "Wouldn't you be?"

"Hmph." Kanaya did not oblige her with an answer.

"I'm curious about the historical stuff too!" Jade insisted. "Can't I see something that's not porny?"

Kanaya sighed, browsed for a moment and then passed Jade a window, wherein another woodcut depicted a Mother Grub in some old Troll artistic style, stirring a pot of monochrome goo.

Jade studied the image for a moment, surprised how quickly her interest shifted from teasing a friend to study. "Looks like how I understand it, so far."

"There are a few minor details I could note, all the same," Kanaya said. She pointed to a tool carved to one side. "I think it's a testing device, for the slurry. It shows up in some modern pictures and hasn't changed at all. I can prove it as soon as I have the archives, but Sollux has been very clear—"

"Five minutes of your time for three hours of mine," Sollux repeated from over in his chair. "This database ain't gonna come in one big chunk, you know," he added as explanation to Jade. "You've gotta tell me what's worth grabbing first." Jade was surprised to notice that he was the only other person in the room at the time. Sure, a lot of people were on patrol, but not everyone. With the loud, high pitched Squiddle voices, it had been hard to notice that so many others had left!

Kanaya continued. "So I've been asking questions like: why has this thing not changed? Why has this thing changed at all? And that's what had me looking up the, uh, other image."

"Do you want to see it?" Jade asked, trying very hard to stop laughing, and failing. "Is it going to make you uncomfortable?"

"Yes." That was what she said, but all the same, Kanaya called up another private image and carefully put her hand flat up to it, then through to the other side. When she turned off the private mode, her hand was easily obscuring any troubling details. At the bottom of the image was one of the previously mentioned bits of "pottery." The top halves of several others appeared just above her hand as well.

"It... wow," Jade said. "It really looks just like a bucket. I mean, it's kind of uncanny, I sort of figured when you said 'pot' you really mean a jar or an urn or something."

"Yeah," Kanaya said, "which is why I was trying to figure out if it was for familiarity or... function?" she coughed. Then she added: "I'm trying to run this bucket-running operation and I don't even know the step-by-step of how they're literally used. It's not a good sign."

"I can see that," Jade agreed, trying not to think too hard about it.

"I'll tell you this:" Kanaya said, "the image does not answer my questions."

"I'll trust you on it," Jade said with a laugh, and leaned back into her seat.

Kanaya seemed surprised by her retreat, and almost leaned back herself, nearly uncovering the image by mistake. "Thank you," she said, before closing the window.
Back on the big screen, Raspberry and Mint had reunited with the Squiddles! Kids! of the title: three little rascals that had replaced much of the original cast when the second studio had not been willing to pay a full staff of voice actors, but were willing to pay for a focus group, which concluded that "kids like kids." The new Squiddles' names were a point of contention among the fanbase.

Tossing the ice cream premise, the new studio had decided to brand the children with inanity in lieu.

"Squiddler, c'mon!" called the young girl. "We've got to get in the tank so we can rescue the fluorocarbons!"

"Right behind you, Squiddette!" said the boy, Mint's little brother, who hoisted their hefty friend, Squibump, into the exhaust pipe before him. The characters squeezed through the pipe and appeared out of the burner inside, where they shook off a smudged layer of coal, not so much as warmed by their trip through a coal engine. Though the animators had forgotten him in the last shot, they were joined here by their yellow friend, who cleaned his glasses.

"W-w-w-where do you think we go, Squidradar?" asked Squibump, and Jade winced in embarrassment at the sound of the yellow Squiddle's name. Jade liked Squidradar nice enough, but his name would have been improved by a paper shredder and a smattering of glue. Not that the other Squiddles had fared that much better. Accompanying the Kids! was a whole crop of Squiddles, like "Squiddle Ruby", who was actually brown, focus-group creations Squiddle G and Squiddle Argyle the Warmhearted, who rapped, along with a vast supporting cast, none of which would survive the season close. Squiddle Darla the Coral Lumberjack, Squiddlepan the Wise, Squidzilla, Squidbob, Squidnot, Squidesque, Squidmomma, Squidnanna, Squidpoppa, Squidbaby, and "Squid," the mollusk from the original season, who had been renamed "Octopus," causing Feferi to get up, turn around, and leave the room.

"How is the cage going?" Kanaya asked after some time had passed.

"Oh, I meant to ask you about that," Jade replied.

"You want my help?"

"Well sure! But no, I wanted to ask how you knew what my project was," Jade said. "I don't remember telling you."

Kanaya shrugged. "Well, it wasn't hard to work out. I mean…" She then disappeared in a blur of jade light, reappeared at the opposite side of the room and returned in the same manner, holding one of Jade's sheets of notepaper. "…Spacey math," she said in explanation.

"That was a waste of effort," said Rose, who had arrived at the transportalizer in the midst of her friend's display.

"I thought it proved my point," Kanaya said, handing Rose the sheet. It was immediately obvious she could not make head nor tail of it. To Jade it was simple: a few test equations to see if her Rat Trap could stop Jack from moving from Point A to Point B, Space-wise. "Don't get me wrong, it's not my strongest subject," Kanaya continued, "but I hardly suck at it, and I can't help but notice that Point A is on the first floor and Point B is in the middle of an engine."

"Engine?" Rose asked.

Technically, the engines were an idea Jade had so that they could build the Rat Trap where Jack would not find it, and then bring it to him, but since Rose knew nothing about the Trap in general, Jade retrieved the sheet and redirected Rose's attention the best way she knew how. "Look, Rose," she said, pointing to the screen. "It's Plop-Plop."
In spite of all her years of real or feigned refinement, Rose snorted at the sight of the Squiddles' tarsier foe. Confronted with the errant Kids!, MacDermott was hamming up a storm of megalomaniacal genius. "I'm sorry," she said to Kanaya.

"I don't get it," Kanaya said.

"The Colonel's name," Jade explained. "They made it 'Plack-Plack' in English but it's 'Plop-Plop' in Europe because they don't mind a poop joke over there."

"Which, by the way," Rose said in an aside, "ruins the joke about him hating the name, because what's wrong with 'Plack-Plack'?"

"What's not wrong with 'Plack-Plack'?" Jade asked.

"I FOUND IT!!!!!"

Jade blinked and paused the DVD before turning back to Feferi, who was glowing at everyone, smile wide and eyes bright, through a thick, patchy layer of motor oil.

"Okay, I was \textbf{OPING} for a bigger crowd but this is still pretty good!!" She skipped over to Sollux and kissed him on the temple, chasing him when he tried to dodge the grease. "I found the pumps," she told him. "Could you turn on the cleaning cycle?"

"I figured," he said, unsurprised. He was already at work on the computer.

"\textbf{Barely} found it," Feferi said as she walked over to Jade and Kanaya. "I mean, I was going to look yesterday, before the movie, but John got me and Sollux trapped in the cafeteria with Karcrab!" She laughed. "But I got 'em! They were with the toilet pipes, ew, but—" Luckily, Jade never learned any more about the toilet pipes.

"All right!" Sollux said after a moment, and he pushed away from the desk. "Next up… some extra scrub brushes." He then reached into his sylladex and pulled out a surviving encrypted card, which crashed to the floor. He decrypted the thing and out popped an aged, spherical ball of metal. The ball turned itself on and then began to levitate into the air, wavering and humming gently. It then turned and beeped first at Sollux, then Feferi, and then began to float away.

"Uh-uh," Feferi said, hooking it with her trident. The thing was surprising fast and graceful. "No grub that way either, buster!" Pulling it closer, she began to pry at a panel on its side.

"Well, not the kind it's looking for," Sollux admitted. From his inventory, he collected another card, this one giving him a slimy, yellow slug creature.

Seeing the others' confusion – even Kanaya – Feferi explained: "Carpenter droid! Change out the programming… and they'll make a nice scrub droid, we figure!" The panel she had been working popped off and scrambled to a halt on the floor, revealing a dry, cold, red worm inside the Droid, which lay pierced by a half dozen probes and wires. Jade almost felt for the thing, until Sollux began to remove the wires and it began to gurgle and protest, not out of pain but at his attempts to remove it from its safe little home.

"Well I don't care how comfortable you are!" Sollux snapped. In spite of the irate thing's protests and bites, Sollux had soon swapped out the software grubs. The second grub seemed content to be hooked in, ghastly as the connections looked to Jade. As he worked, Feferi pried out the other side, revealing another grub. She and Sollux exchanged cautions, and after making a decision, Feferi held up the Droid as he worked. When Sollux removed the second grub, whatever had been keeping the droid afloat gave out, and Feferi had to brace her legs to hold it up.
"I'll get it!" Rose offered, being closest, but when she took the other side, she shouted, "Holy shit!" Still, she put in her best effort, and they were soon balanced. Luckily, the droid recovered once Sollux had fully installed the new piloting program.

"Thanks, Rose!" Feferi said, clapping Rose on the arm.

Rose looked down at her grease covered shirt and sighed. "Don't mention it." She switched her outfit to a velvet ensemble from her sylladex.

"Okay, looks good," Sollux said, prodding the Droid. "The underwater pilot program should work with that model, but hook it up to your braintop to make sure it's not leaking." Jade was not about to question the word "braintop." Sollux continued. "With the lab doing most of the pumping, the droid should be done by morning if you help it scrub up a bit." The droid was already off, and disappeared through the transportalizer.

"I'm gonna!" Feferi squealed, and she kissed him again and darted back to the middle of the room as he batted away her oily self. She then headed over to the others. "Guys, we're gonna go swimming!" she called, fit to burst. She clapped her hands as well, which made a wet slap of oil and grease. That just made her laugh. "Where's Nepeta? I've gotta high-five somebody who won't krill me for it." She looked around for a moment – Jade had to admit, with Nepeta it probably was best to check dark corners and possibly look under furniture, but she simply wasn't there that day.

"She's on a flush," Jade answered. 

"Oh, boo to the imps and Karcrab and John flushing them out," Feferi said. "I've got POOLS TO FLUS)( BUST--ERS!" To Jade's surprise, Feferi produced a long scrub brush from her strife deck. The thing crackled with visible numbers and electricity, which Jade felt almost certain formed the shape of a 2x3dent overtop of the broom as it appeared. "...yeah, there are a few funny things in there," Feferi said to acknowledge Jade's searching look. "FF, you said those were for harpoons!"

"W-ELL MAYB-E I'V-E GOT --EV-ERYDAY N-E-EDS B-ESID-ES GLUBBING ) (ARPOONS, )U)?" She laughed. "...I think I have lunch in here, actually," she said, and her eyes glazed somewhat as she flicked through a selection of hacked cards in her mind. "...Nope! That's probably best, really. Have a wrench," she added, passing one to Jade that glimmered briefly two and a half feet off either end.

"Kanaya!" Feferi said, as if suddenly noticing her. She explained: "You said you needed to talk about the caves! Shoot!" She clapped a hand to her face and then had to spit away the taste of the grime. "Okay!" she declared. "Here's the plan! I've got to go scrub the gym. Can you talk to me the day after tomorrow?"

Kanaya took in Feferi's energy with a certain familiarity, but it was clear she was not quite used to it in person. "Why not tomorrow?" she asked.

Feferi feigned bashful, her arms coquettishly behind her back, before grinning and asking: "Can you come to my pool party tomorrow?"

"You're having a pool party?" Kanaya asked. At the other side of the room, Jade could make out Sollux, rolling his eyes.

"Yes! Total yes!" Feferi smiled to everyone. "It's going to be great, and I'll have music, and there are big pools, and hot tubs, and diving boards, and I want everyone to be there, and please say you'll
"I…" It passed neither Jade nor Kanaya's notice that the day of the party was also the day when Rose would have the day off and Kanaya was not to let her leave without telling her how she felt, however that was. "…I have survey," she tried, tipping her head toward her computer.

"After survey?" Feferi asked, hands clapped in eager prayer.

Kanaya turned toward Rose, who, while unaware of her plans, silently accepted that her friend was requesting her company. "I can come," Rose said, after reaching some sort of accord with Kanaya through poor hand signals and particularly poor quality mime.

"Not too late," Kanaya said, as her way of agreeing.

"That's GR---EAT!" Feferi cheered. "Can you swim?"

"…I lived in a desert," Kanaya reminded.

"But there's plenty of time to learn, huh? And I bet you've got PL--ENTY OF BAT)(ING SUIT DESIGNS IN YOUR BOOK!" Jade was probably the only one to notice, but when Feferi made her guess, Kanaya winced and her hand went to her side, just below the underarm. "Rose? You swim?" Feferi asked, and got a nod. "Do you have a bathing suit?"

"I may have to resize it at the alchemiter, but it should pass," Rose said.

"Great!" Feferi's grin could not be wider. It was not physically possible. "Jade?"

"I'll come. I used to swim all the time!" she said.

"Good!" Feferi turned back and headed toward her matesprit. "Sollux…?"

"Like you'd let me stay," he mumbled.

"Hmph," Feferi pouted. "Well, that's where you're wrong." But she did not pursue the matter further. "Do you think Karcrab will come?"

"Are you kidding?" Sollux pivoted on his chair to face her. "KK raging around a hot tub in his boxers? I wouldn't let him stay behind!"

Feferi giggled at that, too. Casually – perhaps too casually – she then added: "…do you think Aradia would like to come?"

Sollux blinked. "FF…" He touched her on a clean spot of her cheek and guided her down to his level, looked her in the eyes and said: "2he'2 a robot."

"Oh pssh," Feferi said, a dismissal that sounded remarkably like splashing water. "I don't care if she spends the whole party sunk to the bottom of the pool if she's enjoying herself!" She turned about, headed for the transportalizer. "She's your friend—" Jade noticed her smirk at this, "—and I want her to be there!"

"Whatever."

And then, as Feferi took to the transportalizer platform, something happened that changed the mood in the room entirely. Rose cocked her head, as if hearing something, and asked: "Does anyone else —?"
With a burst of light, Feferi was thrown back from the platform, and Terezi appeared atop it. Something about her seemed odd. She clutched her cane lengthwise in both hands, firm and steady, and seemed filled with overzealous gravitas as she looked slowly one way, then the other. She then took in a deep breath, let it out, and Jade watched as a shark-grin spread across her face. Save for the deep breath, Terezi was humming a tune.

"Yes," Rose said, rubbing at her ear. "That. How are you doing that?"

Feferi's grin grew even larger, if that were possible, and she slowly turned toward Rose, a low chuckle building in her throat. "…Will," she proclaimed. She then turned to take in the other occupants of the room and stepped forward, if not entirely off the platform. It was clear she did not want anyone to leave.

"…Ladies and gentlemen," she said after a dramatic pause. "Yesterday! between the hours of 16 and 18, someone stole my white-cloth, red-eyed scalemate, 'Pyralspite', right from under my nose." Her hand errantly fondled the red dragon-head grip of her cane, and then tightened her grasp about it. "She was taken from the cafeteria, when I was otherwise occupied. One of us!" Flourish. Everyone jerked back a touch. "Yes, one of us sixteen… must! have been the culprit!" And then, Terezi pulled hard on the grip and drew a broken, glimmering half-sword from the cane and spread her arms, one weapon one way and one in the other, to claim the room for herself. "TH3S3 ROOMS" she proclaimed, "4R3 NOW 4 CR1M3 SC3N3!"

Your name is Rose Lalonde and your power-mad Troll associate and co-Seer has somehow convinced the game to play her own selection of background music. Oh, and she may have also hijacked the entirety of the central lab to find a lost stuffed animal, but existentially speaking, you find the background music far more distressing, to the point where you have disrupted the narrative flow with second-person musing. Stop that! Stop that at once!

Rose, trying hard to put aside the fact that the game had begun playing "BL1ND JUST1CE – S34RCH (Core)", according to the little box in the corner, approached Terezi with full caution. "Terezi…"

"I'm so glad you can hear it too, Rose!" she said, suddenly breaking character. "Do you know what it is? DO YOU? IT'S TH3 SOUND OF TH3 HUNT ROS3" Terezi replied. "And we? 4R3 TH3 HUNT3RS" Terezi's breath stank of candy. "You're gonna be my assistant!" she declared. "You'll love it. I'm even running the investigation as per your Human standards of legal procedure, see?" She produced a long, thin slip of paper.
"...Oh god," Rose said, as she poured over the sheet of allusions so poor it would have made the Parker Brothers roll over in their disintegrated graves. "I see I'm on this. ...I see you're on this."

"Of course! 3V3RYON3 IS 4 SUSP3CT, but in your lunatic human tradition: 3V3RYON3 1S INNOC3NT UNT1L PROV3N GUILTY" Perhaps to prove her point, Terezi sheathed her halfblade.

"Well..." Rose mused. "That's... certain encouraging coming from you, Terezi. And yet somehow not. In the slightest."

"I know!" she said, and she threw an arm over Rose's shoulder. "You will be like the Human Watson to my Holmes." She then squeezed Rose's neck in her grip. "My potentially guilty, dragon-kidnapping girl-Human!Watson to my Holmes."

"Thrilled," said Rose, as she escaped Terezi grip. "But really, what do you want?"

"I'm being serious!" Terezi said. "We're going to 1NV3ST1G4T! The fact that your game powers would make you a master criminal if you didn't suck at them in every possible way had absolutely no bearing on my choice of sidekick-to-keep-under-my-watch-at-all-times! Geeze! No trust!" She turned away, clucking her tongue, and came across Feferi, who was still on the ground. "How's it going, Peixes?" Terezi offered Feferi her cane.

"Just leaving, actually," Feferi said.

The cane was swept from her grip and Feferi slumped back to the ground. "Nope," Terezi said. "Nope. No one leaves the scene of the crime." Sniffing out the glares sent her way by the others at this news, Terezi caved. "Okay, fine! I'll make an exception. Let no one say I'm not a merciful
overlord. But just you! After you answer one question."

"What's that?"

Rose was surprised when Terezi cut to the point. "Have you seen my dragon?"

"I dunno…" Feferi said, cautiously. She glanced over at Sollux, who shrugged. "Well, yeah, it was in the cafeteria at some point, but we couldn't really see it from where we sat down. It's fishy!"

Terezi laughed at the pun. "Okay, you can go," she said, and walked away from Feferi, spinning her cane as she went. "Besides," Terezi said to Rose. "If these two are confederates, she'll come back to stop his hanging!"

Feferi brushed herself off, but could not help but laugh. "Well, at least you pick good bait."

"I knew I was nothing but chum to you," Sollux muttered.

That made Feferi laugh harder. "Okay, I'm going! Terezi!" she called. "Don't destroy anybody when you're done! Dooon't do it!" And she was gone.

"When I'm done!" Terezi said, like she was quoting something. "I like to think justice is never 'done,'" Terezi said, her grin widening as she turned toward Rose. "…Coming?"

"You had better go, Rose," Kanaya suggested, her eyes on her computer. "I don't think she's going to take no for an answer."

"Even my friends are against me," Rose lamented. "Okay. Fine. Just give me a pen for this highly legal document," she said, and she flashed the sheet first to Kanaya and then to Jade for a longer look, getting a laugh.

"Taken vows, Sister Kanaya?" Jade asked. Kanaya, not able to understand either joke, simply handed over a pencil.

"3XC3LL3NT" Terezi proclaimed, once again clapping her hand over Rose's back. "The rest of you stay here. W4TSON!" she shouted into Rose's ear. "It's time to search the true scene of the crime!" Terezi turned and then half-dragging Rose toward the cafeteria hall. "And it's time to interrogate… the cook!"

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DAY 45, HOUR 8

"Gyah!" Rose jumped back, out of Terezi's grip and into the wall. The game continued to hammer-type captions on her field of vision.

ECTOBIOLOGY LABORATORY
CAPRICORN CAFETERIA

Terezi laughed through her nose and clapped Rose on the shoulder before she pressed down the hall. "How do you keep doing that?" Rose called before following after her.
The cafeteria looked like a war zone, that morning with food and dishes everywhere and burns on the wall. This has a great deal to do with the lack of cleanup after the meal the night before, but it helped that the leftovers was crusting against a real war zone. To hear Eridan tell it, the cafeteria had been the site of the last true climactic battle fought between the Trolls and the Underlings as the Trolls laid claim to the facility. It had taken a full seven of them to flush the place. Though no one else could confirm it, Eridan claimed to have fought an Ogre there, dressed in a frog collar and dragon scales, that had caught fire in the kitchen, but had kept coming and even survived multiple shots from Eridan's weapon. Whatever the truth of the war stories, the cafeteria still showed heavy signs of battle damage, though the Trolls had largely repaired the appliances, utensils and eating area to a pleasant and usable state (if one ignored the part of the wall that would crumble a little every time someone moved a bench). For easy access to fresh food, the Trolls had installed their primary alchemiter and its assorted gizmos in the pantry, just past the kitchen.

"There we are," Terezi said, pointing to the corner table she had been using the night before. It was now empty, save of a set of clean dishes she must have laid out for Pyralspite's "guests." It was tucked behind the wall formed by a part of the kitchen, and there were plenty of places in the room one could stand and not be able to see it, like from the entrance hall. Rose checked the rest of the room, if only for something to do, but saw sign of neither clues nor chef.

As far as Rose understood – and with Terezi's creepy, invasive GUI to back her up – the Cafeteria was connected directly to Gamzee's expansive sector via a door in the back. Unfortunately, Gamzee's was such a confusing place that the only other evidence she had for this was his word, and she had been well past trusting his word. True, more than a few times they had found him with his head stuck in the fridge, or eating ice cream in the middle of the empty dining hall floor, so if it was not connected he was at least good at sneaking past everyone to get inside. Whatever the connection, Gamzee was fond of the cafeteria, and one day not long after the Humans had arrived, he declared himself head chef and proved competent, though his schedule was scattered and ill-planned. Unless Karkat felt industrious enough to swat him awake and into the kitchen, being fed by the master was a matter of luck and good timing.

After a few minutes of Rose half-heartedly poking around, Gamzee showed his face. The far corner of the cafeteria from the entrance was dominated by a rectangular section of counter top, displays and sneeze guards, which guarded the entrance to the kitchen. Gamzee appeared from the kitchen laden with food, which he carried to the old refrigerator and range they had set up behind the counters for casual cooking. The rest of the appliances were in the kitchen proper, though Rose could only make out the dishwashing stations that faced the door, all ready with dishes from the night before for a cleanup that might never come. Gamzee, having finished stuffing the fridge, turned about to lay some sandwiches behind the sneeze guard, and spotted the girls. Terezi had been rubbing her hands together, perhaps at the prospect of an audience, and pushed Rose toward Gamzee.

He grinned when she approached. "What is up my most loquacious motherfucker?"

"Hi Gamzee," Rose said, trying to take inventory of the sandwiches before she felt she had to make eye contact with him out of politeness. Gamzee was bopping his head – partway into their conversation, Rose realized he was doing it in time with the same background music she and Terezi were hearing. For the time, Rose ignored the behaviour. "…What's for lunch?"

"Fuck bra, it's sandwich day." He gestured to a few cutting boards he had brought out with him, complete with fresh ingredients ready for sandwiches. He was even prepped to make egg salad, with eggs and a clean frying pan waiting by the old range, thankfully out of range of the active pressure cooker he had left on the fire, hissing acrid froth from a split its side and against nearby pan of roast charcoal Gamzee had evacuated from the oven a week ago before baking the door shut, as it remained to this day. This, John had said, was where the magic happened.
Gamzee was still talking shop. "We've got turkey or eggs or just cheese over here," he was saying, "and squeezefruit on toast for the other, vegetarian-style." As if to prove his point, his deployed his Miracle modus. Three accidental bottles of faygo and a set of nailclippers later, he had convinced it to deploy an Alternian toaster.

The kids and Trolls had been doing their best to exchange cuisines for the past few weeks; that Gamzee was able to find new flavours from the Kid's old homes still surprised Rose. It was one thing to still find new food while shuffling through an eleven-set pantry from Alternia, but the sheer quantity of food her mother and her friends' guardians had shoved into their pantries just days before the game had begun was equal parts reassuring and suspicious. Cake mixes and cereal boxes packed with shuriken aside.

Rose figured she might as well order lunch, before Terezi saw fit to interrupt. "I guess I'll have that... what did you call it?"

"Squeezeberry," he repeated, and produced one from under the counter. It looked more like a speckled jalapeno to Rose, about half the length of a finger. Pinching it at the base with one hand, Gamzee squelched it with the other until it had ejected a viscous orange paste all over the counter. He nodded, lips pursed and eyelids lowered, like an artist proclaiming his latest masterpiece complete.

Rose leaned slightly over the guard to get a closer look at the mess. "Uh... sure Gamzee, I'll have one, just... not that one."

"Cool," he said, swiping it up and sucking it off his finger. Rose watched for a while as he began to prepare some toast with one hand while washing the one that had just been in his mouth. Assured that her sandwich was being prepared by semi-professional Gamzee rather than utterly spaced Gamzee, she returned to taking stock of the adjoining dining hall.

Terezi stood by her crime scene, stock-still, her cane held firm in her grip, and she breathed deeply to take in the whole scene.

"Gamzee," Rose said, and she turned back to discover that Gamzee's right side was now covered from wrist to waist in flour. "...have you seen Terezi's white dragon?"

"Why? She fly away?" Gamzee asked, his clean hand dripping water over the counter.

Rose laughed. "No, no..." She then noticed the fearful concern in his voice, and had to ask herself why she was surprised. "No, Terezi thinks someone might have taken her. It. The doll."

Gamzee's dragon-panic disappeared at once, and he went to dry his hand. "Well that's rough. If somebody took one of my dragons, we'd have to have some motherfucking words, y'know?"

"I suppose. I'm not very well versed in the care, keeping and policing of flying lizards." Rose checked over her shoulder. Terezi had not yet reacted to Rose's line of inquiry, and Rose was beginning to wonder if she even listening. "....Look, she's probably going to want to interrogate everyone or something before we're done. ...Who's not on flush today? Dave and Aradia, aren't, of course..."

"Well, my coolest bro was in here to grab some fruit, so yeah, he's off. He told me he wouldn't be showing up to our jam session tonight, but I'm used to that. Fucker's never really around anymore, you know? But damn, ain't seen my robogal for ages." Gamzee looked out toward Terezi. "Fuck, look at her. Sad."

"Sad?" Rose said with surprise. Terezi looked more like she was trying to channel the spirit of the law into great, clenching fist about her prey, and given what she had already convinced the game to
do for her, Rose would not be entirely surprised if that, too, came to pass.

"Yeah, she's looked bummed ever since she showed up again yesterday. Fuck, how's that happen to a girl? I mean, JuSt TaKe a lOoK ArOuNd aNd sMiLe, YoU KnOw? CaUsE aIn'T ShIt sO FuCkInG WoNdFuL?" He nodded to himself. "I got it. I'm gonna make her some hot dogs."

"You're... pardon?" Rose asked.

"Crazy motherfucker loves my dogs, man! Two hot dogs with hot peppers and enough ketchup to drown the imperial guard." Gamzee immediately walked to the range and, after he turned Rose's toast, he hefted out a sauce pan.

"Yes, I get it," Rose said. "Her chromatic obsession again, of course. Red, red and red, right?"

"Nah, my man, you gotta look at the big picture. iF yOuR WhOlE FuCkInG WoRlD Is rEd, LiKe, HoW Do yOu kNoW?" Gamzee filled the pan with water before dropping it on a range next to two others he ignored, and set the pan to boil. "I got all kinds of awesome bell peppers from Harley Tower, you have no idea. It's like a motherfucking rainbow on a plate. And cheese. I put it right in the dog because then you can't see it coming and then you're like whoa! Fucking cheese! So awesome."

He had walked over to the fridge as he spoke, pulling out the ingredients and laying them on a cutting board as he mentioned them. He held the cheddar up to his face when he found it, boring his soul deep into its very nature. "Did you know this used to be milk?" he asked. "FuCkInG. MiRaClEs." "You're really putting a lot of effort into this," Rose said, her prying inner psychiatrist latching on to this new information. "You must really care. Why would you say that is?"

"Fuck, I care if anybody comes in here looking like a rain cloud. Saw Kitty slumping around in here the last night with six dead rats and sniffing like someone took her ball on a string, so I lit up some sticks in the corner back here— he pointed over his shoulder, to the kitchen, " and we had an awesome fucking camp fire. Made her some lemon meringue pie."

"On the... fire?" Rose asked. "I'm making a mental note to tell Sollux that his sprinkler system might not be as operational as he's been bragging." When she looked for Gamzee's reaction, she found him staring off into space. "You didn't even realize, did you?"

Gamzee blinked, surprised to see her. "Did you know," he said, leaning over the spit guard and whispering as though he was spilling government secrets. "Did you know that you can make pies out of anything?" He gave her a wide-eyed, knowing nod of his head.

"Me?" Rose couldn't think of anything that was bothering her. And yet...

Gamzee had transformed into the picture of utter seriousness. He even frowned, which Rose had never seen, and his eyes looked in the same direction, which was irregular enough. Seriousness and a sympathetic face on a guy half-covered in flour and his elbow in a puddle of squeezeberry. Rose felt
didn't know whether to laugh or to start babbling about Kanaya or Eridan or the mystery woman in the void. "It's nothing," she decided.

He gave a tilt of his head, and when it was clear she had said all she was willing, the corner of his lip turned up a bit and Rose finally gave in to laughter. He grinned a toothy grin and then, screaming like Jack had dropped in uninvited, he leapt into the air when the toast popped up.

"MoThEr FuCk!" He grabbed at the toast with his bare hands, pinching and retracting until he could yank it onto a plate, and then began to rummage through the bins below for another squeezeberry. Despite finding his demonstration with no trouble, the others seemed more troublesome, and a pile of fruit was dropped onto the counter in no time, leaking a pool of mixed juices. At last he gave a cry of triumph and emerged with his quarry.

"Oh yeah!" Gamzee said as he finished the sandwich. "I just remembered! I wanted to thank you for giving my bro a one-up with Eridan. He's over the moons."

"Tavros?" Rose asked. "I didn't do all that much, really."

"Aw, c'mon, he's been going on about you all week, he's like 'Rose says "this"' and 'Rose says it's great that I "that"'." With her sandwich finished, Gamzee took to the freezer and pulled out a block of hot dogs. "It's nice to have someone that gives a shit, you know?" he asked. Just when Rose was feeling the conversation was getting a touch domestic with the insane clown man, he split the dogs apart with a clever from nowhere against a poorly under-prepared cutting board that buckled in the middle. Things were normal again. "I feel like we're like practically family over here! You know. Me in diamonds and you right over there in the crazy helpful Human Advice Quadrant."

"Oh!" Rose looked away from the cutting board with a jerk, her surprise overwhelming her initial fear that Gamzee had just removed his pinky and was having a delayed reaction. "You mean... you and Tavros are moirails?"

"FuCk YeAh! I mean, I said to my bro, I said: 'My bro, you and me have been bros for sweeps and now that you're raising your voice a little, everyone wants to be your bro! Except I'm your bro, bro, and you know I've got your motherfucking back to the motherfucking end, bro, and I know you've got mine too 'cause..."

"Because you're his bro too?" Rose supplied.

"Nah, he's just good with all my wide and varied career anxieties. You know?" Luckily, he did not seem to be looking for an answer. "LoVe iS A FuCkInG MiRaClE. That's what I was telling Kitty."

"Shock ing," Rose said. Having tossed the hot dogs into a sauce pan, Gamzee began to clean up: he picked up his spreading knife and chucked it straight over his head: it landed like a trick shot in one of dozen drinking glasses that were filling the dish-washing sinks. He then tossed away the split cutting board toward the rack with the rest of the dishes, which carried the whole rack off the edge, knocked over a sauce pan coated in congealed grubsauce and left only a single empty pepper shaker alive. Finally, he handed Rose her sandwich, which, after it all, was quite good. She had no real analogue for its flavour, a sort of smooth not-citrus, though she would have preferred the fruit straight. Still, no need to pass it up, especially if Terezi was going to drag her around interrogating others, which seemed certain when Rose looked up from her sandwich only to see her hovering, steps away.

Terezi eyed the sandwich as though it were her new suspect. "...I question your commitment to justice, Watson."
Rose pinched at the bridge of her nose. "Of course, Holmes, where are my manners? We must return to the case of the missing stuffed doll!"

Terezi lowered her glasses to look Rose in the eye, so to speak. With all seriousness, she asked: "Rose, would I laugh if someone took your things?"

She reached for Rose's sandwich, and Rose pulled away. "I'm going to pull from the bank of our limited mutual experience and say 'probably yes,'" Rose replied.

"Hey!" Gamzee called from the kitchen. "Can I play?"

Rose sighed. "Terezi just happens to be informing me that this isn't a game."

"Blar, Rose," Terezi scoffed, "Gamzee can play if he wants! Come!" she said, and waved them both after her. "Just so long as he doesn't touch anything! Except an apple. Gamzee, can I have an apple?" Gamzee shrugged and fetched one he had left in the puddle of juices, which Terezi did not object to in the slightest. Terezi then led them back to the table she had been nearly inhaling. "I already have one Watson, Gamzee, but you can be Troll Nigel Bruce."

Gamzee almost squealed, as his eyes lit up, star-struck. Rose had to admit that, no matter the intent of the original performance, Terezi probably had just named one of history's more famous clowns.

"Now..." Terezi said. "To business."

The music jolted: Rose winced, and Gamzee, who had been tottering and bumbling as per character, stood bold upright and said "Whoa, okay."

"Thank you," Terezi said, though whether she referred to the game or her Watsons, Rose did not know. Their attention seized, she gestured to the table. "Let me fill you in on the night's events," she said. She kept her eyes closed as she reminisced. "I decided to show up in the lab about fifteen hours. I hadn't really been showing my face and I figured it was time," she admitted. "I brought some Scalemates with me to keep me company, and it was just Sollux up at that hour, so it was easy to get settled. I just wanted to see if everyone would leave me alone if I came out, is all, but I got a good game going! Pyralspite was definitely with me then.

"I carried her over into the cafeteria an hour later, nobody else was back yet. You remember, Gamzee!"

"Stepped on me," Gamzee explained.

"Not intentionally!"

"I was asleep on the floor," he explained further.

"Not entirely intentionally!" Terezi said. "There might have been other places I could have stepped! I JUST D1DNT" She then waited until Rose met her eyes to add: "H3H3H3H3H3H3H3"

Rose shook her head. "Oh, by all means, do delay the rescue of your helpless dragon."

Terezi glared. "Oh, so now you're business. Fine by me!" Terezi continued her explanation – and as she did, she began to scratch at her palm. Various unique, if sometimes repulsive, smells began to waft from her modus, and with a sniff of each, Terezi began searching for a specific, invisible card.

"I was setting up a scene with Pyralspite where she prepared for dinner, knowing one of her rivals would surely murder one of the others during the meal! It's not that hard to plan," Terezi added, and
Rose did not think she was talking about the game. "And it's really more efficient to let other people do the work for you." Indeed, Terezi made it clear she was adding these details especially for Rose, who clearly needed the explanation. "But there's a lot to plan ahead about so I was there for a while, writing notes." She pointed out a note pad she had brought out earlier and left on a nearby table, lying open to a page that had been crammed to the margins with varicoloured handwriting. "After that, I was going to go back to the room, play with the others, and have them back in time for dinner."

"Our dinner, or Pyralspite's?"

"Both, duh," Terezi said.

"You were going to run a murder mystery during dinner? Wait," Rose said. "Carry on. I believe it."

"Good!" Finding the smell of overripe blackberries on her newest invisible card, Terezi took a tight grip on it and swiped her hand in the air: a bag containing fingerprinting equipment took the card's place in the real world. Terezi set to work on the table and surrounds. "I roleplayed for a while first —" Gamzee confirmed with a nod, "—and then left went out to the computer lab, where I ran into Karkat and everybody else that had showed up in the hour or two I was gone."

"Oh, right," Rose said. "I remember that. I was talking to Tavros and I heard you laughing at him. Then John started blowing dust all over the place and we all hid in the kitchen."

"Exactly! I barely managed to grab everyone before he blew them away!" Terezi frowned at the results she was getting. "When I left the cafeteria, Pyralspite was still here. But by the time I got back, dinner started…"

Terezi slammed her hand down on the desk. "And she was gone!" At first Rose assumed the slam had been for dramatic effect, but as Terezi returned her kit to her syllabus, it was clear she was angry for fresh reasons. "This is a disaster!" she said, pointing to the spot on the table she had been dusting. Rose leaned closer and looked at the sample she had taken. It looked like a meaningless smudge of marks, an impenetrable mix of Human whorls and Troll shatterglass prints having covered one another time and again over the course of the last month and a half.

"We really have to clean this place," Rose muttered. She wiped a finger on an untouched part of the table. "I mean: we eat here." Rose shook off her hand. "So what's your point, Terezi?"

"My point?" Terezi chuckled, and pointed to the strip of paper she had given Rose earlier. "It's simple," she cooed. "There was only one time my dragon doll could have been stolen: between Egbert's Windy Thing and Gamzee's dinner. Do you remember who was in the room at the time, Rose?" Rose shook her head. She hadn't even been to the room before dinner, and even then, Tavros had been her priority: she had not really been paying enough attention to even notice the dragon. "Well then it could be anyone!" Terezi proclaimed, "but I'll tell you, my friends, we can do better than that. It's a simple matter of alibis.

"Thank about it," Terezi said. "None of them would steal my dragon if someone else was there to watch them." Rose found it more realistic that someone would gladly turn in someone else if faced down by a loaded Terezi, but so long as that didn't happen, Holmes here was essentially correct. "That means one of them…" The game gave Terezi's proclamation some dramatic silence. "…has no alibi! No one to vouch for them because they were sneaking after my dragon! Whoever has no alibi is our criminal!"

"You seem to be paring this down to a pretty large block of time," Rose said.
"Small time!" Terezi protested. "Only like an hour."

"That's not my point," Rose said. "We all have inventories, it would have only taken a second."

"The only thing I'm paring down here is the difficulty for you amateurs! Geeze!" Terezi clucked her tongue. "That is your note pad," she said, indicating the Clue sheet. "This is mine," she said, picking up the notepad from before, which she replaced in her sylladex to the vague smell of cherry antacid. "I'll deal with the detail work, Watson, thanks."

"Well then, let's get started," Rose insisted. "For starters. Where were you?"

To Rose's surprise, Terezi laughed. "Good thinking, Watson. But no. I've got a pretty good alibi! I was with John."

"Seriously?" Rose asked. "Y3S, why is this surprising?" Terezi shook her head and sighed. "Look, okay, when I said 'I barely managed to grab everyone,' I meant it. I pretty much had to grab dragons out of the air while he blew junk around and made jokes about me being… 'Girl Troll Bill Paxton going after Dorothy.'"

"Oh," Rose said. "Twister jokes."

"Yeah, apparently. Anyway, when I got out I decided to help clean up some."

"You mean he ordered you."

"Maybe I'm a nice person, Rose?" Terezi said, but then immediately laughed. "Nah, I had a question to ask him." When Rose asked what, Terezi simply shrugged. "I dunno. Stuff.

"'Stuff,'" Rose echoed.

"Yes, geeze! 'Personal stuff,' fine! I talked, he answered, we went straight to dinner, everyone wins!" She shook her head. "So what's your alibi, nosey?"

"I have no reason to steal your stuffed toy, and neither does anyone else?"

Terezi tut-tutted this, and patted Rose on the cheek. "That's motive. C'mon, Rose. Alibis. For example: Gamzee's alibi is that he was making dinner, that's obvious."

"Is it?" Having thought about it, Rose had realized that the kitchen was almost invisible from the cafeteria. Gamzee could have easily grabbed the dragon and ran in the middle of a bad trip, and might not even remember the next day. The sectors at this floor of the lab ran on forever, Rose knew, but as a result, didn't connect anywhere else but the computer lab, so at worst it would just be in his sector.

"Don't be stupid, Rose," Terezi said, "you're getting hyper paranoid and that's a rookie mistake. We ate last night, didn't we? This is Gamzee we're talking about here. If he had wandered off, he would have forgotten to come back and not only wouldn't we have eaten, but the whole lab would have burned down! That's an alibi."

But before Rose could complain, Gamzee himself spoke up. "Naw, man, didn't you see me?" he asked Terezi. He pointed over his shoulder. "I was in and out all the damn time, all over the place! Recipe on my computer in the lab, and my good spices ain't here, man, gotta keep them cool and dry! They're in Karkat's." Rose knew from experience that he meant "Karkat's secret room that
everyone knows about and can easily access from a secret passage just off the main hub." "And that's just a start! I was at Tavros', because he's got the grubsauce I wanted to dupe. And then I was in the can."

"That's fine, Gamzee," Rose said with a wince. "We don't need to know about stuff that didn't happen here, it's not relevant. Just tell me the grubsauce wasn't on the floor in the bathroom."

"It was on the floor… in its bottle?"

Terezi cut in. "Okay, yeah, you were in and out all the time. So what's your alibi, then?" Gamzee simply shrugged. "Hrm… are you guilty, Troll Nigel Bruce?" Rose could tell that Terezi found this as likely as she did, which was to say, not at all, but Terezi still gave him a warning. "I've got my nose on you. Now! Other Watson!" Rose snapped to attention. "What's your story?"

Rose had prepared her answer by then. "I was plotting with Tavros. We ran out into the transportalizer just after Jade to get away from John, and went to his place. We got back just before dinner. Ran into Feferi and Sollux in the hall, and we all went to the cafeteria and talked. I didn't check your dragon, I'm afraid. Gamzee showed up on our heels just as we were heading in, pretty much from nowhere. He had a shaker with him of, I'm afraid I don't remember, Gamzee: cayenne…?"

"Blastspice."

"Right." Rose continued: "he said it was dinner time. We ran into Eridan in the cafeteria, he started talking to Tavros and that worked out in the end. What can I say?"

"Oh yeah!" Terezi said. "I forgot! You're not a criminal! You're one of those naked, flying Human grubs with their bows and arrows. We're so proud of you, too, aren't we Gamzee?" Gamzee nodded again, like a painted show-puppy on her command. "Mark it down," she ordered, and Rose did just that, marking off herself and Terezi as having alibis and refusing to do the same for Gamzee, just out of principle. "Now c'mon, Watsons," she said, turning away. "If it wasn't us, well… time to find out who it was!"

"Tally-ho!" Gamzee said, marching alongside. Rose followed in their wake. Back in the main lab, Rose found that little had yet changed, and realized that that was probably Terezi's plan. She was operating without Karkat's interference: Rose wondered how long that would last.

Zero seconds.

"Balls," Terezi said, no doubt something she had picked up from Dave. Karkat and the others streamed out of the transportalizer just as Rose crossed into the lab. "Excuse me!" Terezi called to the group, once they had all arrived. "I am here to inform you that as of a few minutes ago, the main lab and every adjoining room is under the control of TH3 L4W"

Tavros, who had arrived last and still stood on the platform, panicked, hit it again and disappeared. "H4H4H4H4H4!" Terezi shook her head. "But seriously, we have his alibi already." She shot them all a confident grin, her free hand reaching just below her cane's grip, such that she could easily draw her sword. "…Anyone else want to run?" The rest of the room, which consisted of virtually everyone but the Heroes of Time, Feferi and Tavros, stayed where they were. Tavros soon returned as well: beckoned it would seem, by Eridan on Trollian.

"Crime scene, huh?" Vriska noted. "What's the big deal? Did you kill Strider or something?"

"That's what I wanna know!" Karkat demanded, stepping forward. He then paused and waved down
Vriska. "Not the stupid part – the first part."

"I dunno, Karkat," Terezi said, "you don't know what I'd do to someone who got on my bad side, but somebody in this room's going to find out R34L SOON"

Karkat growled at her. "First you're shouting at dinner and now you're tromping around like you own the place. What's your deal? You go nuts while you were hiding in your room? Hit your head on a flush with Egbert?"

"I'm gathering everyone up for interrogations, is my deal," Terezi said. Her voice lost its good humour, but only for a breath before she smiled again. "So everybody sit down! My associates will be with you shortly."

"STAY THERE!" Karkat ordered – not that anyone had moved, witnesses or associates. "You think you're just gonna walk in here and subvert my authority?"

"All two inches of it, yes," Terezi said, gesturing to his horns.

"Over my dead body," he replied, which Rose felt was in line, and then: "nooksmear," which she felt was not.

Terezi sighed at the insult, and explained: "Somebody stole Pyralspite."

"What, that actually happened? I thought that was your usual raving!" Karkat held his ground.

"'Usual', huh?" Terezi said, eyes lowered behind her glasses.

"Yeah, 'usual! You're like a baby screechraptor calling out for attention. Have you ever heard yourself? And I might not be able to keep you from shouting into everyone's ears but if you think you're going to hijack the lab, you've got another thing coming." Karkat jabbed her in the collarbone with a finger and Terezi slapped his hand away, hard, the sound of bone on bone between the two knobby teens audible enough for Rose to hear. Karkat shook out his hand. "Fuck, how'd you lose your stupid lusus-doll anyways, huh? I thought you'd be more careful with that one."

Lusus-doll? "...Oh." Rose found herself isolated in revelation, left only with Gamzee, who did not at exactly seem like the best ear for her conclusions. Terezi told me about how she used to read and talk with her lusus. If that doll actually represented her lusus for her... Rose hadn't thought about it before, what with Terezi's propensity to overplay, but there was a chance that, under it all, she might actually be upset. Rose was not sure what to do with this information, or if it made things better or worse.

For the moment, Terezi was not quite showing either. Sure, she side-eyed Karkat and the emotional blow had been telling, but an idea got into her head, and her smile returned. "Karkat, I wasn't planning on taking over the lab out from under you, you know! After all, you and John are in charge here."

"Oh, here we go!" Karkat said, and he beckoned with his hand. "Lay on the flattery, sister, my shame globes are ready."

"Someone did just steal somebody else's property on your watch, Karkat," Terezi added.

"We were sort of both in the basement," John piped up. "So it wasn't either of our watches!"

"And whose fault is that? Aha!" Terezi got in her first dramatic finger point, and looked like she was glad to have it out of her system.
Karkat, however, had run out of patience. Stepping closer to Terezi against what would have been Rose's good advice, he whispered to her: "It wasn't stolen because there's no reason anyone here would want to take it!" Rose agreed, but knew better than to say it like that. "You lost it and we both know it, you megalomaniacal, disorganized clusterfuck!"

"No, no one had any reason to steal it…" Terezi admitted. "…unless they're my enemy." Karkat grunted. "I'll make it worth your while," she offered instead. "If you're so sure my Pyralspite wasn't stolen, why not prove it… IN COURT?"

"Oh… dear… sweet Troll Morgan Freeman, we've lost her." Karkat talked loud and slow; "Terezi!" he called. "This is going to hurt when you realize you forgot. And then? I'm going to laugh. But Troll courts do not work that way. Nobody stands up against the prosecutor, remember? I blame the Humans," Karkat said to John. "I really do. It's sad."

Terezi reached out with her cane and hooked Karkat on the shoulder by the grip. He swatted it away much as she had his arm, but she was not perturbed. "IT DO3S 1F TH3 P3RSON 4G41NST ME IS B3H1ND TH3 B3NCH"

"…Wait a minute," Karkat lowered his eyes. "Are you trying to draw me into your manic fantasy here? Because that doesn't make any sense. What do I get out of this?"

Terezi played insulted. "I figured you'd be into it!"

"Why in this tin-canned claustrophobic hell would I want to play one of your games?" Karkat demanded.

"I dunno," Eridan said, just behind him. "Sort of sounds like what you two would've done on a first date."

Karkat steamed up, but before he could let Eridan have it, Terezi interrupted. "So whaddya say, Karkat?" she asked. "We've just got to fill this out," she said, passing Karkat another of the strips of paper like she had given Rose. He side-eyed it, and then held it up, like Rose had come to expect from someone using their modus. A glowing light appeared around his hand, and from it popped a dozen cartoon bees, which came to collect the sheet.

"How're they treating you, KK?" Sollux asked, without even looking up.

"Like a lowblooded temp due to be culled next perigree, so they've just got to wait me out." As Karkat grumbled, the bees flew into a large rectangular hive that appeared from nowhere, and they filed the paper among it. Rose had to admit they were quite slow about it. In between the layers of the hive, Rose could spot a half dozen things sticking through, jammed in half-heartedly and left behind, including a rumbled-up shirt and some half-eaten sandwich, all drenched in purple honey. The whole hive disappeared a few months later.

Karkat then pointed down at the ground, just behind the couch. "Court starts in an hour, right here."

"Of course, Your Tyranny," Terezi said, and chuckled. "So, Karkat. Where were you?"

"I was in the cafeteria with the rest of the chumps," Karkat said, but "ah!" he added when Sollux seemed about to speak up. "Yes, yes I did leave. I was in the pantry, alchemizing a new remote for the shit DVD player. Which, as you will recall, would have worked just as well if I had thrown it at the 'Power' button. Then I come out and bam!, Gamzee's there saying he's done the meal. Fucking miracles." Terezi seemed satisfied with that.

"So are we doing this?" Rose asked her Holmes.
"Oh, we're doing this," Terezi said, not breaking her face-off with Karkat.

"Okay," Rose said, stepping forward to speak to the crowd. "Look, I know we're all in favour of some good-natured nonsense from time to time, but I don't want to be dragged around the room any more than any of you want to be questioned. Did anyone actually see Terezi's doll: specifically yesterday?"

The answers Rose got were the sort she perhaps should have expected.

"Nah."

"I HAVEN'T REALLY SEEN IT SINCE I WAS ON LOTAF, rEALLY,"

"yeah, it wa2 over at the couch, wa2n't it?"

"Im Fairly Certain I Saw It On A Table In The Cafeteria"

"of course saw wwith its big red eyes staring straight through to my heart. fuck."

"Was it white-white or was it more of a white-green?"

"I'll nev8r tell! Never! Neverrrrrrr!"

"Tsk," Terezi said, as she hooked Rose's shoulder with her dragon-cane. "Witnesses. You'll learn, dear Watson, that they perform much better under a regimen of interrogation, evidence, and drubbings."

"Sweet," Gamzee said, and he followed after Terezi as she walked toward Jade, Kanaya and Nepeta, who had joined them on the couch.

"No drubbings!" Rose ordered before they got too far ahead.

"Some drubbings!" Terezi said, presumably as compromise.

"Fifty-eight minutes of drubbings," Karkat muttered.

Rose stopped to level with him. "You know, if I didn't know any better, I'd think you were an idiot, egging her on."

"You and me both, sister," Karkat said.

"Instead, you're an idiot letting yourself be egged on," Rose finished. Karkat raised an eyebrow. "Very interesting," Rose observed, and then followed after others, leaving Karkat's scowl and barked reprisal behind.

As Rose approached the couch, she found Terezi overlooking Team Green and not actually asking them any questions. By the looks of things, they had accepted the arrangement as well, and were back to work on their computers. Nepeta had her tablet out and was doodling Karkat with a tiny gavel and a powdered wig. The Squiddles had been turned off.

Jade glanced down at Nepeta's pad. "You gonna leave us to go roleplay, Nepeta?"

Nepeta squinted at her drawing as she did some detail work. "Hmm… no," she said, and that was that. Jade met Rose's eyes in confusion, having clearly never seen Nepeta reject a chance to roleplay at all, never mind so fast, but Rose felt she understood. She could not help but note how Nepeta kept her head down around Terezi, and Terezi returned her the same favour, each acting as though the
other did not exist. It was much the same way Terezi had been treating Dave the few times Rose had seen her in the past few days. If Terezi and Karkat had not been so entrenched and naturally confrontational, Rose imagined the relationship might have slipped quietly onto the same rails. Upset at the thought, Rose side-eyed Terezi, and noticed that she seemed to be listening intently to the crowd as it clued in that it was time to disperse. Terezi kept still, at least until Vriska started to move.

Rose looked her directly in the eyes. "No," she insisted.

"Why not?" Terezi said with a chuckle. "It's like I told Karkat. Who'd have stolen my doll except someone who hates me?"

Rose crossed her arms. "I'm not going to waste time here if this is just about is you trying to stick your cane up Vriska's nose."

"H4H4H4H4! V1V1D, but no. I'm not going to indulge your ashen crush on Vriska, Rose. Gamzee, you do it."

"Indulge Rose's ashen crush on Vriska?" he asked.

"My what?" Rose glared after Terezi. "No."

"No," Terezi instructed Gamzee. "Stick my cane up her nose." She held it up to him. Vriska, over hearing, changed her path from her own computer to the one that would normally be Terezi's, perhaps because it was furthest away.

Rose grabbed Gamzee's arm to stop him from taking the cane. He stared down at her hand in confusion. "Holmes, old chum," he said to Terezi. "I think Watson… uh… I think I just stopped myself."

Rose glared after Terezi as Gamzee tugged his hand. Seeing her cane was not needed, Terezi rapped it against the back of the couch-back. "Knock-knock, Miss Maryam."

"Oh, detectimpaler, I didn't see you there," Kanaya said, and she mimed opening a door in the couch. "Come in. Don't mind my purrbeast. She'll only attack on command." Nepeta giggled, though she kept her head down.

Terezi gestured to Rose, leading her to ask the first questions. "So, uh, Miss Maryam…" Rose said. "Where were you between the hours of… uh… Hurricane Egbert and Dinner o'clock?"

"I see you use different terms down at the butchery-precinct, patrolthug," Kanaya said, all without looking up from her screen, though she smiled. "I was about."

"About?" Terezi sniffed the air as if for the stank of deceit. "Sounds awfully suspicious to me."

"If you're asking for my alibi: Gamzee was with me. We were in dark-lit back chambers, doing unspeakable things together involving knives that I'm sure the precinct would be glad to know about, but I will never admit," Kanaya said.

"She was washing my dishes, yo," Gamzee explained, having calmed down in Rose's grip, though she did not immediately release him. "Roasting pans, utensils, I guess I make a bit of a mess." He laughed. Kanaya shuddered. "Don't know what I'd have done without her."

"Kanaya…" Nepeta said from where she lay, across the two girls. "I don't know how to tell you this, but you could just alchemize new pots and pans, you know."
Kanaya's hand, mid-way to a virtual window, froze in place and then trembled with otherwise neatly contained rage. "Yes. Yes, I'm aware of our official resource-wasting policies," she said through gritted teeth. "I Decided It Would Be A Better Way To Spend Our Resources If I Countered All Of Gamzee's Previous Messes As He Cooked The Cluckbeast. Messes stretching back weeks, might I add. You're Welcome"

"Aha!" cried Terezi. "Aid! Hatred! Tidy privacy! An affair for the books. I just knew you were a lady killer, Stupid Watson," Terezi said to Gamzee.

"What did I do?" he asked.

Terezi did not necessarily answer him. "We've gone from no drama to three quadrants in one! Shameful! Regular Watson, write all this down." She then laid her hand gently on Rose's shoulder, and whispered: "Between your tears."

Rose raised an eyebrow, but put an X next to Kanaya's name. Rose considered hitting Karkat as well, since Kanaya would have seen him go to the alchemiter, but noted that she had to find one of the "chumps" from the cafeteria that made up the rest of his alibi. This was harder work than she had expected. As Rose double-checked her marks, she could not help but be reminded of Vriska, still ominously unchecked. Rose figured it would be best if she could keep the ex-Scourge Sisters apart for the rest of the evening, and if she could head things off, she might even be able to prevent Terezi doing any damage later.

"Well this is all too much drama for me," Rose said. "I'll continue the investigation somewhere that isn't polluted with the stink of treachery, I think."

"I regret nothing!" Kanaya called back in monotone.

Rose took a full step away before the next caused her to fall flat on her face. Terezi unhooked her dragon cane grip from behind Rose's ankle and stepped up to her side, sliding down the cane to rest just above her face and leer down.

"I know what you're doing, Rose," she said. "And you're going to prove it by tripping me," Rose observed, rubbing the sore palms of her hands.

"Y3S" she said, and smiled. It was indeed most of what Rose could see from her, as she blocked off the light, leaving her a silhouette of red glasses and teeth. "You're trying to keep me away from Vriska. You're looking out for your own." Terezi pointed to the far corner, where Vriska was sitting not far from Eridan, who hovered nearby. Terezi's point was well received.

"If this is about Eridan's poorly-planned auspistice idea—" Rose started. "Not really," Terezi muttered, her voice a low cackle when she talked softly, just by nature. "But look at it this way. You don't like Vriska, right?" Rose could think of quite a few things she didn't like, but wasn't going to walk into that trap. Terezi nodded: "Right, but not enough to mediate her. Oh no. Well: I don't like her either, even worse! But not enough to make a move there, either. John says you don't like Eridan," Terezi added then, matter-of-factly.

"I… John?" Rose looked for her friend among the crowd, and found him having settled in on Karkat's computer next to Vriska, chatting happily with her and Eridan.

Terezi put on an air of innocence. "That's what he said you said! Even got rid of Eridan with Tavros." Terezi tightened her grip about her staff. "Good move, Rose. Very good." Rose rolled her eyes and then tried to get to her feet, but Terezi clapped a hand on her shoulder once Rose level with
her. "So look at us, Rose. Two girls that don't like Vriska, but don't hate her... right? Oh, no, not at all. But if she took my lusus-doll?" Terezi actually growled to say "doll", and Rose could not help but feel that if she were much older, the word would have echoed like it did from the moulting Trolls. "Well, then!" Terezi pulled her sword half an inch from its sheath. "...I think I might more than 'not like' her."

"Terezi, if you dare attack someone else in this lab..." Rose said, and she reached out to put the sword away. But to her surprise, Terezi grinned wide and put the sword away on her own.

"Oh, no," Terezi said. "Not ashen for Eridan at all." Terezi pushed Rose's hands back so that she could stand. Rose followed. "Sorry, Rose," Terezi said, "but if you're going to try to mediate me from the person who stole my doll? Platonically or otherwise?" she added, before Rose could comment. "You're going to need good evidence. So you still want to interrogate Vriska? There's a lot riding on it!" She then reached up and signed to her eyes, then her nose, and then jabbed Rose with the same finger. I'm smelling you. Cute.

"Like I could get rid of you," Rose muttered as she decided that was her cue to leave. She cast glances over her shoulder as she went, and found Terezi tracking her every move. Finally she gave in and approached Vriska, who was fighting with Eridan, as per usual. Tavros stood nearby.

"What's going on, Vriska?" Rose interrupted.

Vriska did not look happy to see her, but at least this time it didn't seem personal. Given the circumstances, Rose was glad for that. "Oh, nothing," she said. "Eridan's just given me a digital parasite, is all. The usual!"

"That's fuckin' slander!"

"And what's happening on the computer?" Rose asked. It was too easy, she had to take it. In the distance, Terezi laughed.

"Ah, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha," Vriska said, robotic and curt. "Funny today, are we? Terezi send you over to make a fool out of me before she shows up?"

_You're doing that well enough on your_— "Please stop lobbing me low balls," Rose said. "It's insulting to both of us."

Vriska gave Rose a gesture she had learned meant "Jam your horn up your nook." John, who was still overlooking the fight, gave Rose a sympathy wince.

Rose brushed them both off with a wave of her hand. "Eridan, how do you manage to get a virus onto an alien, in-game computer?"

"I'm telling you, I didn't!" he protested. "Okay: I was here last night. I don't have a computer of my own, you'll remember pretty well, I bet!"

"Alchemize your own!" Vriska and Rose answered together. John was less terse with him but had the same advice.

"It's too much resources!" he complained. "I'm not going to waste everyone's hard-earned grist just because you all think we need twelve supercomputers instead of eleven."

"But we'll have the grist back in a few hours!" John pointed out, referring to Equius and Sollux's grist generator in the basement.
"But what if we need it first?" he complained. "Damn waste, is what it is. You've all gotta take a page outta me and Kan's book, that's what you've gotta do."

"Look," Rose said, more to cut him off than anything. "This discussion on in-game economy is just as fascinating as it is a waste of everyone's time." She pulled out the sheet of paper. "Just tell me where you were yesterday after John started cleaning."

"Smuggling viruses," Vriska muttered.

"Harpy," Eridan whispered back, before Tavros squeezed his hand and shut him up tight and violet.

"Let's start with you, Vriska," Rose said, irritated.

"What, do I have to justify myself to the angry walking-stick now?" Vriska asked.

"Did you steal her doll?" Rose asked.

"No."

"Do you realize she's going to hit you for it if she doesn't find another suspect?" Rose asked next.

Vriska held up a fist and flicked out her thumb – one of the Flourite Octet popped into existence was flicked into the air. "Let's see her reach me first."

Rose narrowed her eyes at Vriska, and then flipped the sheet of paper to write on the back. "Subject actually wants to engage hate-rival. Perhaps not as platonic as I thought. Quadrant still fascinating; terrifying; stupid."

Vriska levelled her die at Rose's head. Rose was not honestly sure if it could work on its own but wasn't looking forward to finding out. "What'd you just say?"

"Oh, nothing," Rose said. "So what is your alibi?"

"For when? John started cleaning... when? I wasn't there, remember? And when till?" Vriska asked. "Oh, don't look surprised, I know how she works."

"It went until just before the meal," Rose said. "About an hour."

"Fuck, I was barely at dinner at all," Vriska said, looking relieved by how easy this was going to go. "I mean, I was going to make dinner at my kitchen," she clarified. Rose knew what she meant; each of the expansive sectors had their own kitchen, with the Humans' just outside their rooms. Gamzee's was just closest and largest. But with no witnesses... "But then Eridan trolled me and I figured... why not?"

"You were still at your computer?" Rose asked Eridan.

"Well not the whole time, but yeah, and I was getting winged with fuckin' chairs and shit," he said, rubbing his head.

John piped out about then. "That only happened once!" To Rose, he explained: "Jade did tell me to leave her stuff alone and he was right here."

"It's not like people let me on their computers all the time," Eridan complained. "Now that Ter's back, I'm never gonna see one again, I bet."

"Aw, you can use mine," Tavros offered.
Eridan, apparently still easily surprised by honest and willing offers from a caring matesprit, was almost wide-eyed. Vriska gagged.

"You said you left," Rose confirmed with Eridan. "Where did you go?"

"Just for a minute," Eridan admitted. "Jerky run," he explained. "From the old fridge, just behind the counters in the caf?" To explain, he held up a hand, and to Rose's surprise, a bottle leapt out of nowhere and into his grip. Like a ship in that bottle, Rose could make out three remaining strips of something-beast-jerky ready for consumption. Eridan smashed the bottle, and Rose watched the glass disintegrate as he took out the strips, offering one to Tavros, one for himself, and a third to Rose, which she refused. Not humouring the idea of giving it to Vriska for a moment, he called out a new bottle, which snapped into existence around the jerky with almost louder glass noises than the original broken bottle. It then vanished back into Eridan's inventory. "After that, I turn around and find you all in there with Gamzee, talking about how dinner's done and I don't need a snack." He flourished his piece of jerky like a wand. "So here we are."

"And on the way, he stole the dragon!" Vriska cut in. "Even though he has no reason to do it and it's of no value to anyone! It makes perfect sense!"

"I'm not done with you," Rose said. "When did you get to the cafeteria?"

Vriska shrugged. "Eight minutes in?"

"So what you're saying is… you don't know," Rose guessed. Vriska scowled, but behind her, John nodded his head. Rose sighed and set about erasing the half of an X she had already marked down. "That wouldn't count even if I didn't have a shark-lawyer sniffing down my neck. Is that really all you have?"

"You don't like my alibi?" Vriska said. She then made a not exactly polite suggestion of what Rose could do with it.

"Right," Rose sighed. "John, can I bother you?" she asked, and led him toward Jade's corner office.

"Why the privacy?" he asked at a whisper.

"Because of what I'm going to ask, as much for my health as my reputation," Rose clarified, indicating Terezi. Rose could not quite hear Jade and Nepeta's conversation from this side of the room, and though her co-Seer was closer than that, she would have to hope it was far enough. "You were talking to Vriska last night, after the movie."

"Oh," John said, and his face fell, which Rose did not take as a good sign. "Yeah, she was… she was pissed. We went to her room, it's actually, like, right over there," John said, pointing to the disused door on the west wall. "It wasn't easy to get much out of her. Vriska's sort of like…" he searched for words, and then selected: "she's gotta blow off steam before she'll tell you what's going on. Well, if she doesn't try to fix it herself, first."

"Damn," Rose said. "I'm worried Terezi might… do something, and if Vriska isn't as calm as possible, there could be trouble."

"Is she serious about this?" John asked.

"I think she might be," Rose admitted. "But it's hard to tell with her, too. I mean, I don't actually know her like I do Kanaya or you know Vriska." Rose sighed. "…Actually, she said she was talking to you yesterday. That honestly makes us about even: one conversation each out-of-game."
"Well, you've been Watson for a little while," John said as a joke. "But yeah. She was actually asking about you."

"I was afraid of that," Rose admitted. "Why?"

"Well…" John thought about it. "First I tried to tell her about Bill Paxton, and his literal rise to stardom in *Apollo 13.*" And then he chuckled.

"Please, spare me," Rose said. She and John were huddled close together for silence and it was clear Terezi was growing suspicious. She started to make her way to the other side of the room, but was interrupted by Karkat. "Just cut to it."

"She was asking about you rejecting Eridan and Vriska, I think? I mean, she was going about it really cryptically but I figured that's pretty much how she's always been." John did not even seem to remember how that kind of behaviour had gotten an alternate self of his killed. "Then she was just asking some questions about you. Asked Jade some too, when she showed up just before dinner to set up cushions. I don't know what Terezi was getting at, but I think…" John noticed at the same time as Rose that Terezi had broken from Karkat. "I think she wanted to know why you talked to her after she broke up with Dave."

"Huh? But… why?" Rose dropped the level of her voice. "I don't know, she was upset!"

"I know!" John agreed. "But I think…" Terezi was too close now, but Vriska provided a speaking opportunity when she decided to shout insults at her. "I don't think the Trolls are used to people caring about them for no reason like that? Even a little. I mean, no reason as far as Trolls go?"

"It… it wasn't for no reason, I just didn't want her to…" But Rose followed his point. And just in time, too, as Terezi once again clapped an arm on her shoulder. Terezi's new insistence on physical contact was really getting annoying fast.

"I figured," she said, in a low voice, "that if you were going so far to reach out to me… I could stand to learn a few things about you." Rose looked up at her, confused. "After all, what has not understanding Humans gotten me so far?" She tapped her cane twice, as if to remind Rose what was inside it, and more importantly, how she had come by it.

And then she said: "We're done," and nothing could have sounded more ominous. "I just told Karkat. The trial starts as soon as he's ready."

"But…" John looked to Karkat, who was already shouting directions to the others to begin moving furniture. "But it's only been ten minutes."

"John," Terezi said, "that's because you're just not used to working with a master detective, and her useful," she patted down hard on Rose's shoulder again, "useful assistant. Watson!" she said with one last, hard pat. "Come on. We approach… TH3 F1N4L CURT41N!" Terezi took a deep breath, refreshed. "And who knows what we'll find behind it? H3H3H3H3H4" Before Rose could speak up again, Terezi interrupted: "Me, Rose. The answer is 'victorious me.' But hey," she said, tapping her cane to her temple, "you can be victorious too! Ask a few more question and you'll know everything I do by now! Think it oooooooover!" Rose hoped, dearly, that that drawn-out vowel wasn't a hint. "Take your time! Think it through. We won't start unless you're ready, but once you're past the break, the curtain will rise and the show… W1LL 3ND"

Rose was not in the mood for those theatrics. Terezi might want to close the case, but Rose was not going to give up without a fight. She got to her feet and interviewed the others as best she could, but got little out of them.
"What can you tell me about Eridan?" Rose asked at one point. "He says he had to go get some jerky? This is his alibi. 'Jerky.' It sounds even stupider now that I'm saying it."

"Well, we weren't exactly making eye contact," Sollux said. "Especially FF. We were in the hallway about then, going to see if John was done. KK figured there was no point, so he bailed on us to fuck up some electronics, which was good because if he had come with us, Ampora would have stuck around to talk to him. Not that he didn't try to have this incredibly awkward conversation with us. You and Nitram showed up right about then, and then Gamzee and we went in to eat. I think Ampora was still by the old fridge by then, so that's where he must have gone?"

"You were in the cafeteria most of the hour," Rose said, as much to confirm as anything. He nodded. "Even if you weren't watching the dragon itself, would you say it was possible for Gamzee to steal it at any point?" Rose asked.

"No, definitely not," Sollux confirmed at last. "He's a screwball but he goes from one of his tangles to another in straight lines."

"Could Feferi and Karkat back you up on that?"

"Sure," he said, and got Feferi to do so over Trollian. As he did, he laughed. "Ehehehehe, you just don't get in Gamzee's way when he's working, he's all business. I'm glad he never turned out like a real Subjugglator." Soon, Rose had Feferi's confirmation, and she marked Gamzee off on her sheet.

As Rose worked, the room began to transform under Karkat's careful direction, from computer lab to computer lab hastily arranged into the shape of a courtroom. Most of the Trolls lifted or cleaned, while Gamzee did the odd bit of serious reconstruction, strutting about, whistling *I've Been Working on the Railroad* and hefting a meat tenderizer. Sure enough, Rose made sure not to get in his way while he was working. Despite Rose's frantic efforts, she was soon called in by Karkat for Terezi's final curtain. Throughout it all, Terezi stayed as she was by Jade's office, taking in the whole scene as the others brought her stage to life before her.

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**DAY 45, HOUR 9**
**ECTOBIology LABORATORY**
**COURTROOM NO. 1**

Rose was impressed. The court had been cleaned and neatly arranged, with the audience all sitting in chairs in a gallery to one side; before them, an area had been prepared for Terezi and her team with tape, and when instructed/grabbed, Rose joined her there. Karkat had even prepared a place opposite the prosecutor for "the guilty," as the Trolls put it, though it remained unoccupied. Rose was not sure who was more responsible for the outright *production* the whole trial was becoming: Terezi, Karkat, or everyone else, who wanted to watch a show. As the others had worked, Dave and Aradia had arrived, the latter somewhat scorched, the former looking too peppy and clean to have been anything but recently healed. John filled them in fast, and Dave had no more than waved to Rose before he left. Aradia stayed.

Soon they were ready. Karkat presided standing against the back of the couch, with the entire court laid out before him and the prosecutor to his right, grinning like an idiot. John approached the bench informally before things began.
"Do you really think this is such a good idea?" he asked Karkat, as he gave him one of his smaller hammers for a gavel. Rose had provided her former doorstop for him to use as a sound block. "I mean, if it were me, I wouldn't even know what to say to the person who did it!"

"What's to say?" Karkat replied. "They give back Terezi's precious lusus-doll, say they're sorry, and we leave them alone because she'll probably hit them with her cane before the week's out and she might as well do it now. Everything comes up even."

Terezi made her opening statement, and made absolutely sure that everyone in the room knew exactly what had happened and when, and reminded them of what had been happening at the time. At some point during her speech, Terezi switched her modus. The new one showed off the item she was talking about above in a hologram just before her, which was irritating as she paced. It showed things that were in her inventory, like the scalemates she still had on-hand, but also things that weren't, like Pyralspite or a copy of Twister; and even things that never could be in her inventory, like a shot of the scene of the crime. It never seemed to retrieve much of anything, but it made for good theatre, if petty theft in any way qualified as a basis for good theatre, however beloved the stolen item.

"And as I said to my assistant…" Terezi said, indicating Rose, "…whoever does not have an alibi for that time… is the criminal."

"Uh-huh." They were Karkat's first words since the start of the trial. He looked far less pleased by the goings on than every other person in the lab. "And with that completely redundant introduction behind us, how about you just lay it out and let us get this over with?"

"I would be happy to, Your Tyranny." She held a hand out palm-up toward Karkat and said: "Take that." Her modus responded and slipped out Rose's sheet of paper, which lofted gently into Karkat's hand. "What you see there is my assistant's take on the stories we heard during our investigation."

Karkat scanned the sheet, and then glared at Terezi, Rose and Gamzee with his finger up his nose to say: "This sheet is half blank!"

Terezi gasped. "Rose!"

"Oh, yes, very surprising," Rose said, "considering you took it from me and I told you the investigation wasn't finished."

Terezi continued to click her tongue, and went over to Karkat to retrieve the sheet. "Watson, Watson," she said to Rose. "Let me fill this in, shall I?"

"Sure," Karkat said, "I don't find improvised bullshit any more a waste of my time than rehearsed."

Terezi smiled to him. "Now, let's see. My companions and I all confirmed our alibis when we started, like good Troll law enforcers," she said with a nod to Rose. "I was with John."

"Uh-huh!" John said from the gallery.

"…Rose was with Tavros, so that's both."

"That is, also correct,"

"And Gamzee, of course, was making our delicious cluckbeast in grubsauce, and the fact that it's done and he didn't walk off should be proof enough for anyone, I think?" Karkat waved that through, in spite of Rose's protests. "The rest of this sheet is pretty simple. Your Tyranny is marked off, very good. Feferi and Sollux were with Karkat, Rose or Tavros at any given moment. And that's
"where my Watson cuts off." More tongue clicking. "You do any better there, Gamzee?"

"I'm pretty sure that, like, I didn't do it?" Gamzee said.

"The one person I didn't think could confirm that," Terezi muttered, and continued before Gamzee could catch on. "But true all the same. But come on, Rose. Pencil?" she asked Rose, as it was apparent she could not take things out of her sylladex at her leisure. Rose passed one over. "For starters, Dave and Aradia weren't around all day. Busy as ever," she said, and said no more in front of the crowd, though Karkat looked primed to spring if she had. It must have been news to him that she knew, but her choice of words made it obvious for all that shared in the Time Conspiracy: even Aradia looked up in what might have been surprise.

"Now as I recall," Terezi said, her eyes firm on the paper, "Equius went off to talk to Aradia and didn't return either. She checked him off, and Rose felt kind of silly for not remembering immediately. Terezi rubbed it in with her next point. "Nepeta went with him, but she didn't come back until we were eating our meal. Isn't that right?"

That seemed to be an inquiry, so Nepeta said: "You learn to chew fast in the wild before something bigger comes along."

"Bigger or craftier," Terezi quipped. "Let's see. Scarlett was out, Brunette was ogling Mustard in the cafeteria..."

"THAT IS, CORRECT, BUT ALSO MALICIOUS SLANDER, AT THE SAME TIME,"

"...Grey's good, Green was late, Laurel was doing dishes, Meadow-Brook innocent and hunting... Peacock." Terezi turned slowly toward Vriska, who braced herself in challenge.

Karkat sighed. "And we come to our predictable twist."

"...who didn't do it!" Rose was as surprised to hear herself speak as anyone, yet she continued, searching her memory for the thorn sticking in her conscience. "...Because she has the best witness of all. You, Terezi." Rose was not sure how to read Terezi's face. At the moment, the difference between a grin and a sneer could be the difference between innocence and open violence, perhaps directed at Rose this time. "She had to have come into the computer lab to get to the kitchen, because sectors on this floor only connect to this room. Vriska's is right over there, right? That means it's on this floor." She pointed to the adjoining door, and John nodded.

"You were talking to John," Rose continued to Terezi, "and you said that after that, you went straight to dinner. You never mentioned Vriska, and while that doesn't mean you didn't see her, I bet you didn't! You were having a personal conversation with John. If Vriska had come out at any point during that conversation, you would have slammed shut like a clam... uh... beast." In the distance, Feferi wobbled her hand to say "sort of." "...My point is, she didn't go past you, so she must have come out of her room after you were done your talk: at the start of dinner."

Terezi walked up to Rose and patted her on the cheek. "My Watson's all growing into her boots, isn't she?"

"You knew?" Vriska said from the gallery.

"Well yeah!" Terezi said. "Like she said: I was right there."

"So why all this glaring at me?"

Terezi threw up her hands. "So I could say 'but it wasn't her Aha!' 4ND 3V3RYON3 1S
"I know I am," Vriska said.

"Gallant to the end, Serket," Rose replied, "you're welcome."

"Hey! Hey!" Karkat slammed his gavel. "Move it on!"

"Right, right," Terezi said. "Peacock's good, Azure in the basement, Plum in the kitchen, Orchid…" Terezi tapped the sheet. "Eridan was in the lab most of the time, but also went to the cafeteria. The only witnesses at that time were in the entrance hall… where you can't see the table where I left the dragon! No alibi!" Terezi pointed at him dramatically with her pencil, and Eridan flinched, but she backed off almost at once. "…but he also didn't do it. Dinner started right after, and he wasn't caught holding it. It's not hidden in the cafeteria, we've searched it, and there was enough room in the fridge for Gamzee to pack it full of new things!"

Karkat shrugged. "What about his modus?"

"His modus?" Terezi asked. "Eridan: jerky," she requested, holding out her hand. Eridan was confused, but obliged, summoning the bottle and smashing it. He handed over the strip of meat.

"When Eridan went to the fridge, and no one could see him, Rose and Tavros had just joined Sollux and Feferi. And Rose, I know, has a very special talent, don't you Rose?" Rose was not sure what she meant, but Terezi returned the jerky to Eridan. "Put it back," she ordered, and Eridan held up the jerky until a bottle snapped into existence around it, once more with the awful clash of glass.

"Rose?" Terezi asked. "You didn't see Eridan steal my dragon into his modus. Did you hear it?"

Rose grinned in surprise. "No ma'am!"

Terezi smiled back and marked off Eridan on her sheet. "Now… Lavender was with Mustard in the cafeteria like I just said, Periwinkle was talking movies in the lab, Rose is clean, Cardinal flew away…"

"I admit, it was me!" Jade shouted. "I'm an out of control, sticky-fingered plushie stealer! And I would have gotten away with it, too, if it wasn't for these darn kids and their goat!"

"Oh, sit down!" Terezi complained. "You were fetching pillows and blankets, and you spent the rest of the time arranging them."

"Well yeah," Jade said. "But seriously, Terezi. I'm sorry your dragon's missing, but obviously no one stole it. You just accounted for everyone!"

"No way, sis." It was Gamzee. He shook his head gravely to Jade. "My legal pal ain't half done. I know you can't hear it, but I'm a motherfucking Bard of… uh… something…" Actually, now that she thought of it, Rose had never heard what Gamzee's element was. He rapped his forehead. "My point is: I'M OnE WiTh wIcKeD RhYtHm, YoU DiG? And something just got mad tense up in here." Rose could dig, the game had shifted over to a Suspense theme. "But that just makes me feel… you know? Like she's gonna turn it all about."

"Ooh," said Terezi, her gleaming teeth more like the hunter than the hunted. "Nice choice of words"

"He's right," said Karkat, begrudging. "She said the list was based on everyone's stories. She never said the stories were true. This is where she swings her stupid stick around and accuses anyone and everyone of being a liar."
Terezi smiled, and in the gallery, Sollux spoke up to say, "You know, KK, you're just proving Ampora's point about the first date thing, with you knowing exactly how this is supposed to go."

Karkat waved his gavel. "The witness will shut up before I trepan him with his candy-corn crown. Prosecutor: if you waste my time…"

"Mate in two, Your Tyranny," Terezi promised. She held up a hand, and again whispered: "Take that."

An MP3 player of sorts, built with a hand grip, appeared in Terezi's hand. Terezi pressed the buttons on the grip blind, and the room soon filled with multiple vocal tracks. Rose heard Jade's voice, her own, Gamzee's and Terezi's as well, and more. Terezi had been taping every single one of their interrogations, and was now playing them all at once, on top of one another.

"…When I left the cafeteria, Pyralspite was still here…"

"Don't mind my purrbeast…"

"…make a fool out of me before she shows up?"

Rose and the others listened to the jumble, confused and unsure as to what Terezi was even trying to accomplish. Terezi turned to Rose. "Did you catch it?" Rose shook her head. Terezi pressed a few buttons, and the clips played again. Terezi set both of her hands, the recorder included, on the haft of her cane.

"I don't have a computer of my own…"

"You and Nitram showed up right about then…"

"I was in the pantry, alchemizing a new remote…"

"I Decided It Would Be A Better Way To Spend Our Resources If I Countered All Of Gamzee's Previous Messes As He Cooked The Cluckbeast"

And then Terezi moved. Terezi swept up her cane toward the gallery, and shouted "OBJ3CT1ON" and she had so dearly been waiting to say. From her sylladex, a collection of hologram pots and pans shot out, weaponized, and the crowd ducked them as they collided harmlessly with the wall. When everyone was standing back where they had begun, however warily, Terezi's cane remained levelled at Kanaya.

"What… the… hell!" Kanaya protested.

"Oh, c'mon!" Terezi laughed. "Imagine if they had been evidence I actually had on me! Imagine if they had been real!"

"I was!" Kanaya said. Her fingers clutched about a nickel apart, ready to grasp a tube of lipstick if necessary.

"Miss Maryam," Terezi said, calm as ever. "I think all we have here is a simple misunderstanding."

"Was it the part where you thought she was a bullseye?" Rose complained from behind.

"No, that was on purpose," Terezi confirmed. The lipstick came out, Terezi ignored it. "You said you countered 'all of Gamzee's previous messes while he cooked the chicken.'"

Kanaya brushed herself off. The lipstick remained in hand. "That's right…?"
“So you didn’t clean up any of the dishes from the meal itself?”

Kanaya took to examining one of the holograms that had been flung at her. “…Yes. That’s correct.”

“Then why are there only dishes in the cafeteria kitchen for the sauce?” Terezi shrugged. “Because I’d swear we ate cluckbeast last night…”

“Ah!” Kanaya dropped the hologram in her surprise. “But… I…”

Karkat stood up. “Terezi, are you accusing Kanaya of stealing your doll because there’s not enough poultry nearby?”

“Stealing? No!” Terezi shook her head. “What part of ‘Mate in two’ don’t you understand? This just changes something important.”

Kanaya did not seem particularly convinced as she squirmed in place, and Karkat pressed his point. “So what? What does it change? The time? Their alibi?”

“Her location, Your Tyranny. I think…” Terezi smiled up at Kanaya, which Rose did not think would reassure anyone. “…I really do think that we’ve had a little miscommunication.” She reached up and tapped Kanaya on the nose with each syllable of “miscommunication.” Speaking again to the crowd, but looking straight into Kanaya’s eyes, she said: “I believe you told us that you were with Gamzee in the kitchen, is that right?”

“Y-Yes….” Kanaya stammered, hackles up.

“…Which one?”

Kanaya was taken aback. “Which…”

Exactly.” Terezi turned back to Karkat over her shoulder. “Because there are TW3LV3. One in each sector. The one in Gamzee’s is just biggest and closest.”

“Well, we were in my room, of course,” Kanaya said. “I’m not even sure the ovens down here work. Gamzee met me just after John started cleaning and I offered to let him roast the chicken in my room. I thought it was obvious we weren’t in the main kitchen, the way he kept leaving it!”

“Gamzee was raiding Karkat’s for spices,” Rose said, to explain the confusion.

“Hey!” Karkat complained, but this was neither the time nor the place.

“It does explain a lot, though,” Rose said. “Considering you went to the trouble of cleaning the pots and pans,” Rose added. Kanaya nodded. “After all…”

“…why clean what someone else is just going to replace after the very next meal I’m not watching like a hawk?” Kanaya finished. “But my pots are still mine.”

Terezi clicked her tongue at Gamzee. “Should have told us, Nigel.”

Gamzee frowned. “Well, I could’a, but Watson there said it wasn’t… what’s the word? Relevant? Because it wasn’t in the cafeteria.”

“Quite right!” Terezi said. “Oh, don’t be sad,” she added to Rose, who was actually more angry with herself. “It only just became relevant.”

“So what?” Karkat demanded. “All this changes is that they have an alibi… somewhere else.”
"That's right," Terezi agreed. "But remember something important…” As she spoke, she took out the pencil and sheet of paper a second time, neither of which she had carefully kept out of her inventory. She flipped the pencil around and erased something. She then took the sheet into her inventory. "Mate in one. What do you think, Karkat? I know you. You're not an idiot. Just close sometimes!"

"I think you're full of shit," he said, still having not left his post at the couch, and she approached him about as close as a prosecutor would stand before her judge. Her finale was going to be picture perfect. "But that doesn't make you wrong."

"No. No it doesn't." Terezi smiled her broad shark-grin. "It's like I told my Watsons and the court. Whoever doesn't have an alibi is the criminal… and someone's alibi was just broken."

And then, for the first time since Rose had learned the dragon doll represented Terezi's lusus, Rose tensed. Terezi would have been proud to know that with all her goading, Rose had finally realized what this was all about. For the time, Terezi's attention was focused on her play, more or less. She seemed anxious, but was grinning and focused, like she was overcoming a case of butterflies in her stomach come in the final approach. "Do you know whose alibi that is, Karkat?" She held out her hand: "Take that."

The sheet of paper once again flew softly out of Terezi's inventory, did a graceful flip, and was snagged out of the air by Karkat. While he read it at first with his usual demeanor, Rose saw as his cheeks went flush, as he, too, realized what Terezi had started. And the music changed.

"That's right, Karkat," Terezi said, her voice low. "Kanaya wasn't in the big kitchen. That means TH3 ONLY P3RSON I N TH3 L4B WHO DO3SNT H4V3 4N 4L1B1… 1S YOU"

Terezi kept her eyes on him in his sudden panic, and took in the response from the gallery only with her ears. "Here's what I think happened. John starts to clean up the lab, and on the way out, Kanaya runs into Gamzee and turns back. When you arrived, however, you found my Pyralspite, and decided… why not? But what's your modus again, Karkat?" Terezi asked. "Oh, right. The one that makes the big beehive show up. Hard to use that in a crowded room. Easy to use it in an empty room, like the cafeteria. Or the kitchen – how far can those bees fly, Karkat?" Karkat was sweating bullets. "Oh, we know you went to the alchemiter, Karkat. You had to get that remote. And you couldn't have done it after, because dinner started right then. Just in time for you to blend right into the crowd."

"You…" Karkat said. "…This trial… You set me up!" He looked about his carefully prepared court set. "This whole act… someone steals a doll to get your attention after you go hide for a week, so you out them in front of everyone?"

"Was that a confession?" Terezi smirked.

"ARRRRGH! Maybe if this whole trial is your insanity plea!" Karkat grabbed at his own hair. "What… what, was this just you going… H3Y, ROS3, L3TS SCR3W OV3R K4RK4T"

"Oh my god, you are so terrible at that."

"Oh, oh, or maybe: HeY, mOtHeRfUcKiNg lAwYeR cHiCkA, lEt's tHrOw a fUcKiNg sHoW!"

"I'm serious, you're just absolutely terrible," she said, grin as broad as ever. The game seemed to agree, as it changed off of its revelation theme. "It's aLi a8oUt tHe iNFeLtCt10N, YOU KNOW WH4T 1 M3AN? But yeah, I can really see why you think this is all about you, Karkat. I mean, besides the ego thing." When Karkat looked confused, she sighed and took a step forward. "Oh you silly, stupid boy." Ignoring his hands, which shot up for defence, she reached up through his guard to
pat him on the cheek. "Of course I could have set you up, but that wouldn't be have been funny. Now, you doing it to yourself…" And then she began to laugh and he had to step back into the couch, fists clenching and unclenching, unsure how to even take the first recovery step back onto semi-solid ground.

The prosecution took the opening and continued her tangential case. "But of course it's a scheme to you! I couldn't be chasing real justice, could I, Karkat? Noooo… how could it not be all about you? How would the world survive? With you as our big scary leader, well! Everything's been falling into place, every problem fixed up nice like it's some grub jigsaw, all on your watch." She gestured toward Tavros and Eridan. "Everything's been going so well for everyone, clearly this is just some petty little scheme of mine to hear your dulcet tones." She took a step to close the new gap between them, and leaned coquettishly towards him. "Why, you just radiate authority these days! While I've been off hiding my room, well, you've just all grown into the greatest leader Trolls and Humans have ever known, haven't you?"

She cupped her hand again on his cheek. His fists tensed as he braced himself, ready for a jab, a slap, some kind of attack, and goodness knew he looked ready with a follow-up reply. To his surprise, she leaned to his ear and spoke in a whisper: "What do you say we wrap up this little trial so you can take the prosecution to your chambers for a short… recess?"

His eyes shot wide, his face fell a mile in terror, and she felt it and broke away with echoing peals of insane laughter. "Oh my god, your face! heheh3h3…" She clutched at her sides. "...H4H4H4H4H4!" He stared agape. They all did. "That's it! That's all I needed. Of course I set you up for a big public fall! I knew it was you before you even showed up, but I didn't say it because it wouldn't have been as fun to just say it! I'm guilty. Rose! Put me in the cell next to him. I can't take it anymore!"

Karkat's expression was quite the contrast to Terezi's laughter. He watched her laugh for a while until she took a break to look up and check the damage, which was substantial. "...Don't do that," he muttered. "That's not funny."

"Why?" she said, with a dark undertone in her voice, "SOR3 M3MOR13S?"

Rose winced. "That wasn't called for," she said.

"Try me," Terezi said, still dark, and without turning from Karkat. "So, Karkat? What's the big deal?"

"This whole thing!" he complained. "How about the fact that this clearly isn't about your dragon, and you know it!"

Terezi paced away. "Oh, I know you know what this about." She glared down at him, for all he was taller than her. "It's all that's keeping you from shouting out the obvious complaints! But I knew it was you before I started, remember? Rose, what was it I said about the person who stole my doll?" Terezi turned back to the others, for the first time taking in the impact of her revelation on the whole crowd, and savouring.

"You said…" Rose stammered, trying to remember the exact wording. "...The person who stole it must have been an enemy." Karkat balked, and Rose was not sure what to say. "I-I don't know, Karkat. I mean…" His face fell. "Honestly. How many people in this Lab knew what that doll meant to Terezi? If you were trying to get her attention… you should have known not to do that."

Terezi approached Karkat another step. "But I'm glad you did. It's been a fun cap to a great week."
Karkat's thoughts were clearly all over the board, nervousness paramount. He needed time to regroup, but Rose felt that he could have done anything better in the entire world than to bid for time by asking: "What the hell are you talking about?" She could almost hear Terezi's bear trap snap on his leg.

"Oh, I don't know," Terezi said, her voice calm: so calm it had to be false, and so all the more frightening. Rose backed a step away as Terezi swept out her cane. "Few days ago, someone I trust… not you… breaks all the hope I have that I'm doing okay and that we're going to be safe here, in this deathtrap?" She scoped the room, perhaps checking to see if Dave had returned. "And he leaves me all on my own, and… do you come? No. The first news I get, from the whole outside world is that you… refused to come." Terezi turned back to him, eyes cold. "That you made up excuses, about 'SHAR—'" Terezi's voice broke, whether emotionally or in inability to do the impression, Rose could not tell, as she kept her bearing perfectly. "...'Sharp, pointy rocks.' And there I was! Upset, hurt… and there's this squeezing… uh… crushing feeling, like, in my chest? Because, I thought, that after all these sweeps, even if you didn't care about me anymore, you would still be there for me, somehow, uh… you dipshit? Now I know, I know, that doesn't sound like the start of a fun week, but bear with me."

Karkat held up a hand toward Terezi's own, out of instinct and in comfort, but she did not seem to notice, and he stopped himself well before reaching her. To cover for his motion, he spoke out. "Oh, I get it. This is where the revenge fantasy pushes its way into your sick little head. Well, I'm sorry you got upset that I had the gall to not make things worse!"

"But then," Terezi said, and she pushed aside his hand with a spread of her arms, "after a few days of being bossed around with Egbert on Imp Flushes because you don't have the nerve to face me?" He couldn't help it, he actually growled at her, but it was clear it was not going to half quiet her now. "What do I hear? What did I hear, Karkat, when you come limping in from a patrol one day? Was it that you were coddling poor little Sollux for getting a little scratch on his ego? For getting a little tired in a fight? That you're going overboard to calm him down because he's scared might have hurt one of his friends? She's not even your friend! No offence, Aradia," she said over her shoulder, who was looking on as fascinated as everyone else. "Just you, looking out for someone you care about, who's upset about something… completely removed from you." She clapped her hands once, and then leaned in so she could whisper: "And that pain, you know, in my chest? It came back. And it squeezed really, really hard? And then…" She make a spreading gesture with her hand. "Nothing! I clued in. I got it. I realized… you've stopped caring about me… completely, right Karkat?"

"Hey!" he snapped, pointing a finger in her face. "What do you… where do you get off with… HOW DO YOU THINK I WAS FEELING WH—"

"No, no!" Terezi interrupted. "I get it! I'm not saying you never cared, or that this didn't hurt you too. It's just… sometimes… you stop liking someone." Her glance flicked to Rose, only momentarily. "If you've noticed they've changed. Karkat. Quite the month we've had, isn't it?" He had no response. "And then," she finished, rocking on the balls of her feet. "Then you took my Pyralspite."

"So what?" he growled. The point of the whole trial was as clear to Karkat as it was to Rose, and perhaps he saw the need to let its accruements fall where Terezi had set them up. "What if I thought… serves you right? Or what if I thought it'd be a good conversation piece to get past your crazy? Surprise! Looks like that worked!"

"Well, what did you think I would do?" Terezi demanded. Karkat shook his head as his only response, astonished, like he had remembered all at once with whom he was dealing, and what she was capable of. "It's been nice," Terezi said on the edge of growling. "Nice to know where your thoughts are for once, even if you won't talk to me anymore."
"You can't think I'm that stupid," he said, in what passed for him as a hushed voice, something closer to a normal speaking tone. "You think I didn't want to talk to you about this? With you hiding in your room every free hour?"

She shrugged, her tone slipping toward in an emotional surge. "I thought, after all this time, I could trust you when things go bad. Bad with Dave. Bad with J— bad with anything! I trust my ears and nose and tongue to see for me..." Rose realized, in her frustration to cover what she knew about Jack, Terezi had said some things she had not meant to say any of that out loud, at least not without obfuscation or misdirection. She wrapped up quickly: "...I thought I could trust you, too."

"All you had to do was tell me," he muttered. "Email, write all over one of my memos, SHOUT AT ME IN THE FUCKING HALL, GODDAMMIT!"

Rose had a few words for Karkat about who had burned whose bridges, but Terezi took a different angle to say: "Oh, I would never bother you, Karkat! You're spending so much time with all your leaderly work. I know you just don't have time anymore!"

There it was. It was clear to Rose that this mention of leadership, coated with new venom, had not been brought up for fun like it had before. No: Terezi was swinging where Karkat was strongest and most proud, to complete her grand show in as spectacular a fashion as possible. Terezi had taken her stolen scalemate case and turned it into a new grand breakup farewell to replace whatever plans she had had to make with Dave. Now that Karkat's leadership skills were on the table, all she had to do was to hit him back at just the right angle and he would collapse under the weight of his own ego. Rose considered stepping in, but they were already shouting and lashing about.

Karkat shouted first. "I have spent EVERY. WAKING. MOMENT. since we got on this Lab trying to make sure everyone on this Lab is ready for Jack and happy, Terezi, and if you got your head out of your selfish waste chute for five fucking minutes, I think—"

"Oh, big words," she replied, getting angrier now. "Big words from a guy that's been playing it by ear Every. Waking. Moment—"

"What the hell is wrong with playing it by ear?" he demanded. "Maybe you haven't noticed, but things keep changing around here, and there are fifteen of you running around like cluckbeasts with your heads cut off—"

"Oh, sure, blame us, you self-absorbed rage case!" Terezi almost walked away, trying to placate her anger by pacing. "Let's just forget about the way you keep dropping us like dead leaves once we don't fit into your time budget. You don't talk to me, don't talk to Gantze. You left Eridan to Rose when it came to Vriska and Tavros, but oh, Sollux, still have time for Sollux! For now."

"Oh, well, forgive me for not being perfect!"

"So he admits it," Terezi said, smug for all her shouting.

Karkat pressed on: "Forgive me for not having all the time in the world!" Karkat shouted. "It's almost like, oh! It's impossible! If you had an issue with how things were going, Pyrope, maybe you should have brought it up instead of hiding it behind your games with Strider? Whoops! You were too busy not even bringing it up your problems to Strider!"

"Well what if we can't talk to you, Karkat? What about when we can't? Because you're too busy playing it by ear! What about when we can't find the time, or the emotional... grounding to put up with your shit for five damn minutes—"
"'Can't!'" Karkat growled. "That's your excuse? That you can't? Seems like you're still talking pretty well to me!"

"We can't keep up with you, you insensitive jackass! There's nothing to keep up with!" Terezi shrieked. Things were starting to slip from her rails. "Nothing's the same with you one day to the next! You have no plans! You've never had any plans! There's nothing for us to trust!"

"Who has plans for crazy psycho-bitches that go shit-crazy because someone took their dolls?" Karkat found the nerve to push back, taking a step towards Terezi.

"You just don't care!" Terezi shouted. "You don't care what she meant to me. You don't care what you meant to me! You just walked away!"

Karkat pointed a thumb at his chest. "I walked away because I had better shit to do than put up with your drama!"

"Better shit to do? You. Have. No. Plans!" Terezi barred her teeth. "You don't have anything better to do! No plans for Jack, no plans—nothing! You walk away, from everything! That's your 'leadership!' That's your glowing example: Full, fucking retreat. Is that what you're going to do, Karkat? When you fuck up next? Is that what you're going to do when one of us dies on your watch and there's no one to blame but yourself?"

So he hit her. And the game let the music stop.

The swing Terezi had expected, indeed it was clear to Rose that it was the very aim of her goading from the start, but neither of them actually expected him to connect. His fist cut across her right cheek in spite of her best efforts to raise her arm to block. She had perhaps always been fast, and every rung of the echeladder made her all the faster, but perhaps they had both underestimated some gap between Knight and Seer, or just maybe, like Terezi had alluded, they still thought they still had some lingering grain of trust between them that would not have allowed them to cross that final line. Though she did not prevent the blow, Terezi caught his arm a second late, seizing Karkat by the wrist out of reflex, fluid despite the injury. They stood in tableau for a good while, both shocked dead by what they had seen clear-coming, not willing to believe it all the same. Slowly, Terezi reached up with her free hand to lower her shades, and met Karkat's eyes with two blasted pupils drowned in milky jaundice. Karkat tried not to meet those eyes.

Rose could not remember the last time she had seen them look one another in the eyes, outside of their play-trial. Perhaps it was so long ago that doing so again dug up memories of better days, or the first of the foul. But now, though Terezi's face spoke a cold-stunned mix of emotion, her eyes stared vacant and he could not look at them. Not after the punch, now that they had crossed all bounds of Pity.

Softly, she whispered: "...I win."

She twisted his arm at an angle it did not want to go and he fell with a cry to his knees, and repaid him across the face with a backhand, so hard he had to brace himself to keep from hitting the ground. Terezi slipped her cane's strap off her wrist and pressed it to his chest until he lay upon the floor, with her looking down from above. Foot replaced cane, and she struck the cane to the floor aside his ear, where it bore her weight as she leaned over top of her prey, leaving them both in a heavy silence.

"Guys..." someone said from far off, though to Rose, they seemed even further than that. Jade? Feferi? John? "You guys... We should..."

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Karkat shouted to break their personal silence, which made Terezi laugh all over again.
She smiled even broader. "Tit for tat, Karkat, and what the hell is wrong with you? Where's the Karkat with all the confidence and shouting, did I knock him loose? As for me, well! Can't a girl have a LITTLE FUN, K4RK4T?" She leaned slightly forward, the weight on her foot pressing down on his chest. "You had your turn. You got to get up and play His Tyranny! Slam down your gavel, give your biggest roar and deliver a sentence to the guilty party, but somehow, I got this crazy idea that you couldn't pull it off. And you didn't. Let's be honest, Karkat. It's time you stop being what you're not."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're no judge, Karkat. You're no leader. You just sat there and let me tromp over you. I gave you the power to end that! Just slam down your gavel. Blame yourself. Blame me! That's how justice works. And fourteen other people would say 'Oh, okay, we're done.' Because they don't care! But when you saw me coming at you, you tried to fight me on your own level. You just don't have the horns for command."

Karkat scowled and picked at the side of his head. "I'm sorry, say that last part again, I think I had some 'you're a fucking bitch' stuck in here." He pointed his finger into her face. "You wouldn't understand what it takes to command. You don't have what it takes to be a subordinate! Don't you even recognize that the only reason we're still alive is because we haven't been blowing up in each other's faces!" He shouted: "Dammit, if you trusted me, why didn't you show it and talk to me? I'm one of the few reasons we're still alive here! My organization! My improvisation! My! Plans!"

"THEN GET UP HERE!" she said in her poor mimic of his tone, and she stepped off his chest and clasped the hand he had been using to gesture. She crouched down low, close enough for him to feel her breath on his face. "Get off your back, and show me you actually deserve to sit there and call me a bitch, you wriggling coward!"

And she stood up and jerked his arm, tossing him one-handed so that she could catch him again behind the neck. He responded fast, and they pulled one another into a kiss that set Rose's stomach to churn. Lips locked and grips tightened: they held the kiss with both their weight on Terezi's strength and cane. Karkat's free hand grabbed up and clutched at her side, a free-flow of energy jumping hot between them in coursing hormones and blinding emotion; the room about them stopped dead. John and Jade were shocked; Nepeta, cut twice over.

Rose tried to take a step forward, not sure what she was going to say or to what end, when Terezi pulled back, her lips a hair's breadth from his, and she chuckled and dropped him to the ground. There, she gently stroked and then jabbed a finger on his ribs. "Now open your inventory."

Karkat smirked up, smug but half-dazed, as he gently stroked one of her horns with the tip of his finger. "You get access to my inventory when Human hell freezes over."

"My dragon, putz," Terezi protested.

Karkat chuckled, and pulled himself back up towards her to plant a short series of kisses at the end of her jaw. Terezi sighed, perhaps as much out of pleasure as complaint. But then he whispered into her ear: "Fuck you."

She raised an eyebrow, knowing him too well to be surprised by his tone, but before she could finish saying "Hell n—" Karkat knocked away her cane. Simultaneously, he kicked out a leg and he pulled her crashing to the ground aside him. She shouted aloud in pain at first, and then groaned as she curled to one side to coddle her arm, and so rolled up against Karkat in what Rose could only see as an awful mockery of matesprit closeness. Karkat could not help it: it was his turn to laugh, but as he did, he rapped a knuckle on the nearby floor and caused his inventory-hive to reappear.
"Hey!" he called, and a representative flock of bees appeared near his head. "See her? Unless I'm getting torn apart, and someone other than her is doing it? You don't help her: ever." The bees flew a rapid pattern in positive response.

"Lovely," Terezi said. Her hair had fallen across her face and she pushed some of it aside with her now-only good hand, before taking to her feet and stepping over him. Perusing the hive, she plucked inquisitively at the rumbled up shirt and pulled it out. She opened the bundle. "Hmph," she said. "Here's your decisive evidence. Take that, asshole," she said, as she tossed the shirt – and Pyralspite – into his chest, where it squeaked to a stop.

After all that had happened, Rose was almost surprised to see the dragon doll, and felt the only tiny sense of relief she had felt since the kiss when Karkat returned the scalemate to its owner voluntarily, muttering: "Heh. Why not? Why bother?"

Terezi slumped down next to him, dragon cupped dearly in her hurt arm, and then sighed and looked up at the others. "Sorry folks, show's over," she said. That seemed to break the spell over the others, though their reactions were mixed. Rose could not help but catch her closest friends' terrified gapes, or Kanaya's unspoken offer of conversation, if she needed it. Rose acknowledged them all, wanting to take up all three, but something held her back, and she reached down to pick up the strip of paper Karkat had dropped at some point during the fight, like cleaning up litter. She went over the blocks a second time, Terezi's marks mixed with her own.

"So this is it, huh?" Karkat said after Rose had checked the blocks a second time. "After all these sweeps?"

"...Yeah," Terezi replied. She captchalogued her glasses, to a slight puff of spearmint as her modus returned to normal. Pyralspite went away as well. Shifting up and over, Terezi straddled Karkat and looked him in the eyes. Rose noticed a teal bruise beginning to flower along her face where he had first hit her, and had no doubt he was developing his own. "I mean, is it really that surprising? It's not what I pictured, but I guess it works. You and me just... fighting to see who gets to be in charge and never really winning till... till hell, Karkat, whenever this goes?"

"Sure, I mean, whenever you want," Karkat said. "You and me, fucking around. Just throw a fist my way, I'll block it, we'll make a big mess of the place, how's that sound? C'mon, Rez, don't be stupid. You know this is gonna be mind games to the end of fucking time."

"End of time, huh?" Terezi said, with a croak in her voice. "What about Jack?"

Karkat shuddered. "Fuck Jack," he said. "Asshole. Y'know..." he said, as he rubbed at Terezi's side. "Sometimes I look at all the data from Megido and the sensors and it feels like he's getting closer and closer. If we still had dreams I'd probably be having nightmares about old fleabait because I'm already seeing him in every rattle and roll in an empty room."

Terezi started laughing into Karkat's shirt at the idea of him running scared from the Lab's everpresent clanging ambience, and even nestled closer against his chest. After a while she added: "Bark!"

"Fuck you."

"You okay, Watson?" Gamzee asked Rose, as he found her with her face flushed in a sick-full feel of confusion. Gamzee had his serious voice again, and in a way it helped Rose to pull back to reality.

"I'm..." Rose wasn't sure. She knew, with a new certainty, that it was time to talk to John and Jade and Kanaya, maybe at once. And... Dave. "I know what to do about it. It's just... new to me." She
stuffed the *Clue* sheet into her pocket. "I'll be okay."

"You got it, James," Gamzee said, and he squeezed her hand and headed off. Rose also took the opportunity to leave, as Karkat and Terezi kissed a second time, and Karkat traced a finger down her cheek, with a frown on his face. "Fuck," he said, "I missed you."

Rose signalled to Kanaya with her head, and went to Jade and John, who waited for her at far side of the room, Jade's face a mask of confusion and John unable to look away from the metamorphosed couple. He held his arms tight to his chest. "Rose," he said, "this is gonna be a surprise to you, but… I don't think I hate Karkat."

Terezi leaned down, and pulled herself close to Karkat, hands free to hold, teeth to bite, lips to speak and kiss and whisper; a chance to do what kismeses do, before they know better.

Chapter End Notes

First drafters looking for an explanation go over heeeeeeere.

I was going to have the Squiddles spouting out of date environmental fears rather than alluding to global warming, but I decided that having Mint say "fluorocarbons" was an opportunity not to be missed. Also, I'm just now looking at Mint's text for the first time since I got my new monitor and I'm realizing just how dim it is. I'll probably futz around with that soon (of course, I might use it later for first draft reasons, so if you see it again, hey, fun fact).

Terezi's Clue Sheet is covered in names from the storied Clue(do) franchise (specifically: Scarlett, Brunette, Mustard, Grey, Green, Meadow-Brook, Peacock, Azure, Plum, Lavender and Rose), but it turns out Clue has only one Green name while we need three, and other such issues. Oh well. The sheet is a bit blurry because I resized it for readability. This is a bit too bad because with the original size, the names looked pretty much like the rest of the sheet, but at this size they're far too crisp. Oh well.

"She Deliberately Withheld The Fact That Karkats Alibi Relied On Me So She Could Throw Pots At Me Didnt She"

"Yes, I think so. More dramatic that way."

"Ill Be With You All In A Minute"

"…Where are you going?"

"To Find Some Pots"

> Advance

Block 3 of 16
Stage 11: -CANCELLED-  
Stage 12: **  
Stage 13: *
Stage 14: *
Stage 15: **

[Transposed:]

Stage 63: ***** portion of TWO-STAGE NIGHTMARE STEP

Block Total: 11
Previous Block: 11
TG: all im saying is
TG: if it were anyone but gigglefins id be suspecting some real middle school level foul
play here
TT: You're implying that someone else would have used a pool party as an excuse for
noogeying and pool noodle duels?
TG: middle school not grade school
TG: homeschooler
TG: but lets not talk about that lets talk about how pool noodle duels are awesome and
how if id knew there were any on this rock they've already happened
TT: What a shame, I was hoping to hear more of your comparison between Feferi
sharing her passions to sixth grade tomfoolery. I'm sure it would be very insightful /
juvenile in-and-of itself.
TG: im saying that if this were anyone else this would clearly be a big zany plan to get
everyone in their bathing gear to work out those first awkward puberty tingles
TG: and by the way criminally undershooting a good party if you asked my opinion
TG: look me in the digital eye and tell me you'd think this was perfectly innocent if
somebody came up with this plan who wasnt already wearing their bathing suit every
day of the week
TG: which you wont because you wouldn't know a good time if it smacked you in the
face with its long squishy noodle
TT: Are you critiquing the sexual experimentation of middle schoolers? Because I'm not
certain this is a route you want to follow to its end.
TG: im critiquing the experimental whatever you want to call it of a group of teenagers
with tons of better shit they could be doing parties or otherwise
TT: I already find it suspicious that you seem to have a set of presumptions about the
sexual maturity of every member of our group.
TG: of course i have presumptions my presumption is that the rest of you are all twisting
to make some presumptions of your own wink wink nudge nudge the punchlines that
you think a pool party is racy
TT: At yet, with all your suspicions about this being some sort of preteen gawking party
for full-teens, you're still coming.
TG: dont tisk me lady youre the one whos gonna going to all this trouble for a new
bathing suit im not the only one raising a fuss
TG: probably already called in maryam to dazzle it up for you
TT: Actually: no, as it turns out I'm perfectly capable of using the alchemiter.
TG: boring
TT: Kanaya would gladly size you for a bikini if you'd like, she'd hate for her talents to
go to waste.
TG: nah mine still fits
TT: Then I await its grandeur.
TG: you should it matches the shades perfectly
TG: ive got this summerwear crap down here on this space station
TT: So it's hideous?
TG: its stunning is what it is
TG: like the most careful threadcraft of the spandex gnomes working through the night
to craft a great idol of fabric in worship and support of my stupendous jugs
TT: And yet despite your attempts to distract me with your mammary advantage, it's sinking in for me that you plan on keeping your eyewear on even within sight of the pool.
TT: What with all the sunlight.
TG: of course the shades stay on rose ive gotta draw a clear line in the pretend sand between me and these flirty juvenile shenanigans
TT: When teenagers are exploring the depths of their budding sexualities: he'll be there!
TG: when they're indulging crushes at random through a 1970s style swinger party downgraded game of spin the bottle: he'll be there
TT: When they're risking a chancy fondle between kisses in the darkened confines of Seven Minutes in Heaven: he'll be there too.
TG: in the closet
TT: Right.
TG: going all super creepy here at the end but we had better bring it home with the the grand finale: full-out forfeit-based singles and doubles games of strip poker
TG: each game more complicated than the last
TG: until absolutely everyone has banged everyone else
TT: Oh Strider.
TT: What has the Internet wrought in you?
TG: apotheosis
TT: Terrifying.
TT: So if we're seeing you at this party – gawking, as you will, at our pre-assured gawking in turn – should we be expecting your companion in truancy as well? And if so, will she too be stripping down to her tin skivvies for the sake of this adolescent trap you've imagined for us all?
TG: haha oh I WISH
TT: !
TT: Well here's a surprise. Not only does he not try to deny knowledge of what I'm even talking about in regards to a "companion", he flings himself into it.
TG: oh no rose is suspicious of me and aradia's constant and obvious disappearances whatever will i do better whip up the mother of all lies
TT: Practicing for strip poker.
TG: yes nailed it youre a godsend
TG: okay but seriously
TG: look i dont have much respect for this little peep party of peixes right?
TT: As you insist on calling it, yes.
TG: but you dont know what this girl is like, rose
TT: I know that she's a robot and your enthusiasm about inviting her to a pool party is suspicious at least.
TG: not my point my point is that she needs shaking up even if that means dragging her to a teen sex party or whatever were pretending this is now im losing track
TT: I think you and I are pretending entirely different things.
TG: the trouble is that ive never worked with someone whos "no audience" before i mean she's like a blank wall
TG: im used to people who are receptive but my audience has been limited the past few days
TT: Terezi? Are we talking about that, because I know the three of us have been waiting for you to open that particular door.
TG: oh well now that i know youre gonna be eager to help
TG: consider the door shut
TG: and locked
TG: now can we talk about aradia please
TT: If you insist. Well...
TT: The problem there is that you're just not the slightest bit entertaining, isn't it?
TT: She's just not willing to humour you like the rest of us. I'm afraid our good graces have socially crippled you.
TT: I did warn John but he insisted on coddling.
TG: hey can it me and megido get a pretty good thing going when she wants to talk
TG: she been tuning me in to some of her old physical training
TT: Aradia?
TG: yeah whips to use and deathtraps to dodge its just up my line but different enough to be new
TG: guys gotta stretch his growth
TT: Interesting. I can't say it's something I've taken into consideration.
TG: says the girl who fights with knitting needles she first picked up a year and a half ago yeah i cant imagine why
TG: now i dont really have a bone to throw back megidos way cause i cant shoot firecrackers from my fingertips after all but we work out okay
TG: i dunno for sure maybe its her computer brains but she gets pretty in tune with some of my mixes
TG: and she knows a lot about the past and relics we actually spent a whole night talking about decomp it was something else
TT: You mean, like your long-forgotten of collection of dead things?
TG: yeah forgotten by you maybe
TG: i outta pour one out for the poor guys wiped out by jack like that
TG: just dump a bottle of methanol on the floor theres a good plan
TT: Now don't you start pre-empting my insults, or what will we have to talk about any longer?
TT: I don't think either of us remember how to hold a proper conversation.
TG: early bird gets the chemical fumes wafting up from this particular worm rose
TG: my point is she and ive got different perspectives on it but she actually knows her shit
TT: I'll have to take your word on it.
TG: yes rose really not all of us have nice tidy interests like godsquids im sorry
TT: How on earth does one carry on a conversation of that nature for an entire night?
TG: "of that nature"?
TG: hell we were just talking about one angle
TT: you wouldnt get it
TT: You don't know that!
TG: aw thats cute rose but im sorry its just not your field
TT: I'm just not used to you having an interest in a branch of knowledge practical for any purpose but the performance of ill rhymes.
TG: sorry but unless you go look it up yourself youre just gonna have to live with not being privy to the secrets of the formaldehyde-suspended gods
TG: i make it a policy not to tell my secrets to the one friend who might find creative reasons to use them.
TG: That's you.
TT: I followed.
TT: So if things are so good for you and your mummy buddy, why this desire to drag her to the pool party?
TG: well see its cool to talk and that but thing is she never does and i dont think even she likes that it goes that way
TG: youd probably get more out of it out of her than me doc
TG: its like she forgets shes supposed to be a person half the time
TT: And you're hoping to administer the social equivalent of a hiccup shock cure?
TG: cmon rose admit it you wanna crack this metal nut too
TG: look the only way i know how to keep this chick grounded in the real world and
smiling is to let her babble about ancient troll history
TG: which is actually kind of awesome i mean take any random bit of human history
but spin it so its actually interesting
TG: but lets branch out here
TT: I may have stumbled across a fault in your interest.
TG: fault in everyones elses maybe
TG: megido gets it and besides this fills a major life goal for me
TG: ive filled my quadrants rose
TT: Your quadrants.
TG: yeah
TG: my dork quadrants
TG: ive got me my overeducated dork
TG: my immature dork
TG: my dork king
TG: and at long last ive met a dork whose just the fucking normal kind you have no idea
what kind of a relief this is
TT: What a big day for you.
TT: You've got them all.
TT: You are you the very best, like no one ever was.
TG: nice try but jades got juvie dork solid you dont have a chance to double down
TT: Worth a shot.
TG: i just figured that maybe if megidos my normal dork friend we could maybe
sometimes talk about shit that isnt dork shit how about
TG: normal people stuff that fun people do thats all
TG: do i have to be surrounded by dorks forever
TT: But we'd miss you.
TG: but youd have a field week analyzing why youd miss me and by then id be back so
no foul
TT: But if you leave, who will fill my jackass quadrants?
TT: You can't just strand me like this, Strider.
TT: Eridan is clamouring for the Self-Important Jackass slot and for Vriska in the
Backstabbing Jackass
TT: "ok neww plan ivve gotta keep intact for tavv noww you knoww so if she threatens
me again like last night youvve gotta go after her with your sticks wwhen shes lookin
the other way."
TT: "but dont wait too long or she wont realize wwhy your stabbing her"
TT: "gotta rub her face in it shes like a barkfiend like that"
TG: yikes
TT: "no roz im not callin them that theyre just sticks okay? fuck"
TT: I'd really feel out of place without my trusty Self-Absorbed Jackass.
TG: hey dont look at me lalonde we both knew what this was about when we started
TT: *sigh*
TT: This is true.
TG: why dont you do what all of us do in times like this and complain to our trusty,
mutual Loudmouth Jackass
TG: hes so reliable
TG: like a community service really he even fills his own slot for himself
TT: I don't particularly care to bring Karkat into this affair.
TT: Though I'm sort of surprised he isn't already involved in the other affair.
TG: the preteen catwalk-into-water winter bikini prom of 2009?
TT: That's the one.
TT: Let's face it, unlike yourself, Vantas has no hope of being crowned King and
dancing the slow-dance of shame with himself while the audience applauds.
TG: dont you take the magic out of my evening rose
TT: I wouldn't dream of it! That spotlight is all yours.
TT: I'm just saying that Karkat lacks the proper amenities for an attractive swimsuit
body.
TT: Like, for example, an attractive body.
TG: at least hes pretty much already shaved
TG: if that guy had to get a bikini wax i think wed hear it back on earth
TT: Do Trolls HAVE body hair? I don't think I've seen so much as a beard.
TG: well youd know
TT: So I fear.
TG: so whos your pick to bring home mr and miss abandoned ectolab here at swimprom
09
TT: I'm not sure. We have beauty contest procedure to follow here first. I'll have to see
the applicants and hear their critical views on world peace before we can judge the
swimsuit competition.
TG: oh whoops im sorry but you forgot we were living with trolls
TG: the answer to your questions about world peace are now:
TG: "CoUID YoU RePeAt tHe qUeSTIoN I HaD A BaNaNa iN My eAr"
TG: ":33 e *the kingdom was at p33ce but little did they know that TROLLZILLA was
rising from the seas to wreck VENGEANCE upon them!!!"*
TG: and
TG: "fuck them all iim going to dii2ney land"
TT: Ironically, the only ones likely to understand the question are the ones I know have
worn bathing suits in the past so this beauty contest all comes together for Teams Pisces
and Virgo.
TT: Unless one of us pulls it off.
TT: I don't expect any better answers from you, frankly, but maybe we could goad John
into saying a few nice words quoted liberally from Bill Pullman in Independence Day.
TT: I'm sure he'll put an admirable counter-effort to your own in the swimsuit
department, but we'll have to see to be sure.
TG: oh look it's a gawkers laundry list john kanaya feferi even wow
TG: youre not even going to act like wont be enjoying the show will you miss
adolescent psychology
TT: I swear I have no idea what you could be referring to.
TG: well lets just say that someone i knows got a bi card that reads "pros: has a really
fucking great time at coed pool parties"
TG: among other things like "cons: doesn't exist"
TG: but wow look at that pro rose its right there on the card cant guess thats the situation
TT: Oh, don't be silly, Strider.
TT: You know I only have eyes for you.
TG: now see thats something that has to stop right the fuck here
TG: first off because a guy shouldnt have to play flirt with his ectoglop sister when hes
got only one layer of nylon weave between him and his junk
TG: i mean that should just be a law or something
TT: Don't worry, I'm prepared to let the other attendees make that an issue for you.
TT: I'm sure I can work a few things out with some people that would be eager and
capable of making life difficult for you. John, Jade, Nepeta, Gamzee...
TG: hey get the clown off that boner list right the fuck now
TT: You're objecting to Gamzee?
TG: in particular? yes
TG: look did you never see my house in either of the timelines you've got tell me how many clown dolls there were with cameras in them rose
TG: tell me that
TT: All right. I can see that being a legitimate concern.
TG: so lets just say i dont wanna know how far down the paint goes and leave it at that
TT: …How curiously phrased.
TG: oh i bet
TG: second reason you should stop the rampant sibling flirt is that I don’t wanna get chainsawed in half that just doesn't fit my itinerary for the day
TT: Yes, because Kanaya is certain to totally misinterpret you trying to joke your way into the gym showers with me?
TG: so thats how youre gonna be?
TG: youre not even gonna pussyfoot around with the whole "not my girlfriend" routine
TT: Oh, I'll pussyfoot around whatever "not my girlfriend" routines are required to get the point across.
TT: Until the metaphorical cows come home, if they must.
TT: Taking our insults at your erectile situation in an unfortunate direction.
TG: think that one got away from you there rose
TG: sometimes you gotta know when to bail on a dick joke before it gets outta hand you know better than that
TT: Are you lecturing me on dick joke etiquette?
TG: damn straight who taught you this horrible display of non sequiters
TG: was it john i'll kill him
TT: I learned it from you, all right?
TT: I learned it from chatting with you!
TG: oh good you didnt miss the opening there's still hope
TG: okay its all right son so long as we both admit we've got a problem
TG: now lets crack open your weed and get back to phunny phalluses 101
TG: lesson one about the mushroom-tipped tuber growing out of your midparts is that it aint got shit to do with herds of cows
TT: Fascinating. I was so off-base.
TG: now you see son if you threw that one at the taurus troll you might be in business
TG: you could even branch it out if you had different targets
TG: like say a school of fish or a pack of cats
TG: because lets be honest, "clowder of puss" is just asking for a gag or three
TG: a gagging three
TT: This opens so many doors!
TG: you've got it kid
TG: weed and cock gags were on our way to gay stoner heaven right here
TT: but no okay seriously back on topic
TT: What part of that exchange was even a modicum short of serious for you?
TG: most of it
TG: dont really give a shit if you wanna tell jokes about me and a hundred cows
TT: ;)
TG: but you really are my son rose
TT: I knew it. I knew John was a liar.
TG: he was just lying to protect you my boy
TT: Daddy hold me I'm scared.
TG: its okay my boy shhh ive got you
TG: now make your old man proud turn this into an incest joke in exactly one step
TT: Daddy your overwhelming fatherly cologne makes me feel funny in my now-poorly defined genitalia and/or gender identity.
TG: that's my boy
TG: that's my boy
TT: Brb
TG: ?
TT: sending this to John.
TG: wait wait hold on let me turn off my music

Through the wall, Rose heard the sound of her best friend make an odd, wet wailing sound at the back of his throat. "Oh my god."

"John?" called Jade. "What is it?"

"Oh my god!"

TG: great idea
TT: Thank you.
TG: okay but seriously back on topic no more pussyfooting around
TG: from me this time that is
TG: what the fuck is up with you and carmilla
TT: Literary references to nineteenth century lesbian vampires?
TT: Are you sure it's me you're worried about flirting with? Because it seems to me like you're hitting on Kanaya.
TG: shit why does that keep happening
TG: all these gay vampire-loving chicks all the time clinging to my high-necked cowl i mean really
TT: And never a straight woman in sight.
TG: starting to get a little discouraging is all im saying
TT: Yes, I'm sure I can only imagine.
TG: you can only imagine because… you're… NOT hiding hickeys your most recent attempt at roleplaying?
TT: Don't be silly. Today I'm the one brushing her teeth to get out the blood.
TG: yeah id buy that
TG: but seriously cmon we both know when it comes to kanayas bod in a one piece you're gonna go over the top one way or another
TT: You seem so certain and yet I don't believe you.
TG: yeah you play that up like that why not
TG: way i see it you're either gonna 1) gawk at out of the corner of your eye while flicking some freudian pen at her because you're probably going to spend the party writing like a total dork
TT: Dammit, I was actually going to do some writing.
TG: or maybe 2) you're gonna just be all casual because you're already totally familiar if you know what im saying
TG: all those late night trips to chez virgo
TT: I guess I'm going to have to resort to books.
TG: or 3) you're gonna be wearing the look-away shame of rejector/rejected
TT: Dave are you trying to discuss feelings with me because this is a real breakthrough.
TG: im trying to discuss the level of hot lesbian action in my overeducated nerd quadrant
TG: fuck
TG: or 4) maybe you're just not interested at all cmon rose throw me a bone
TT: Not interested Kanaya at all?
TT: Ridiculous. She's wonderful with me and since this is the focus of your discussion: have you so much as glanced at the woman when she's showing off her new clothes?
TT: She's gorgeous.
TT: She'd be dynamite if she put some effort into emphasizing her sexuality but in a way I prefer things as they are.
TT: As does she if I'm reading her right.
TG: rose i dunno if youve noticed but those little catwalks she does are being done special for somebody whos not me and is just maybe the girl talking about sexual dynamite
TG: like they used in the old viagra mines back home
TT: Now you're just showing how little you know her.
TT: Kanaya's "catwalks" are for her, primarily.
TG: youre a crush-blind schoolgirl
TT: I'm serious.
TT: I promise you that if even we were intimately embroiled at this very moment, Kanaya's mind would still be, at least for a blink of distraction, on the arrangement of any lingering lingerie to highlight the mutual experience.
TG: bullshit
TT: If I lie, may I eat my hat.
TT: Oh shit, mulligan?
TG: yeah why not
TT: If I lie, may I eat out my girlfriend's bizarre hat-shaped genitalia
TG: three points stuck the landing but bad form for just straight-up turning me the fuck off
TT: I'm thinking a coonskin or perhaps a pickelhaube.
TG: im serious this is testy strider gross out zone day what the hell
TG: do me a favour and lets have no more clowns and no more unknown troll dangly bits i dont even wanna think about either again
TT: Again?
TG: i keep picturing this weird blood-coloured prehensile aedeagus trying to twist its way up in my business
TG: and im not really interested in that if you know what i mean
TG: oh who am i kidding of course you dont
TT: Did you honestly just use the word "aedeagus"?
TG: I just had to look that up, I'm shocked and still several steps behind you.
TT: How long have you been thinking about this, and more importantly, why?
TG: dont look too much into it rose the bug parts knowhow goes back to the sticking dead crawlies in jars phase
TT: And yet I'm not distracted by my ACTUAL question in the slightest!
TT: By the way, you don't need to worry about any sort of crawling betentacled penii
TT: They ejaculate into wide-brimmed buckets, Dave, not space-station toilet vacuums.
TT: In my mind, that implies one if not both of them has downward trajectory and poor aim.
TT: I personally suspect some sort of xeno-cloacae.
TG: rose its hard to aim anything when youre
TG: wait no forget it i got a better bone to pick
TT: Not touching that one.
TG: shut up
TG: im too busy being shocked that miss rose "three gigs of tentacle porn" lalonde is going with the most boring sex organ known to man over bizarre overthought alien weirdness
TT: Is it that confounding to you that I might be genuinely interested the makeup of our be-candy-corned co-prisoners?
TT: You who was, just moments ago, teasing me for this exact interest and worse in one Troll's "bod" in particular?
TT: By the way, you were right. Kanaya isn't the only one I'm looking forward to seeing half-naked if we're going to be juvenile about it.
TG: oh?
TT: Oh yes, no counterattack for my accusations now the topic has changed back to one of teenaged anxieties. Truly this is score one for the Strider.
TG: do you have a list for me or not?
TT: Well, you for starters.
TG: ...
TG: don't pause on me rose i ain't rising to that bait
TT: I'm serious, though yes, it is mostly for ammunition purposes in our slinging matches.
TG: oh good ive got a mostly nothing to worry about then
TT: Nope.
TG: lets move on
TT: Well if you're not going to be pleasantly awkward about it I suppose I might as well just press on.
TT: That being: Kanaya, John, Equius and in the hopes of worming a list from you in turn, yes, Feferi's attractive but I don't really expect to see any more of her unless she goes straight-up nude.
TT: I mean, it's not like she's going to declare a skinny dip as though this were some drunk college party. We're still pretending this is grade school and she should have the memo by now, right?
TG: zahhak really?
TT: Yes.
TT: Why not? Have you seen the boy? He's the definition of "built" even you can't deny that just out of hand.
TT: blah blah, sexuality joke, cultural norms, freud freud
TG: rose the man is moist
TT: This is a pool party.
TG: yeah okay if we wait for the filter to deal with it
TG: also john? is that why this kanaya thing isnt as clear cut as it probably should be because i dunno i thought things were cool between you and egbert
TT: Oh my god I understand. This whole conversation makes sense retroactively.
TT: You're genuinely concerned, aren't you? On some level, this level of the unknown in your friendships is setting you on edge.
TG: well its not exactly normal but i dont exactly get to check in these days so im not exactly peachy when shits upside down and i didnt know or get to say a thing in edgewise good or bad
TT: Yeah, I know that feeling.
TG: oh
TG: yeah sorry about that i guess
TT: No. No I understand.
TG: do you think so?
TT: Well...
TT: No.
TT: Do you want to talk about it, perhaps if I make some sort of embarrassing gesture to dilute any connection between "Do you want to talk about it" and psychiatry?
TG: nah lets just not
TT: Nothing I can do at all?
TG: you could fill me in without distracting us with even more pointless dick jokes or troll anatomy discussion thats just gonna end up spurting forth from your writing noncon flagella
TT: Filling you in about me and Kanaya?
TG: yeah
TT: Well, if you think that would help. There's not much to say.
TT: But where to begin…?
TT: Can I be candid with you or are you going to be in one of your moods?
TG: which one ive got plenty
TT: Too true.
TT: But are any of them emotionally available?
TG: are any of them emotionally available she says like she doesnt know me at all
TG: ill have you know im fully in touch with my emotional side
TG: clearly you missed out on front row seats to dave "sensitive" striders "ballads sung in the shower" for the past week or so
TT: Was that last week? Why, my tickets have been wasted!
TG: yeah dont think i didnt notice you missing in the audience through the shower curtain rose
TG: cuts me right here
TT: You should sing a song about it.
TG: see if i don’t
TG: drop me a beat on the walls just drum it straight out
TT: Jade's between you and me.
TG: shell pass it on shes cool
TT: Or how about we talk about Kanaya.
TG: too late
TG: sister didnt come
TG: to my naked jamboree
TG: how else am i gonna sing
TG: about my twisted family tree
TT: Stop it.
TT: Singing about your exhibitionism is getting us nowhere.
TT: Weren't you the one complaining about the flirting just moments ago?
TG: doesnt realize this aint no kiddy peixes party
TG: just a public viewing
TG: of a striders hot body
TT: I don't feel mature enough to be in a relationship and so don't field comfortable in either quadrant but am being drawn by sexual and filial connections towards both in spite of myself.
TG: now does that feel better?
TT: Good. GOD. Did you have to sing out loud?
TG: im running pesterchum on dictation cant you hear me
TG: besides youve gotta feel it in your bones rose
TG: rl rapping never fails
TT: Normally I'd ignore you but today I need advice.
TG: whatever youve gotta tell yourself to sleep at night
TG: why not just tell our favourite virgo that youre not gonna move up on her one way or the other
TT: Because I don't feel mature enough to be in THIS relationship.
TT: This trial one.
TT: And telling her that would feel like I had been lying to her?
TG: okay well why not tell her that before it gets worse
TT: But I would also LIKE to be mature enough to be in not just this relationship but also the others?
TT: And she seems to have no issue with us being in this relationship so perhaps I AM mature enough for it and haven't realized?
TG: fuck
TT: A sort of first timer's paranoia.
TG: this isnt fair youre the one who told me all psychological shit i know so i cant really say anything you havent thought of
TT: Then give me a new angle. Teach me the wisdom of the lost Cult of Rap, Sifu Homeboy.
TG: rose rappers arent exactly the best source to draw your relationship advice
TG: like i think the net total of all our learning is that we've got all the bitches
TG: as in presently
TG: they are already here
TG: rose do you want to get all the bitches
TT: I don't think there's any correct way to reply to that.
TG: because the only advice i can give you is:
TG: already have all the bitches
TG: as you can see it makes perfect sense
TT: I can suddenly see why you're the Hero of Time.
TG: look rose
TG: hold on

A few moments later, Rose heard a kick at her door.

"Oh. Well then," she mused, and then got up and opened the door. Once he was in, she shut the door and turned up the lights, knowing her preferred dim would never work with Dave's shades.

Dave sat on Rose's bed. "We're gonna do that thing where I ask you something and you tell me without sitting around thinking of some snarky bullshit response. What's the called?" Rose was about to answer but Dave immediately cut in: "Don't care. Point is: we're gonna get all psychiatrist up in this shit. So, okay?"

Rose leaned against her dresser and nodded. "If we must."

"Just gotta answer me four questions," Dave said. "First thing that comes to your head."

"I understand."

"Now…" he said, and he set a fist in his opposite hand. "Do you wanna hook up with Kanaya?"

"Dave—"

"I mean old school, writhing red here," he clarified.

Rose groaned. "You really can't be this direct… I…" Rose sighed. "Yes."

"All right, we're getting somewhere." He shifted position and called up one of his half-swords.
"Now, do you wanna be the one to go and stop her if she tries to cut some bastard in half with her chainsaw?"

"I really can't see…" Rose was not sure what she really could not see. "…I mean, wouldn't you want to stop anyone? Isn't that a cultural difference here?"
"Well there's part of your problem," Dave said. "Maybe you should be looking this up a bit more, Rose, I mean this isn't something you can just toss out like that. They don't like 'em, but the Trolls do have a term for 'best friend' and shock of fucking shocks, the term is: 'best friend.' If it was the same god damned thing they'd use the same god damned word, and just like all their other 'friends', they toss 'em to the curb if they upgrade."

"I know that."

"There's a difference between besties and diamonds and that difference is in the elite Kevlar-plated field that is Advanced Chainsaw Interception and all the emotions that lead up to that. That's what she's gonna expect and if you barge in there with your 'Oh, I'd help anybody bullcrap' she's not gonna get what she wants out of it."

"Like a sexual person who doesn't truly understand their asexual partner. Different expectations leading to disaster. Yes, I get that." Rose scowled at Dave's implication that she hadn't been doing her homework. She was about to show him some of the DVDs Karkat had left her when he spoke up again.

"Look, okay, let's go to the mushy pale heart of it, then, past the violence crap. The mushy moirail memorial moments."

"Proud of that, are we?" Rose asked.

"Yes. Next question from me, and no thinking this time!" Dave adjusted his shades to show he meant business. "Do you think you've got that kinda connection, resonating at the deepest possible levels of your collapsing-and-expanding-blood-pump-whatever ever spelunked by the greatest poets of Troll Disney?"

"I don't… What?" Rose shook her head. "Yes, sometimes!" Rose's hand was still on the drawer with the DVDs, and she slammed it shut. "What, are you testing my reaction time to your bullshit with your powers? What's the point of this?"

"Just trying to see where you stand, shit," he said. "You want question four?"

"No," Rose said. "Yes. Do it anyways."

"S'not so much a question," he admitted. "Just tell me you're not trying to do this relationship shit because you trying to extend the friendship." Rose looked back to him, surprised. Dave was stonefaced, as ever, and added: "Because she's got no way of getting why you'd even do that."

"I… no," Rose said. "No. Not that."

"Good," he said. "…Aradia was talking the other day and it was just sort of…" He pointed to the side of his forehead, the forefront of his mind. "You know."

"Yeah."

"You want my advice?" Dave asked. Rose nodded. "Don't do anything stupid yet. Go take in more of Vantas' Troll fanfiction. Talk to Maryam. Do something stupid later."

"…Yeah. Maybe," Rose said. "…Thanks, Dave."

"No problem," he said, heading back to the door. As he hit the opening button, Rose held out a hand to keep him from leaving.
"Dave," she said. "You still owe me a list. The people you're going to gawk at at the party?"

Dave paused for an unseen blink. "Well would you look at the time gotta go, Rose."

"Oh, don't do this," Rose threatened. "You know I'll have it out of you in a few days, if not at the party itself. Nylon mesh and all that."

Dave met Rose's eyes, tapped her hand from below, and waited until she lifted it out of his way before disappearing into the hall.

Being just as embarrassed about her bathing suit as she hoped everyone else would be, Jade took some comfort in knowing that Nepeta was going to go to Feferi's with her, as she appreciated the company. Critically, Nepeta would come without Equius, whom Jade did not figure she could bear, considering. Unfortunately, Nepeta had taken this of all moments to remember that she was supposed to be a cat, and so was not wearing a bathing suit at all, but rather her usual ensemble, which all in all made Jade feel worse. She wrapped her threadbare Squiddles! beach towel around her shoulders and watched as Feferi wrestled Nepeta's filthy coat from her back and the shoes off her feet before she got either near the nice clean water. The roleplay did not cease in any event, and Nepeta kept her eyes on the water (lake) and hot tub (hot springs) with tense hesitation from the sides of the room (treeline).

Really, once the others finally arrived, Jade realized she had had no need to worry. The Trolls wore bathing suits just as uniform as their favourite tees: the boys' were black, with the symbol stemming from a coloured stripe along the right side, and the girls' were just like Feferi's, under all of her frills. At first, however, there was no one there but Feferi, Sollux and Karkat, so Jade kept wrapped up for the time being.

"the cautious huntress approaches the lake to spy on the furtive motions of the elusive katfish!!" Nepeta lowered flat to the ground, as cats do, to peer over the edge of the pool, where Karkat came up to her. He was swimming laps (Jade was surprised to find that he was actually quite good) and stopped long enough to meet Nepeta's in-character glare with one of his own. Nepeta narrated on, her voice soft and low enough keep her prey from hearing, if he had not been in her face. "the huntress' purrey is brave, coming to face her in a clash of wills!" At this, Karkat lowered his eyes, and then blew off the thin layer of water on his lips and up in a mist towards her. Nepeta shrieked in play ("Spitting katfish!") and swatted him away and back to his laps. Jade caught a smirk on his lips before he returned to his crawl.

Having convinced Nepeta to give her her towel as well, Jade squatted down on its embroidered cats and wrapped her own around her like a shawl to watch the others arrive. Feferi hustled about, arranging and rearranging the gym's equipment, occasionally slipping into the girls' and boys' change rooms to see if anyone had come from some other route. Not long after Jade arrived, she also sent Sollux off to alchemize pool toys, which he did with much fuss and bother before returning and dropping a pile of encrypted cards to the floor. Many of these became pool noodles and inflatables, and took one of the former over toward the pool. Jades caught a smirk on his lips before he returned to his crawl.

"KK," he said, and he jabbed at his friend with the noodle.

"WHAT?" Karkat demanded as he began to tread water, but Sollux continued to prod at him, grinning, until Karkat snatched it away.

Sollux giggled. "Eheheheheh. KK. Guess what part of a Smuppet this used to be."

"Gyah!" Karkat flung the noodle away, where Jade was a little surprised that it actually floated.
"The nose, asshole," Sollux said, and he splashed his friend before heading over to the toys to inflate an inflatable seagoat.

Equius came next, and did indeed go straight for the pool, joining Karkat in laps, for all the wide berth "joining" would not have normally implied. A few minutes later, Gamzee arrived. A few seconds after that, everyone noticed at once.

"Gamzee…" Feferi stammered, "you're…"

"tHaNKS, i KnOw!"

Gamzee stood at the edge of the pool, slack, with his thumbs tugging at the belt of his bathing suit. This was problematic, considering that he was wearing the smallest speedo Jade had ever seen, bright with swirling, glow-in-the-dark colours that spiraled towards the middle. His natural slouch had his crotch pointed straight out and down, to where Karkat had frozen in panic.

"HeY BeSt fRiEnD," Gamzee said with a grin that grew after he caught Karkat's eye. "Got my waterproof paints on, you like?" Karkat just gawked, and shook his head from time to time. Terezi, who had arrived with Gamzee, finally let out the laugh she had been holding in. She clapped Gamzee on the shoulder before slinking into the water, needing no more of an entrance than that. After a dip underwater, she got up to pull Karkat away.

Feeling modest as a Victorian snowsuit next to Gamzee's crotch, Jade finally saw fit to remove her towel, set aside her glasses and throw herself into the water. The pool would have been big enough for all sixteen of them, much less those Feferi expected to show, and Jade found plenty of room to play. After a few minutes of swimming and a laugh with Terezi, Jade looked back to the poolside to find that several of the others had arrived together. Dave was there, with Rose and Kanaya, who had both dressed as though for a trip to the beach rather than a pool, complete with a picnic basket Kanaya had stuffed full of drinks. They seemed almost out of place without a bottle of suntan lotion. The girls both wore sunglasses on their foreheads and Kanaya was a sight in a long beach wrap and a bandeau top – Jade backed a bit further into the water in spite of herself. The top was odd, for all Jade was trying not to stare, as it was clear to Jade that it did not quite match with the bottoms and wrap to quite the exacting the standards she had expected from Kanaya. Then again, Jade remembered this was also the day Kanaya was supposed to ask Rose about their relationship, and could not help but suspect that there may have been a last-second change in the wardrobe to something more… particular (hehehe).

Nepeta, who was stalking about the "hot springs" near their entrance, remembered she was a shipper long enough to slip in a teasing whistle before scampering off.

"Oh, well excuse me if I'm…" Kanaya scoped the room. "Yes, the only one here brave enough to bare her navel."

Any teenaged anxieties Jade might have had at seeing Kanaya's outfit were buried by questions regarding the existence of Troll navels.

Kanaya went on ahead as Dave and Rose exchanged a few words, and Jade saw Rose's tongue train toward the corner of her lips as she watched Kanaya go. Dave made a joke Jade felt was probably related, and Rose laughed before starting after her friend. As she went, she lowered her sunglasses, only for Dave to tap her on the wrist and ask about her shades. She laughed again and answered, something about "all the sunlight," and rolled her fingers by Dave's face to a brief spark of Light.

Kanaya and Rose settled into two of the deck chairs Feferi or Sollux had set up prior, not far from Sollux himself, and Dave came over toward Jade. She went to meet him, but was forced to diverge when he caught sight of Gamzee and pulled aside, forcing Jade to follow. To Jade's surprise, it was
only once he had gotten away that he noticed Gamzee's attire and pose, and Dave's façade broke for a moment, his lips parting in confusion. After a moment, he began to mimic the pose: first the slouch, then the hands, then the dopey look straight down.

"'Sup, Harley?"

"'Sup, boxers?" Jade returned.

"Don't know what you're talking about," Dave said, shifting naturally into another statuesque position. His bathing suit was genuine Striderwear, with Smuppets on all surfaces. Jade had her doubts that he had ever wore them before coming to terms with what the smuppets were actually for – at this point, they were definitely worth the irony. The rest of Dave was smooth skin and lithe muscles, which Jade had absolutely no intentions of bringing up considering how determined he was to pose them. Nepeta came to a skidding stop nearby, for whatever reason known only to her. She whistled at him much like she had to Kanaya, playing straight into his game. Later on, it would occur to Jade that Nepeta was probably playing into Dave's little game on purpose.

"'Sup cat," Dave greeted. "You a bird now, too?"

Nepeta screwed up her face. "Nu," she said. "Chasing me makes me dizzy."

"Good, because birds are my thing," Dave said, and Jade feels he's fairly lucky that Nepeta did not overhear, because he would have been another dead craneraptor if she had.

Not that he didn't deserve it. "Hey Dave!" Jade chirped. "I wanna show you something."

He arcs one eyebrow. "Girl in a bathing suit with no pockets in an empty pool wants to show me something. Yeah, this ain't suspicious."

"Well maybe I want to…" Jade tried to drop her voice and even winked a little, "…show you something."

Like she should have expected, Dave decided to open by critiquing her bluff ("Well, it's not that empty.") before moving on to her wink: "And what the hell was this?" He then began to wink his own exaggerated winks.

Jade had to admit, she was out of subterfuge, and patience. "I'm going to pull you into the pool, Dave."

Like Jade had hoped, Dave had not expected her to pull out of a verbal repartee so quickly. He had been spending too much time with Rose. "…Like hell you will!" he said, but he did not pull away his arm fast enough.

"Come…" she said, before overpowering him at once and pulling him well into the water. Jade thought she heard Karkat's sputtering and shouting even before she returned to the surface, and sure enough found him pulling to one side of the pool to get away from her.

Dave surfaced soon after, put his hands straight to his face, and then triumphantly declared: "And the shades are all right!"

"Fucking… could've killed us!" Karkat said from the far side of the pool. Jade was about to say something, but Dave spoke up first.

"Oh please, Vantas. Like you haven't taken a dozen Ogre clubs to the head and I bet you're just like you were when you came into the game. Which is sad, really." Dave then reached up and took off
his shades. Jade gasped: if only because it was the reaction Dave expected and Karkat was simply not going to provide. Dave lowered his bright red eyes at Jade. "You're gonna pay for that," he said, pointing with his folded shades.

"Am I?" she asked. "Who's gonna make me?"

"Me," Dave promised, pulling his shades into his sylladex before he started to splash towards her. Jade kicked back. "Well you've got to catch me first!"

She pulled away, giggling.

All things considered, Rose was enjoying the party very much. At first, she and Kanaya stayed parked in their chairs while the others went about at their leisure; there, Rose buried her nose in a novel as she and Kanaya began another of their neverending conversations. Kanaya was pretending to sun, reflector and all. "Whatever floats your boat, Kanaya!" Feferi said after they had explained tanning, though she continued to throw them suspicious glances from then on out. As they settled in, the others arrived.

"Equius!" Vriska called from one of the boys' changing rooms. Equius was so involved in his laps that Jade had to hit him with a pool noodle to get his attention. A few minutes later, he had returned, dripping from a second trip to the showers. Soon after, Vriska, Eridan and Tavros followed, Tavros hung about his matesprit's neck: Eridan was carrying him in with Vriska's help. His legs had been left behind.

"Get me something sturdy, would ya?" Eridan said to Vriska.

"I'm goin', I'm going!" Vriska headed around to the inflatables Sollux had alchemized. He was nearby, and pointed her towards one he had prepared special, apparently on Tavros' instructions.

Rose tapped Kanaya on the arm. "Your handiwork?" she asked, regarding Tavros' lower abdomen, which had been fitted with some sort of waterproof cap locked into place to protect one last patch of electronics that had not been removed. Rose suspected they must normally connect Tavros' nervous system to the legs.

"The amputation, yes," Kanaya said. "Recovery was more Equius' field. I think John's been looking into it since."

"Our heirs of medicine," Rose mused, and watched as Eridan helped Tavros into the water on Tavros' request.

"I've gotcha," Eridan said, and he repeated himself often, more and more nervous the more he took on Tavros' weight as he simultaneously tried to remember how to swim. "I've gotcha," he said at last, this time with relief as he seemed to settle.

"It feels… pretty good!" Tavros said, almost as nervous as Eridan. He celebrated by squirting water out of a fist at Dave, who had been trying to sneak up on Jade. Dave yelped with surprise at this second shot to his dignity, and swore when that made Jade notice him.

"Oh, now things are just getting fucking hostile in this pool," Dave said, and dived in the opposite direction to reconsider his plan of attack. Jade was not much relieved, as Tavros scored a hit right on her nose.

"Hooooooooold o—hey!" Vrika snapped as Jade swept her arm to catch both Eridan and Tavros with
The three set to work getting Tavros into his floating chair, which involved getting him first back to the edge. Gamzee helped, moving for the first time since his talk with Karkat, and Jade played for a while with Terezi until taking a short break to poke Dave in the ribs. Other than that, things were very orderly, and when John finally arrived to complete their group, Feferi finally saw fit to get into the pool herself. Nepeta, once again full cat, continued to slap cautiously at the water, as though it would bite her. It seemed to Rose that she was nigh-high asking to be pushed in, but she felt a little too preoccupied to deal with that and would have to let one of the natural pranksters do that for her.

"Looks like fun!" John said by way of greeting as he came by Rose and Kanaya. "Going to go for a swim before you go?" he asked.

"Before we go where?" Rose asked. John's eyes flicked over towards Kanaya before saying anything to Rose, and swiftly realized he had been caught in the act. Rose turned back just in time to see Kanaya hide a signal she had sent him with his hands. Thankfully, she fessed before John made any poor excuses.

"I just told him the other day that I figured we would go back to my place after the party," she explained. In and of itself, this was not suspicious to Rose, but Kanaya's initial attempts to snuff it out had ruined its innocent impression. Luckily for Kanaya, that just helped her plan along. Before, Rose would have simply gone for the sake of going. Now, she was curious.

"All right," Rose said, all-knowing. Kanaya grabbed for one of her drinks to excuse her non-response, and John waved goodbye before to set down his towel. As he worked, Rose watched as he caught sight of Nepeta and immediately caught Rose's same bad idea. But John was a refined prankster, at least in terms of over-complication, and to Rose's surprise he walked away from Nepeta and off toward the only other person still out of the pool: Sollux. After a quick, whispered exchange that had them both giggling, they were both headed back to the pool.

"as the careful purrbeast continues her pawtious check, she begins to wonder if it is safe to go for a bath—the careful purrbeast has guests!" Nepeta looked first to one and then the other, and there Rose saw the beauty of John's plan, as she was too distracted to realize what was about to happen, as John and Sollux dropped down to the ledge beside her, and pushed her in. Her narration continued momementarily ("Bffpfft, ffp, gyak—!") before roleplayers' instinct took over and Nepeta began to flail like a housecat towards the ledge. There she pulled up on top with both arms to catch her breath, and sent a death glare at each boy as she dripped out from under her hat. Slowly, she reached up to pull off the hat, wrenched it out and returned it to her sylladex. Far less slowly, she then lunged out at them both and managed to grab hold of Sollux and pulled him in after her.

John followed of his own free will before she turned on him as well, and after splashing him with her foot, Nepeta went off on her own. She recovered her mood fast enough, as seen during a brief but animated visit to Tavros' chair, which Eridan was guarding like an amphibious hawk. After that, Nepeta went back after John, revenge in her eyes, but was interrupted by Equius, who admonished her on her sopping outfit. "But I don't have a bathing suit!" Nepeta complained.

"What you had was an entire day in which to make one," he pointed out.

"Hmph," Nepeta complained, but after she did, she caught sight of Karkat, resting in-between laps and watching the discussion from a distance. Suddenly, Nepeta was in the mood to compromise, and reached first to her side and then to her hip to remove her shirt and grungy pants into her sylladex. This left in her underwear, which was so uniform-spartan that none of the other Humans seemed to notice and none of the Trolls seemed to care, save Karkat, who recognized what she was doing and had done his best to leave the scene before he could be accused of anything at all. Nepeta pouted to
see him go but went off to join Jade, instead, who didn't seem to notice anything unusual even as she was hug-tackled from behind. Rose reasoned that the sturdy underclothes were the exact sort of thing one needed in a society of blade-wielding children, especially if one went hunting the local monster animals. Spry and muscular, Nepeta proved to be a terror in the water. Teamed up with Jade, she darted through the water with some speed, eager to coordinate an ambush they had planned.

"John raises a good question," Rose said, as Dave's arms gave out and disappeared under the water with the rest of him. "Do we want to go join the children?"

Kanaya laughed. "I hadn't intended on it. Do you?"

"Maybe if they calm down," Rose replied. Not that they showed any sign of stopping. For want of keeping him afloat, Tavros and his friends remained an island of stability, but the rest was chaos, and soon even an orderly diving game started by Feferi fell into disorder as Karkat, who had been dragged there by Terezi, started to cheat whenever his new kismesis was up to go.

The object of the game was to retrieve several coloured balls from the bottom of the pool in a single dive – the kind of improvised game one creates when one's toys only useful properties are whether it can or cannot float. Terezi could not smell the balls once she was underwater, but was not that bad at finding them if she took in the water ahead of her dive. Unfortunately, Karkat quickly discovered that she could not pick out the blue against the pool tile. Rose felt bad that she and Feferi had not caught on as long as they had, especially once Karkat tossed in a handful of nothing but blues as a finale. Shoving followed. Pelting with balls followed that. The Vantas/Pyrope promise to keep the kismesis cerebral was off to a fantastic start.

Unnoticed by all for a time, even to Rose, Gamzee had made off with more than a pair of the balls by stealing them during the arguments and hiding them in a broken pool filter with his feet, sneaking out one or two when dives began. In the end, it was someone outside their group who caught him in the act.

"Really, GZ?" Sollux asked, swimming up to him.

"Hey, bro-bro," Gamzee said at first, as lacking in presence as ever, hardly the kind of person you'd expect to be cheating at a children's game. He completely failed to notice Feferi come up from behind, even when Sollux pointed her toward the filter. She groaned, and that made Gamzee jump.

"Whoa, chica, didn't notice you there, all up in my personal space."

Feferi jumped back into the pool and stuck her arm into the filter to pull out ball after ball, as she muttered something about how she "knew" she "should have fixed this!"

"I've never seen those before in my life," Gamzee said, before the first ball had even cleared the surface.

Karkat and Terezi had still not noticed the exchange, and Sollux glanced at them before he told Gamzee to "Just don't start anything stupid."

Feferi took his lead and tossed Gamzee the last ball, which he received happily. "Right the fuck away, my man-man." The moment they turned about, he plugged the ball back into the filter.

Feferi, hearing the plunk of the ball hitting the water, shook her head, but then changed her mood completely before jumping over to Sollux.

"What's up, gourami?" she asked. Sollux did not seem to fully understand but months as Feferi's matesprit had clearly taught him to take it in stride as a fish reference.
"Last thing we need is TZ going after GZ in some sort of law-crazy caliginous two-plus-one-way," Sollux said.

"Aww, looking after my party!" Feferi said, in a way that was only just teasing. Then she gasped. "You're like their auspistice!" She leaned forward with a toothy grin. "I should tell them! I will!"

"What?" was the wrong reaction, and Feferi almost got away before Sollux grabbed her by the arm. She immediately tried to escape below, and Rose's attention was pulled away by shouting at the other side of the pool. Dave, it would seem, had gotten his hand a pool noodle, Jade and John had soon armed themselves with their powers, and all three of her best friends had taken up half the pool with their wobbly fencing.

Vriska pushed Tavros carefully out of the way of the fight, Eridan tailing close behind. "Geeeeeeeeze," she said, "someone should have told us to come armed!" She looked back and shouted: "Hit him, John! "Thump. "There we go!"

Tavros laughed. "It's like the big fight between Hook, Scar and Bones."

Rose was surprised to find that Vriska knew exactly what he was referring to, as she was at a loss, and it seemed Eridan was as well. Vriska even laughed. "You're right! Caught in the shallows, stabbing at each other, trying to be the last one alive before…" She got an evil look in her eye.

Even stranger to Rose, Tavros shared it. "The cannons!" he shouted.

"Cully!" Vriska said to Eridan. "Fetch the captain his ammunition?"

Eridan was too confused to argue, and went to Gamzee to borrow the remaining pool balls, many of which were now being held up in a pyramid by an incredibly dextrous pair of feet.

Eridan looked at the trick wish admiration. "You know, speaking as friends, you should really try to unicycle with your hands and juggle with your feet. It'd be more impressive, you know?"

Gamzee did not reply at first. Instead, he looked towards Eridan, almost as much at him as past him, glassy-eyed and absent. Uninterrupted, Eridan began to collect the balls from his feet, placing them in one of his inventory bottles. Gamzee did not initially react to this, either, save in how he seemed to freeze all over. That caught Eridan's attention, and he looked up to meet Gamzee's eyes, which ignored him. But after a moment of looking in Eridan's general direction, Gamzee seemed to twitch at the lips. Slowly, his smile appeared, cracking into existence and pulling up, up, and then more, exposing his upper fangs as his smile grew bit by bit. Eridan began to back away, and only then did the lines around Gamzee's eyes tighten as he seemed to notice him for the first time.

"HeY flsHbRo," he said, in his absolute normal tone.

Eridan choked. "S'goin' all right, Gamz," he said, in response to a question that had not been asked. He patted Gamzee's hand where it lay on the edge of the pool. "You're a good kid."

Eridan turned, and Gamzee's hand snapped up to grab him by the shoulder. Eridan seemed to shrink away into a little floating ball. "Hey bro," Gamzee whispered, such that only Eridan and Rose with her powers could hear. "You datin' my moirail?"

Eridan's response came out more as a squeal than words. "Yyyeeees?"

Gamzee clapped him hard on the shoulder. "Lookin' after him too?" Eridan nodded. "All right then, my man," he said into Eridan's ear, and he tossed Eridan another ball. Rose was not sure from where he had pulled it. "Doin' a great job! Right?"
"Right, Gamzee!" Eridan agreed.

Gamzee nodded. "Doin' a great job."

Eridan fled.

Vriska snapped up the balls as soon as Eridan poured them from his broken virtual bottles, and armed him and Tavros at random. Tavros smiled to Eridan, and tried to ask him about his talk with Gamzee, though Eridan just shook his head. Shrugging, Tavros raised a hand. "Annnnd... fire!"

Meanwhile, Rose's friends fought on, oblivious. "Face it, you guys," John had been saying. "You just can't get past my Double Noodle Defence."

"Well you can't hit anything with them!" Jade pointed out. "We just have to— Ack!" she shouted, as a ball crashed into the water next to her.

The Double Noodle Defence proved less effective against projectiles, and Dave's attempts to bat them out of the sky only rearmed Tavros and his trusty crew. Things were looking bad for the Humans, until Jade dropped her noodle and began to return fire.

The only real casualties in the fight belonged to those not fighting the war, though Tavros nearly fell in the water at one point. Karkat and Terezi were constantly interrupted from their argument by errant projectiles, and Equius had to find a way to return balls that had landed near him without embedding a deflated wad of rubber three inches into the tilework ("COD DAMMIT -- EQUUIS!!"). Kanaya even got hold of a red ball, but despite Rose's insistence that she "Aim for the head," the ball landed somewhere in between the combatants where John bravely went out to retrieve it.

Under the bevy of fire, Sollux and Feferi re-emerged in a far corner where they were able to go without ducking for cover for an extended period of time.

Whatever they had been talking about between ducks for safety had clearly run its course. "Hey," Feferi said, as a change of subject. "Do you know if Aradia's coming?"

"AA? Why would I know?" Sollux said.

"I dunno!" Feferi said. "Who else? I mean, you two are—"

"Try him," Sollux interrupted, pointing to Equius.

"Whaaaale... I don't really want to ask Equius," Feferi admitted. "He and I are having a bit of a—"

"Hey, Horsebreath!" Sollux called.

Equius stopped his laps and began to tread water. An angry look began to cross his face. "Why did I respond to that name?" he asked himself at first. "Most especially from you."

"Can't imagine," Sollux said. "Look, have you seen AA?"

Equius, judging the truth from Sollux's tone, glared toward Feferi and answered her instead of her unintended middleman. "Miss Megido's schedule is erratic, and I'm not necessarily privy to it." He did not seem much pleased by that. "You'd be better off asking Strider." He seemed even less pleased by that.

"Strider?" Feferi repeated, and Sollux: "Eh? Why?"

"I know nothing more about the details than either of you, I can assure," Equius growled. That, at
least, was directed at Sollux, as if daring him to say otherwise.

Sollux, clearly not caring to respond to Equius, turned to Dave instead. "Well, I guess we can wait a bit," he said.

But Feferi did not. She headed over at once, holding up an arm to deflect an errant cannonball. Eridan ceased firing at once and Tavros, seeing his matesprit halt, did the same. Vriska only threw one more ball, braining John, but after that she seemed to decide it was no fun to carry on alone.

"'Sup?" Dave asked in the sudden, eerie silence, once he realized Feferi had come up to him. He plucked up the ball that had bounced off of John's head and tossed it to himself as he spoke with her.

"Have you seen Aradia?" Feferi asked.

Rose leaned over to Kanaya. "Well that's not going to get her anywhere."

Sure enough, Dave's response was: "Sure, lots of times."

She groaned. "I mean, is she coming to the party?"

"Dunno," Dave said, tossing his ball from one hand to the other. "Is she into rust? I bet she is. 'Oh, my lowlooded loovely,'" Dave impersonated, trying to land Equius' tone and failing. He reached out with his hand and mimed stroking an invisible cheek. "'I've taken all of the necessary precautions. My touch will never again make you…'" Dave then made a sound that was probably meant to be rusting. "'…Fiddlesticks.'"

"I'll have you know," Equius boomed from the other side of the pool, "that Aradia was always equipped with the best available anti-rust protections. I am a consummate professional."

"Oh we know about you and 'consummate,'" Dave said, and Rose mouthed along with him, having seen the reply coming well ahead of time. "Well at least he's self-aware," Dave said on his own, and then shrugged. "Dunno, princess, you had better check around." He then turned and chucked the ball to one side, hitting Karkat. As Karkat fussed and swore, Terezi started to laugh, but stopped as soon as she caught sight of who had thrown the ball. Dave gave no impression that he had noticed.

Feferi was pensive, but returned to Sollux and guided him to the poolside. "I'm gonna go find her," Feferi explained, kissing Sollux goodbye.

"Why?" Sollux asked, echoing Rose's inner thoughts.

"Beca—"

"rrrrrr!" In an instant, Sollux and Feferi disappeared in a blur of water and motion, and soon Rose was greeted with the sight of Feferi stuffing her fist in front of her face to keep from laughing as Nepeta exacted her revenge on Sollux, narrating: "the terrible beast latches on its first unwary purrey, threatening to pull it to the depths below!"

"Dammit! FF, help!" Sollux admonished.

"I can't!" Feferi squealed, which was true mostly for laughing. "I'm sorry, guppy, you shouldn't step between a shippershark and its prey!"

Sollux struggled with one of Nepeta's hands. "That's bullshit and you—"

"Yes!" Nepeta proclaimed, sitting upright from where she was tangled about Sollux's back. "That's
what I am! the shippershark has come to get you to pursue your quadrants!" She gently pushed him towards Feferi. "Kiss! Kiiiiiss!" Sollux threw Nepeta off of him and back into the water, where she surfaced after a delay, eyes narrow, and tapped two fingers together. "Kiiiiiss," she murmured, and swam away.

Unfortunately for Feferi, she had not taken advantage of the opening to escape, and she and Sollux were soon talking again in harsh whispers. The hissing, barely heard debate escalated very quickly, so quickly that Rose was not able to follow it, might very well have escalated into an open fight if Feferi had not been forced to crack down on rulebreakers running around her pool as things intensified between her and Sollux. In what could be described as a show of solidarity even under pressure, Sollux threw his weight in behind all her decisions, only for the both of them to return to their snit fit the moment eyes were off of them.

For her part, Nepeta snuck up on Equius. In spite of her efforts he saw her coming from well off and sighed with resignation as he waited for her to arrive. She made no sound as she went, or at least, none Rose could make out over the sound of Feferi and Sollux on one side and Jade and John on the other. It would seem either John or Jade had tried to tickle the other, only to learn that Dave was better at it than both of them. Not that he would ever have admitted it.

"the furrocius shippershark edges in for another of her most purrculiar sort of kills!" Nepeta said. She then pounced and latched around Equius, her face fierce as she demanded: "And how are your relationships?" like some kind of aquatic Cupid Claus. (Claws?)

"My quadrants are fine, thank you Nepeta," he tried, but she only climbed higher, trying to speak into his ear. "Nepeta."

"the shippershark says: 'Mr. Grouchy Boy had better start standing up for himself when the dave human is making fun of him, because it doesn't make him look very STRONG.' Does it?"

"Stop this at once."

"the shippershark is wondering if maybe the f001ish musclebeast that wandered into her lake—"

"I thought I was the 'grouchy boy,'" Equius pointed out.

Nepeta glared at his hair. "…she was thinking about what they were talking about the other night. about… ah…" Her eyes darted about the room, unaware that Rose – and Terezi, Rose noted – were listening in. "…a second quadrant?"

"Second quadrant?" Equius asked, and Nepeta made a face. "I remember our discussion about Miss Megido, but I don't know what you mean about a second quadrant."

"You know," Nepeta said, and she made a face. "Your spades."

"Don't be silly," Equius demanded. "I don't have a first quadrant." Nepeta cocked her head. "I thought I had a moirail, but I'd never consider a relationship with articulate sealife."

Nepeta's eyes went wide and she laughed. "Oh my pawd you made a joke. Karkat!" Karkat dived underwater as he swam past. "He made a joke!" Nepeta giggled as Karkat escaped to the opposite end of the pool. Nepeta then lowered herself down to hug Equius and purred. "Actually," she said after a moment, "that's sort of what I want to talk to you about."

"Yes, I know you wanted to talk about Aradia," said Equius.

"No!" Nepeta's voice dropped. "I was wondering if... you know..."
Nepeta's whisper from there was much harder to hear, a rare show of a huntress' legitimate stealth for all she chose to forgo it on a regular day. Rose could not pick it up.

"Don't be absurd," Equius said, shocked. "Me and Miss… Aradia and I…"

"Oh come on," Nepeta said. "Why not?"

"It's absurd! It's… 100d! It's wrong." Nepeta groaned in response as he began to carry them both away from the others.

They continued to talk as they went, Equius growing more and more agitated with each step. Rose strained to hear more, and so had to jump when she heard a "honk!" beside her. "Hey," Gamzee said, his bulge hovering over Rose. "Could I be all up and grabbin' one of your kickin' elixirs?"

Rose found herself just as speechless as Karkat, in the great long shadow of the thing. Her only source of mental comfort was that anyone else in the room would do the same, until Kanaya suddenly spoke up and said: "Go ahead, Gamzee." He left soon after, tossing the bottle to himself like a juggling pin.

"Curse your lesbian powers," Rose muttered.

"My what?" Kanaya asked. Rose had not really intended to explain, but Kanaya was interrupted all the same. "Oh!" she said, as Vriska arrived with the first of what turned out to be nearly a dozen drink requests from the others. A line had soon formed. For a few minutes things Rose and Kanaya's chairs became the centre of the party. There was a moment of confusion once the basket had been emptied, and Kanaya began to look around, but it was Rose who found her chastity key, somehow having displaced her regular bookmark in her novel. She passed the key to Kanaya, who unlocked a cooler of drinks prepared for just such a contingency. As she worked, Dave appeared by Rose's side, his eye on Gamzee and his eyebrow cocked. "So," Dave said. "That's no cloaca."

"No," Rose granted. "…but it is Gamzee," she said, trying to pay more attention to her book than either boy. "Perhaps he just shoved something into his pants. Why don't you give it a squeeze and see if it honks?"

"Or if he does," quipped Terezi, who was passing. She chuckled at her own joke as she passed. Rose looked up at that interruption: Dave ignored their passer-by, and for her part, Terezi seemed to have made the joke for her own sake and was ignoring them in turn. The two of them were starting to intrigue Rose enough to justify an inquiry, but here at the party was not the time for such a sensitive discussion. Terezi went from there to chat with Eridan and Tavros as they hung out in the pool waiting for Vriska to return with drinks.

"By the way," Rose said to Dave, to shift his attention away from Terezi, for all he pretended not to look. "You'll be happy to know that in spite of your on-hand interactions with Jade and your crotchward gazing in regards to the clown, your poker face remains intact. Nylon mesh and all that."

"My wha—oh. Right." Dave looked away, and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Well whoop-de-doo for me."

Nice try, Strider, but... "Of course, I did say I'd try to break it myself if necessary," Rose threatened, and tapped her chin in thought. Her finger presented the answer straight away, and so Rose looked up to Dave and then licked at her fingertip.

Dave was looking away, and so had no way of truly knowing what Rose was doing, but he had an instinct for that sort of thing. After a while, when the others had left with their drinks, he asked:
"Kanaya, is she making an obviously licentious Human gesture behind my back?"

Kanaya, who had been reading one of her magazines, looked up with a sigh and found Rose looking back to her, her finger in her mouth. Rose cocked an eyebrow. "...I can only presume," Kanaya replied, and snapped her magazine before returning to it. Dave left with a snort. Seeing him go, Kanaya leaned toward Rose and asked: "Score one for you in the incest minefield of competitive passive-aggression?"

"Aw," Rose said, "and you were worried you wouldn't understand siblings or passive-aggression!"

Kanaya smirked. Later, she asked another question. "What was all that?" When Rose looked to her for clarification, Kanaya popped a finger in her mouth, and Rose laughed.

"Oh, you'd owe me for that answer," Rose said.

"Not if it's what I think it is, but I can't be sure," Kanaya said, and she rubbed at her side. "...What would I owe you?"

"Hmm... that depends," Rose said with a grin of her own.

Some chat later, there was an outburst from Tavros' group. Terezi headed off, smiling though not exactly gloating. Whatever she said, it had left Vriska scowling.

"I'm getting a tube," Vriska proclaimed, as if that somehow made up for things. Eridan called after her, and "All right, all right!", Vriska got a second inner tube for him as well, and soon all three were coasting about on the water.

"Would you like something to drink, Rose?" Kanaya asked.

"No," Rose said after some thought. "I think I'm going to go for a swim now that everyone's finally calm."

She got up and headed into the water, which was warm and inviting, and took the opportunity to enjoy herself, including trying to incite another water battle between John and Jade (Rose felt that if her psychiatric skills were not being put to use for good, they might as well be put to use for evil). After a quarter hour or so, as Rose was gossiping with Karkat as they both rested between laps, they realized that they had come to a stop just within earshot of Feferi and Sollux's ongoing fight, which had at some point or another moved out of the pool and into a far corner of the room near some fire equipment.

"Human Christ," Karkat swore, but Rose noticed he did not break away from the ledge any more than she did. Feferi, who was leaning up against the corner with her arms crossed, had been saying something about Aradia Rose had not been able made out over Karkat.

"Oh my god, FF, will you stop it?" Sollux demanded. "youve been on my nub about this for day2! why do you even care?"

"I'm just trying to help!" Feferi protested. "The only reason you two have been so much as in the same room since you hooked back up is because you never leave the computer lab!" Karkat snorted a laugh, and Rose silenced him with a glare. "...You're not talking," Feferi added, her voice sad and fading. They both looked very tired.

"It's been three days!" Sollux said, never-the-less.

"And this is the perfect excuse to finally do something together!" Feferi countered.
"It's a pool party!" Sollux pointed out.

Feferi threw up her hands. "Well what was I supposed to do? Invite everyone to someone else's place?"

She pointed out to the pool, and Rose and Karkat both feigned that they were turning back on their laps at that very moment. After a moment of frustration, Karkat found a lost pool ball and he took to gesturing with it as he talked. "If she fucks things up with him, I'm never going to hear the end of it. And then SHE'S never going to hear the end of it!"

Karkat tossed the ball to Rose, and she took up their exchange. "So your excuse is… you're being a good buddy? Interesting. Does he know about this blatant, pale interest?" Rose returned the ball.

"Hey, I wouldn't keep that whiny son of an Earth Female Canid in one of my quadrants if he literally crawled up my ass and picked out drapes! Am I using that right?" he asked.

"I suppose. What's with the Human swears?" Rose asked without being given the ball.

"I dunno, John asked me to branch out," Karkat said, a bit too honestly. He deliberately hit Rose in the shoulder with the next ball, and she made sure to aim for the throat when his next turn came. "What's your excuse?"

"I like to know what's going on," Rose said, and took her opportunity mid-sentence when he would least expect it. "It keeps me sane."

Karkat coughed to regain his breath. "Why, because everyone else is crazy too?"

As they had been fighting, Feferi had carried on. "Besides!" she had said as Karkat had thrown the first ball. "I like to swim!!"

"well maybe you 2houd ju2t miind your own bu2ine22 then!" Sollux argued. "Since when is what I do with my own friends such a big deal to you? you haven't an2wered my que2tiion!"

"What you do with your quadrants is my business, buster," Feferi pointed out, "and because I CAR-E about you!" She collapsed back against the wall, and pinched at her nose. "Ugh, I can't fight with you when you're like this!" She turned her head aside and muttered, so low that Rose wondered if Sollux even made her out. "Why am I always attracting oblivious dorks? First Eridan—"

"What about Ampora?" Sollux asked, having caught at least that much.

Feferi shouted this time. "First Eridan, now you! And you haven't filled a quadrant ever despite Karkat, Aradia, Gamzee, and yes, Eridan too!" Sollux made a face – so did Karkat, Rose was upset that she hadn't caught whether it had cropped up to his name or Eridan's – but Feferi continued, stamping her foot. "We both need someone stable for once, don't you sea?"

A gentle splash nearby had Karkat and Rose both jumping out of their skins as Nepeta came in, unnoticed. "I can help with that," she said to them.

"Shh!" they both replied, and pushed her back under the water.

Sollux was almost shouting. "FF, I'm not one of your culling projects!" That had her surprised, and speechless. "You just keep poking and prying, and you thiink ii dont notice?"

Sollux had not replied, so Feferi, talking with her arms now, got up to leave. "Well I'm going to be proactive even if you won't!" she said.
She stormed out, Sollux letting her go without issue. If anything, he seemed to be getting a headache. Rose felt a cold, firm grip on her back as Nepeta dangled off of both her and Karkat's shoulders to get a better look at the scene. "Aw," she said when she realized it was over.

Karkat glared at her. "What are you doing?"

"Hangin' out!" Nepeta said at once, and only then realizing her pun, she gave a big smile and began to swing back and forth between them in the water.

Rose was about to say something, when someone atop the edge flicked her over the head. She turned to see Dave standing there and, as she did, Karkat gently extracted Nepeta from Rose's shoulders. Rose soon had had to look back at the Trolls, when Nepeta chirped "Oh!" and Dave looked their way.

It would seem that, in her surprise at being removed from Rose, Nepeta had latched both arms around Karkat's neck. Karkat's hands tensed in the water beside her, as if he were struggling to decide how do remove her without exasperating the problem, and settled on a rare display of good behaviour. Karkat put his hands on her torso – judging by his eyes: well and deliberately away from her bra – and pushed her away, more like a kind suggestion than a forcible removal. While Nepeta had obviously not misinterpreted his gesture, her reflex response was to giggle and blush. When he reached for her hands, Nepeta found her self-control and let go, much to Karkat's relief. Nepeta went swimming back toward Jade.

"Smooth," Dave said to his fellow Knight.

"Gallant, even," Rose said as the thought crossed her mind.

Karkat grunted in reply at first, but then said: "Here's another one from John: fuck off, nunsacks." He then flipped them both off, and swam away.

"Mine," Dave muttered, "that was mine." He shook his head. "Anyway."

"Yes," Rose replied, turning back.

Dave pointed over his shoulder, toward the redundant set of changing rooms that interlinked Feferi's dungeon home. "I'm out," he said.

"Out: I'm too cool for this shit 'out'?" Rose asked. "Or—"

"Out." Dave confirmed.

Rose tensed, and began to shimmy along the ledge and back to the corner, as far away from John and Jade as possible. Pulling her weight up onto the ledge, Rose let out a tired sight and clasped a fist in the opposite hand. "Right," she said. She must have been mumbling, as Dave lowered to sit by the pool. "You know, you've really got a way with pulling a girl down." He smirked. "Just going to leave us in the middle of the party?"

"My shift," he said. "Girl's gotta plug in her batteries just like everybody else, and we can't really leave it—"

"No," Rose agreed, to keep him from saying anything anyone might overhear. "I mean, I know we were talking about it, but guess it just hadn't really sunk in that you were just gonna up and..." He shrugged. Rose was not sure quite what she wanted to say. "I was talking to..." Rose cut off before saying Terezi's name in hope it might be fudged in Dave's head to John's. "I heard things are pretty bad."
"Eh," Dave said, with just enough of a lilt that Rose felt he meant it. "Pretty routine, really."

Rose lowered her voice, and her eyes. "...I hear we've all died."

Not looking at him, Rose did not see Dave's exact response, but she imagined the usual Strider stoney-face. "...Yeah."

"But you've been able to—"

"Usually we keep it from happening in the first place," Dave interrupted. Rose harrumphed into her arms. She had not been ready for this conversation, for all she had been joking about it earlier in the day. That said, she felt that it was important to get things straight from the beginning. She tried to keep her eyes off of Dave, trying in vain to hear his answers from his speech alone, to pretend as though it were his usual text typing in front of her. She was familiar with the words, but not the motions and the sounds and the looks: Rose had no basis on which to judge her friend in the real world. She just had not had the time.

Dave was talkative enough, for all the answers were stoic and useless, little more than Rose had already inferred from logic or her chat with Terezi. "Just you, John, Harley and Vantas," came one answer.

"Oh, Jade knows?"

"Pretty recent."

Another question answered: "Eh, it's dull, mostly," and another, "Maybe he shows every four shifts?" when the subject finally shifted to Jack. Dave's forthright responses made Rose more sure that he was still obfuscating the truth, somehow. She envisioned the worst kind of exaggerations, with the fourteen of them dead and Dave and Aradia forced to rewind time and time again to keep them in place, and Jack always the returning figure, flicking in at the edge of her imagination. Vaguely, she remembered the last time she had been able to get a good look at the demon dog. John had lain dead on the tower, and Dave's body lay smashed against the Battlefield tile. She knew how she would have felt, if she were in Dave's place, and with him pretending to be so measured and calm...

"What about you?" she asked him after a while.

"I'm late," he joked, though Rose had to admit she had kept him there longer than he had probably intended.

Damn the man, Rose thought. Covering us is one thing, but doesn't he realize we're concerned?

Rose looked up at Dave and, as she did, she noticed something odd about him that she had not noticed before. Unfortunately, that was also the moment Dave stood, and started talking his way down a segue that would allow him to leave. Feeling the need to say something, anything at all to keep him from leaving at once, Rose rallied together a bit of rote sentimentality, much to her humiliation: "...Promise me you won't die, Strider."

Dave did not miss a beat. "Well if you insist, but I gotta say, you're fucking with my evening plans here."

Damn. With Dave in the zone and her off her feet, Rose felt there was no other way to proceed than to dig herself in further. Calling his attention with: "Dave…", she passed along her message along without the traditional joke, by pointing to her chin.
Dave looked at her funny, and then rubbed at his own, which clued him in. "...I'll have to go bug Egbert tonight. Dork's got more shaving cream than he'll need in his life. Thanks," he added to Rose. "Hadn't noticed."

"Yeah," Rose said, her head falling back to her arms. "Me neither."

But Dave's calm expression faded as he caught sight of something in John's direction, and went visibly confused. "...The hell are they doing?"

Rose turned, and saw Jade and John, both with drinks in one hand and game powers channeling through the other, playing with a basketball-sized orb of pool water. Jade held the ball aloft as John attacked with quick bursts of spinning air. "Hey, Rose!" John called after a moment, not looking up. Then he added: "Duck!" The ball was then teleported away.

Rose realized what they were doing a second too late, and tried to get underwater only to feel the freezing-cold ball of water pour out on top of Dave, dousing her in the process.

"Sorry, Rose!" Jade said with a laugh. "Bye, Dave!"

"Bye!" John chorused.

Dave locked eyes with Rose, but then headed out, calm as if he were a much drier, warmer man, and left the room for the showers, a trail of icy footprints left in his wake.

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After showering off the chlorine and getting dressed, Dave found that his extended chat with Rose had left him with limited time to get ready for his patrol shift. He waved to himself in the changing room as he entered the showers, and set to scrubbing.

Patrols were nothing worth writing home about, unless Jack showed up too close for comfort. Usually, they meant standing outside on the roof or pacing the meteor, keeping an eye out for the man himself. Some days, it meant adjusting the sensors, but unless Aradia had noticed something irregular, that wasn't likely to come up that particular evening, as they had been at them the night before. But for all they were usually boring, every patrol first meant getting ready to go into fight, just in case. Dave waved to himself in the showers as he exited the changing room and headed back home.

After some stretches, Dave dumped out everything he had brought to the party in his sylladex for one potential joke or another and replaced them with sharp things, heavy things. Jack had never learned to hashrap – if they weren't flying around all the time, it would have been the perfect way to fight the bastard.

Dave left his room all but late, and after a bit of a walk, decided he'd rather be early, instead. That kind of Time play tended to leave him more tired than not (an early attempt to give himself a whole night's sleep during the game had ruined him for two days), but a minute or two here or there were not going to hurt him in the long run. He figured he might fill Aradia in on the epic pool war she had missed out on, maybe convince her to make an appearance while he was gone and come to the next party if someone ever threw another. To his surprise, he found her far earlier than he expected, not far from the exit to the Lab. That was her luxury, he supposed, being able to link with the sensors wirelessly, but she usually preferred to sit alone. He could see why, as today, hanging out indoors had gotten her caught by Feferi. When he caught wind of Aradia's suspicious tone of voice, Dave ducked behind a corner. His partner would know he was there, of course, but Feferi…

"...this entire p00l party setup was a ruse"
Feferi replied, sheepish but forthright: "The pool party idea was already on-hand when I needed a ruse."

Aradia did need to pause for any further calculation. "they're n0t h0nestly that hard t0 distract"

"They are! Kind of!" Feferi cleared her throat, and she slumped against the corner with her back to Dave, arms crossed. "Don't you think it's a little hard to get them all pointed in the same direction?"

Dave didn't need to see Aradia to know her response was a robo stone face of one who took some serious issues with rhetoricals. "Please get to the point."

Feferi paused, and adjusted her hair with one hand. "All right," she said, and threw her hands up. "…How's your love life?"

Some part of Aradia beeped, another ribbited. "This is about Sollux."

Feferi sighed. "It's not R-E-ELY about Sollux—"

"In the interest of getting this over with as soon as possible," Aradia said, "are you trying to ward me off or to gather information?"

"I… I'm trying to…" Feferi went on a tangent: "Look, I'm trying to give an informative answer without sounding indignant." She then cleared her throat to buy additional time. "I am… sort of asking to gather information. It's not just Sollux! You've got… other quadrants…?"

"Equius," Aradia concluded. "sollux and i are starting fr0m scratch," she explained. Slowly. "if i fill any 0ther quadrant it will be because that pers0n fits it AND s0llux d0es n0t" Aradia said, dodging the new question entirely. "thats really all there is t0 say 0n the matter if it means anything at all"

"And I'm ALSO wondering how YOU feel!" Feferi said, though there was something less genuine on her voice, mingled with frustration. "Sollux has told me so much about you since we met, but I don't really know how you felt about him back then, and how you do now about… ANYT)(ING!!"

"I'm taking the chance to make up my mind," Aradia said. "That's the point, after all."

"Ugh!" Feferi swung back her right arm, perhaps to hit a wall that wasn't quite there. "Maybe I just want my matesprit to have someone in his life that can make up her mind about stuff that actually matters!"

Feferi stormed down the hall from there, her eyes on the ground as she went. A few steps down the hall, out of sight from Aradia, she stopped, tensed, but in the end, chose to press on. In doing so, she bumped into Dave. "Oh. Sorry," she said, acting as though nothing more toward had happened than a hallway collision. She sidled past Dave before clearing out, double-time.

Dave found Aradia lingering where Feferi had left her, standing neutral, which he had long had come to see as "lost in thought." Being backed up by a computer, it was a pose that tended not to last very long, and this was no exception. "On shift?" she asked him.

"Yeah. What the hell was that about?" he asked, nodding back toward Feferi. Before Aradia could answer, he through in his support. "Subtle as a great white torpedo."

"There's a right and a wrong way to check your quadrants' quadrants," Aradia said, once as though to Feferi's trail rather than to Dave. "That was not the right one. I don't know what it was but... not the right one."
"Tell me about it. And I don't even have any stake in this mono-poly quarter-fuck." Dave headed toward the hall beyond, barely pausing to set a hand on Aradia's shoulder. "Go take a break," he said. "Maybe tell Two-Squared that he's dating the Dropout from the Black Ops Lagoon."

Aradia smirked and pushed him out to the hall by his shoulder. "Tell me if you see Jack," she said. "Might be easier for me to just hit something."

"What else is he good for?" Dave asked. "Hitting, ruining parties, maybe we tie a bone to his tail get him to chase himself around in a circle. Classic!" When she didn't respond to that, Dave changed his approached. "Hey. Don't mind the relationship shit today. Everybody's knee-deep."

That got a reaction, if only sarcasm. "Oh? You?"

"Of course me!" Dave said, and then he sniffed dramatically. "I confessed to my long-lost son today."

Aradia blinked, first with eyes and then with lights, obviously aware this was a joke but unable to work out exactly how it worked. "…You don't understand our 'mono-poly quarter-fuck'," she repeated. As her live personality bubbled to the surface, she began to play with her hair. "And I don't understand your Human family tree dynamics."

"Fair 'nough," Dave said. "Feel free to abuse 'em, then. If Pinky comes back to you, you just tell her that Captor's like a brother to you. A second cousin, maybe. Or a creepy uncle!" Aradia pushed her hair out of her face to get a clear look at Dave as he babbled. "We could work on creepy uncle, dude could pull it off. By the time she realizes we're bullshitting her, you'll have it all sorted out and a sweep worth of other things."

"Hmph," Aradia said as a laugh. "Or I could just make up my mind. She's a jerk, but she doesn't have a bad point." She tucked back her hair and smiled.

"Hey, so long as that's coming from you and not Princess None-Of-Her-Coddammed-Business up there in your gills," Dave granted. "But throw me a bone here! Come up with a new reason to throw Peixes into my prank, or you're just gonna hurt its feelings, you know?"

"Oh, definitely," Aradia said, and seeing that he turned to go, added: "Have a nice night. I'm going to download Troll Bioshock and blow up an underwater city. No reason."

"Yeah, see you. Five minutes, though," he said. "I've gotta go alchemize a moustache."

"Is this for your stupid plan?" Aradia asked.

"The creepy uncle moustache is the cornerstone of my stupid plan, yes." Dave started one step down the hall before something occurred to him. "Hey. You and me. Let's play 'Lalonde' here for a minute. Doesn't leave this room. Captor: making out or making right?"

Aradia grinned at the phrasing, and started to think on the choice. "Well…"

"Nope, nope. No thinking," Dave said, "this worked with Lalonde this morning it'll work here. It's magic." Aradia opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off with: "No! Nope! No. I'm magic!" The last cut off nothing more than a would-be laugh. "See, that's not how this is supposed to work. You've gotta trust me and just spit it out. It's too late now, forget it. Let's be honest here: he's just another one in your line of guys stretching on into forever."

"My what?" she asked.
"Oh come on," Dave said. "You've got the sasquatch. You've got the nerd. You've got the default in a scarf, though don't feel proud about that. Stop smiling!" he added, and Aradia forced her body into a straight-face. "That's creepy as fuck." That broke it back to a smile. "Now where was I? Oh, right. You've got the wiener…"

"I should talk to Tavros again," Aradia said, as much serious as she was playing into the game. "You've caught me, Strider. I'm just mad pimpin'."

"You fucking are," Dave said, though he had to cover up a laugh with a cough to say it. "Next thing I know you're going to be watching some of Egbert's concentrated phlegm and he'll be none the wiser as you work your way into raiding his Cave of Wonders. Next day you'll be breaking out the Animal Crackers for the big… trapeze finale." Dave screwed up his face. "There's a visual I didn't need."

"Don't take it personally, Dave," she replied, and rubbed his, "you'll be the crown jewel in my collection. Whipping up mixes for me every day, getting your jam on. Getting my jam on." She stopped her hand up against his neck. Her hand was still a strange mix of inner heat and cold metal, but her face was teasing. "No worries," she said, but then removed the hand to check its nails. "With my permission, of course."

"Hmm… well..."

"Don't talk back!" she interrupted.

Dave nodded. "Okay, give me a second." He held up to hands like a scale. "Mixing all day… versus sloppy eighths after Egbert and the clown."

"That's the deal," she said at first, but then waved it off. "Oh, I suppose I could squeeze you and John together."

"Mean me and John could squeeze y—" Dave had to stop himself. "Did you walk into that or are you just not aware of what you're saying? I just don't know where to draw the line with you twelve, you gotta give me a point of reference that doesn't involve propositioning Egbert."

Aradia reached up to tickle Dave under the chin, perhaps to see if he would allow it (he did not). "…See you in a few guys, Dave," she said when he pushed her hand away. "Of course, if Feferi gets any weirder, maybe I'll have to push you back one more step."

"Not complaining," Dave said at once.

Aradia raised an eyebrow. "...Oh, interesting."

"Hey, just on principle, I mean."

"Mm-hm." Aradia found he was willing to let her set a finger on his chest. "I'll have to ask Rose about this one."

"Just don't mention the thing with squishing and John," Dave said, and he turned without reacting to her touch. "All three of us will never hear the end of it."

"Going to go back to your moustache plan?" Aradia asked.

"Definitely. Make sure to tell Rose about that one," he requested. "Or I'll show up wearing it myself, one way or the other."
"You got it."

Dave pressed on and out the door, not honestly bothering with a moustache. Instead, he found himself wishing Aradia really had shown up to Peixies' pixie panties party, because between the two of them they would have had the whole place under their dorky thumbs. Next time. Soon he was outside, on the dusty surface of the asteroid, and tried to toss aside his thoughts so that he could focus on Jack, and work.

But as he let the Lab's outside door shut behind him, Dave found that he was not yet alone. The air outside – if it really was "air" in the Medium – was deathly still, as ever, and the sky was clear past the asteroids, but Karkat and Terezi's voices echoed from around the corner. They appeared before Dave could react, but what could he have done? Turned away? Walked up to them? They were obviously Going Outside on what Dave figured was their first Hatedate, probably sprouted by their fighting at the pool. They could have left any time after he had gone to the showers. It wouldn't be right to interrupt, and it wouldn't do to be seen running away. Still, Dave tensed up at the sight of Terezi, like he had wanted to do ever since Rose had mentioned Pyrope that morning, and would have done every time he saw her if Rose and the others hadn't been around watching him. He stepped away from the door, just in case they wanted to leave that very pass. That would have suited Dave just fine.

What a day, he thought.

"Do you know what your PROBLEM is?" Karkat asked Terezi, not having yet seen Dave. "I'LL GIVE YOU A HINT. YOU'VE TURNED THIS PLACE INTO A CLOWN STY IN ABOUT THE PAST NINE HOURS. HOW DO YOU DO THAT? PERSONALITY ISSUES, THAT'S WHAT. THAT'S YOUR PROBLEM."

"Not really," Terezi laughed. "You just go 'H3Y G4MZ33, L3T'S GO FUCK SH1T UP' and he's like—" Terezi stopped, sniffed the air deliberately and, not liking the result, stuffed her hands in her pockets. The two of them were back in their usual clothes, though the void-air had done nothing to dry out their hair. Terezi stayed silent as they approached.

Karkat lowered his eyes and doubled his pace. "Oh. It's just you," he said to Dave. "What are you doing up here? Taking yourself out for a well-deserved Hatedate?"

"She knows, asshole," Dave said. "Nice communication."

"I know she knows!" he said. "I just..." Karkat looked from Dave to Terezi and seemed to decide it was better off not rising to the taunt. "Wasn't sure," he said instead. "Fine then. We'll be going. I just thought it was Megido's shift a little longer."

"Just missed her," Dave said. "Must have headed in after you headed out." Karkat harrumphed and led Terezi toward the door, even holding it for her.

Dave tried to hold it in, at first. He tried, and he tried, but as he watched Terezi go, trying not to even look at him, memories started to well up on him. During the day, or even the past few days, those memories had been memories of the fight, of her screaming and shouting confusing xeno-sentiments at her and of him locking himself in his room like a baby while John and Jade pounded on the door. Now it was different. Now they were happy memories.

"You sure know how to pick them, don't you?" he said to Terezi without thinking any further. "He's just a fucking gentleman. Bet he's just as nice to you after your shit-fits as he is to your girlfriends."

Terezi stopped. "Wh—" Dave's mouth dried out. "What?"
"Nothing," Karkat said, eyes flicking back and forth between the two of them. "Nepeta," he explained.

Terezi was still trying to find her voice, but Dave knew the next comment was definitely directed at him. "Nepeta and me broke up our trial. While ago."

Dave adjusted his shades. "Oh, so then it's a trend."

She turned on him, and Karkat took a step back, as far as the door would allow him. "What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing," Dave insisted, "just commenting on your choice of company."

"Company?" Terezi pointed to Karkat, who was not putting up a very admirable display as Fated Rival as he kept the door in front of him like a shield. "I knew what I wanted and I went for it," Terezi insisted, in defiance her kismesis' display. Indeed, this seemed to strengthen Karkat's resolve, somewhat. "Same with you," Terezi said to Dave. "You didn't have to say yes. You just didn't have to piss on it as you went out!"

"Him?" Dave said, as though he only fully understood what she was saying now. "I wasn't talking about him! God knows I don't want anything to do with your black shit! A bro doesn't even have to try to get in that lineup, does he!" Terezi tried to speak up there, but he cut her off. She let him, if only in hope for a better opening. If Dave had been keeping a step better focus, he may have given her one. Instead, things fell apart. "I want as much to do with your spaded fuck-quadrant as I do with you pissing on all my friends with your culture's anti-friend…" His mind reached for Troll swear words, but floundered against the rocks. "Ugh!" He looked down as he searched for words.

"Go ahead, Strider," Terezi muttered, arms crossed. "I didn't give you a chance to talk the first time. Go spit all over my shoes. Looks like that's all you've got."

"And the clown!" Dave shouted instead. He was losing his cool and it was starting to feel all right. A voice at the back of his head – his Bro's, if it was anyone's – warned him that he diving straight off into an empty pool, but he didn't listen. "You kick me to the curb— You knock me down with this crap about 'Oh, I can't be your friend,' and 'I don't want anything anything to do with you if it doesn't involve your cock—'"

"That's not what I said!" Terezi shouted.

"'Or you doing some alien bullshit that you can't even feel—'"

"TH4TS NOT WH4T 1 M34NT!"

Terezi stamped, perhaps aiming for Dave's foot and missing, but it was clear she was now too angry to continue with her opening. As a result, Karkat stepped in. "Listen, dickhole—"

Dave pushed him aside, and spoke fast to keep him from getting in, not knowing if it was some kismeslids thing that he was allowed to pick up her fights for her or what, he didn't particularly care to deal with any of that Troll bullshit right now. "And then what do you do?" he said to Terezi, "you push me out and five seconds later, what? You pick up the clown! The clown!"

Having offended two of his friends, Karkat surged against Dave's arm, but Dave held firmed. Terezi hissed her reply. "Five seconds—! That was a week!"

"The clown and Rose!" Dave continued. "But fuck Rose, Rose is smarter than that. Rose is smarter than you. But the clown! I keep trying to think it through straight but I can't help but come back to
the clown, because I can't help but think this is the real deal, huh? That you're really going for Miracles Makara, and—"

Dave, on the verge of shouting, recovered his cool, knowing it was all he was worth to do it. "Just never really knew you, did I?" Dave gave Karkat one last shove as he tried to cut back in. "Piss off, man," he told him. "I've said my peace. Let the lady talk for herself." But Terezi said nothing. "Well?" Dave demanded.

Terezi barred her teeth at him. "I'm better than this," she told him. "So are you." She growled and checked herself: "I thought you were..." she corrected herself, "Argh!" With that, she turned, threw open the door and headed down the hall.

Karkat gave Dave a cautious look, and despite it all it was a leader's look, wondering just how to handle Dave without letting things get any worse, and for a moment, he had Dave's pity. In fact, the more he thought about it, the sight of Karkat's look made Dave feel worse, knowing news of the fight was only going to reach out its claws and grab John, and from John, everyone else. But for now, Dave held his ground.

Karkat whispered to Terezi as they disappeared down the hall. Looking for an excuse to say anything at all, he settled on asking: "Well how the hell was I supposed to know you knew about them watching for Jack? You never said a damn word!"

"What was I supposed to say? 'Oh Dave's such an asshole, I wish he wasn't saving our lives every day?' How am I supposed to react to that, Karkat? Huh? How do you think it feels to hate... t' shut out someone that you owe... every day?"

Feeling far too awkward to keep the door open any longer, Dave let it close behind them. Karkat started to say something else, something like "Well for starters..." when he and Dave were both interrupted by a violent crash. Dave yanked open the door.

"SHUT UP!" Terezi shouted at Karkat. From the looks of things, she had backhanded him, and far harder than intended, slamming him against the wall. "WH4T DO YOU KNOW? JUST..." She turned and left down a hall Dave knew led nowhere whatsoever. "We were fine!" she shouted to the hallways. "Fine!"

Dave left the door shut then, leaving the Lab behind, and began to walk away, at one point muttering "Well that went well." He crossed the asteroid, coming to approximately the opposite pole, where he squatted down on the ground and started to think. After a long while, he began to smooth out the sand into a workable layer, and took a broken metal rod from his sylladex to draw on his new palette.

"Jack," he whispered to the void, "do me a favour, dickweed. C'mon man, one goddamn favour. You're always hitting me up at the wrong time. Can you just cram it up your dog-nook tonight?" He doodled Sweet Bro fleeing the unfinished scene with crocodile tears trailing behind him. Dave liked to imagine the tears were done up with a foil wrap filter, along with other random parts of the scene caught in a bad selection, but as that was not really an option, so he just spat in them and called it high art.

"I just need a night to think, all right? Lalonde's all cracked up about her and Maryam but if you ask me, she's got weeks. I'm thinking I'm a week in and maybe I'm the one that needs advice. But you don't get advice looking this good, not even from your own sister. Now that's a burden I'm prepared to live with, but... maybe I got myself thinking everything was fine and so I didn't ask her shit this morning, and now that everything's definitely not fine, and... well..."

Dave added in Hella Jeff to the background, reaching forlornly after Sweet Bro with an outstretched
hand that not dissimilar to his shoes. For artistic reasons, Dave doodled in Geromy in his usual pose, but so that it looked like he had his arms around Jeff. In loving comfort, perhaps? And also in clipping errors. Dave made sure to draw one line of the arm cutting through Jeff's neck. Geromy was perfect, as ever. Not many people knew this, but he was drawn by hand every single time. True story.

Dave added a speech balloon to Sweet Bro that read "mY feepings!" Masterpiece. "So since I'm not getting anything from Rose, I've gotta think like Rose instead. And that means you fuck off, Dogshit! Got it?"

Dave began to add another panel, of Hella Jeff in closeup. To this, he added a balloon, pointed inside of Jeff’s eyeball, which read: "But what about…." This tailed into a third panel that consisted entirely of a speech balloon with emotion-filled, tiny text that read: "..MY feelngs??" Dave finished off with another spit-tear in panel two, this one without a border.

Dave stood up and took in his newest work. He spun his improvised pen in its direction. "When I turn twenty, I'm going to drink so hard I'm going to forget every goddamn teenaged year. That is my solid pledge. And if Megido's not feeling like helping me down some straight-up ethanol fuel, I'm taking two years each from Rose, John and Jade. And one from Vantas, just because."

In spite of it all, he took a picture of it with his shades, and headed back to the Lab to begin his patrol.

Chapter End Notes

"The nose, asshole." Don't get too smart, Sollux. I have a feeling that might be what the nose is used for. *wonk*

Troll Navels – Long Story: When a Troll grub spins its cocoon, it does so only after a period of manic feeding, which not only gives it the energy to spin, but to produce a blood-coloured backwash it unloads into a section of the cocoon called the "placental sac", which is used to feed the Troll via a growth in the belly, during the period when its infant stomach dies and its adult stomach slowly comes into proper working order. This growth is later removed, leaving the belly button.

Short Story: Bullshit. Bullshit is why!

This was the first half of what was meant to be the End of Act. The next chapter will be relatively soon. Relatively.
Closing Time

Well, folks, sorry to say, but this is the point where the ball stops rolling. I won't be able to write any more chapters, but this isn't the end! For the next while, I'll be talking about the remaining chapters, in detail, of what would have happened, why, character motivations, symbolism, authorial intent, and of course, excerpts, which will include, as I mentioned on my tumblr, the entire finishing scene. The next few chapters are mostly commentary on adaptation from Draft 1 to Draft 2, but after that it's all fresh. A number of scenes I'm fond of might get written up entirely just because. We'll see as we go. Though for not being able to carry through, even to as far as the next chapter and the end of act, I am truly sorry.

If I'm in the mood, I may also do a post-mortem of both drafts a few months later, though is anyone ever really in the mood to write a post-mortem? Sometimes you just don't want to go back.

You probably want to know why. It's a combination of four major factors. Firstly, the stress factor: not the fic itself but its impact on other things. For the longest time, Hands has been my source of comfort, but those days have passed. It would be one thing if I were doing professional writing with my time, but it's not possible to tell my other job "I can't cover for my co-worker's newest hangover-day because I need to write my fanfic." It's easy to come to resent your hobby when it actually costs you in both free time and chore time, nevermind the guilt of thinking "If only I had been working on the other thing…"

Speaking of the other thing, my "external influence" has failed. This is no mean problem. This was my major hope at finding real work, a centerpiece for my portfolio. It wasn't meant to be a major piece, or especially my last hope, but that was what it became over time, and with its failure I think we can see that I never had much hope in my chosen field, or much ability. In the past few months I've slowly lost any hope of finding work in my field, and with the final failure of this project, it seems I may not even be able to enjoy the field as a hobbyist. Failing to complete this fic means a large chunk of two years wasted, but failing to complete the external influence is the final step in the failure of about seven years total. I'm not even sure what this makes me, now, if I can't be what I'd been planning, searching for, building towards. My remedy for the problem is to begin a new project, and there's no room for the fanfic in that schedule. Well, maybe there is. Part of me suspects I'm lashing out at Hands, but the other problems are indicative.

The third problem is the drop in readership. Technically this is misleading: the last chapter had a very high boost in readership, but we all know it's because you were drawn here by a demo chapter promising more of Gamzee's crotch. It really depends on where you want to measure, but if I were a CEO, these numbers would be less of an excuse for the shareholders to fire me and more an excuse for them to set me on fire and punt me out a window, because they would have nothing else to lose and everything to gain by doing so. This is my fault. To those readers who aren't reading this because you left for lack of regular updates or a dislike of the new draft in general, I deeply apologize. As a factor in ending the fic, my reasoning should be clear: as I stated during the vote for the end of the first draft, I pride myself more of an entertainer than as a writer. This draft has been a poor source of entertainment. In that regard, it has been as much a failure as my external project.

With stress, there is no joy. With pressures, there is no time. With failure, there is no pride, and together, there is no reason to continue to squeeze myself through this hole. But for those of you who are still here, the entertainer in me thanks you, the author in me thanks you, and both of those (and my inner, screaming instincts as a gaming completionist) promise to carry through with the notes to the end. I'll even throw in a bonus for those who stick around: the last planned Homestar Runner-style intermission from the first draft. Karkat, if you'll recall, was "Preparing for the fucking
inevitable" and I never got around to finishing it. That's last, though. Because I'd actually have to finish this one. It wouldn't really be funny in summary-form.

One step at a time, though.

For those that never finished the first draft, I will be redirecting you to those chapters as we go through the next few, as I only actually made it about half-way through this second draft. If you want to start reading now, go to Chapter 10 of the original draft, but if you have the patience, bear with me, and I'll be sure to provide a context and reading guide for each chapter explaining what was going on in the original draft (it's quite different), how the chapter was going to be adapted and so on. Once we get past the end of the first draft, we'll be purely in notes and excerpts territory, but hopefully I can make that entertaining. As usual, updates will be on my tumblr and the MSPA forums thread.

Thank you all once again for your time, your attention, your proofreading and criticism where applicable, and most importantly, the chance to entertain you through plot, humour, character relationships, and in the case of the first draft, recast jokes from a 2000-9 web series, like the muses most certainly intended. I hope to see most of you as we carry through to the end.

I'm going to leave this message up for a few updates, after which it will probably be replaced with a less florid post simply explaining that this was the point where the fic ended and that readers are about to enter the Behind The Scenes chapters. Have no fear: your comments, insults and mimed reaction gifs will be preserved!
(Edit from the end of the fic: This first chapter was half-completed before I dropped the fic and so exists in a blend of commentary and completed sequences. It's the only chapter of the sort as a result, though a few later chapters (especially ends of acts) adopt a format that flows much better while still providing semi-completed content. Please excuse the growing pains.)

Chapter 11 was to serve as the final chapter of Act 2. That said, from a thematic standpoint, there's really no reason for the divide between Acts 2 and 3: they were, indeed, meant to be together. The issue is that this chapter ended in one of the fic's climaxes, perhaps more important than the original EOA2… and was never an end-of-act itself. Both have now been drastically changed, which complicates the issue even further. So they're split. What does this "make" the two split acts, in terms of themes and plot arcs? Well, I suppose they come to two different conclusions on the same topic. Let's step back.

Let's start by talking about the fic. The central focuses of the fic are these: firstly, an attempt to explore auspistice, secondly, an attempt to explore the ways in which cross-cultural relationships with the Trolls would be distinct from our own, and thirdly, how those relationships would be challenging for all sides. To help support these objectives, I created/called up two of the fic's major hooks as my tools: Troll puberty via the moult, and the way Troll society is exactly like how Karkat portrays in Canon Acts 4 and 5, with no friendship and with even more central violence. The moult, the lack of friendship and the increased violence are all meant as expedients to three central objectives. Lighter fluid, if you will. Because of their existence, decisions made by the characters had to be made more rapidly, consequences became more drastic, and so on. They're plot devices designed to get through each phase of the relationships faster, and to maximize the drama.

You can see how these elements work in Act 1. Act 1 was meant to stand for the pre-relationship phase, focusing on the potential danger of Troll relationships, starting with Vriska tearing into Eridan for black reasons and ending with Terezi tearing into Dave for cultural reasons: the breadth of the threat is spelled out, perhaps inescapable. The characters come to conflict quickly, thanks to the accelerated violence and lack of friendship, and the threat is substantiated by the Troll's alien advantages, which will only get stronger as they moult in the future.

With the threat spelled out, we move on to the original next act, where we move to the starting stages of the relationships, in spite of the danger. Here we see the lack of friendship working to accelerate with Rose and Kanaya, Terezi and both Karkat and Gamzee, and possibly in other corners. The violence has come into play with Karkat, and is far from done yet.

From there, I'll spoil you some by saying the act after that is the stage where the relationships begin to grow, struggle, and impact one another, in some cases leading to new. From there, the final act, where the relationships, in the most mature state we will see them, come to head with both one another and the central plot.

(Meanwhile, the primary plot, which serves as a companion and analogy for the relationship plots, is being set up behind the scenes, in both callbacks to before the events of the fic and here and there, like traps. But since most of that is still spoilers, I won't say any more.)

But now this new split. What purpose does it serve? Well, after some thought, I realized: where the other acts split on watershed states in the relationships-on-average, this split is on Rose and the other
Humans' comfort level with the Trolls' culture: my accelerants, as actual plot elements for once. Whether or not this was wise…

Chapter 11 begins with a pesterlog I took from the original Chapter 8, and continues into a number of scenes that I did indeed complete. That makes this one a little different from the ones to follow (and certainly longer!), since we're going to be jumping back and forth between commentary and scenes way more often than before. Shouldn't be that bad, though.

GA: For My Next Question I Would Like To Ask You For A Summary Of Human Courtship
GA: As Practiced In Your Region And Demographic Etc Etc As You Have Specified In The Past
TT: That seems fair. I was considering asking you the same but figured covering all four quadrants would just eat up our time.
TT: I figured the information might help stave off certain disasters I'm getting the impression are occurring down my social pipeline.
GA: Is This About Karkat
TT: Why, what do you know?
GA: ...
GA: Things
TT: Kanaya.
GA: Maybe It Would Be Better For You To Speak To Your Friends Directly
TT: Fine. John's online, I'll bother him.
TT: Did you want to ask about courtship because of whatever it is you're hiding from me?
GA: No
GA: It Was One Of The Original Questions I Hoped To Ask You When I First Contacted You
TT: Mm-hm.
TT: Who's Vriska?
GA: Are You Talking To Your John Friend
TT: Yes.
GA: Arachnids grip
TT: Your ex-moirail?
GA: Yes
GA: Why Has She Done Something
GA: She Has Been Acting Very Strange Since The Death Of Her Lusus
GA: I Believe She Is Trying To Repair Her Life But Is Not Honestly Very Good At It
TT: John says she's been flirting with him.
TT: "apparently"
TT: Adorable but clueless.
GA: Really
TT: He would like to know if I think he should flirt back.
TT: Not really a question I think I'm capable of answering without more information.
GA: Are You Asking Me
TT: Oh wait, he means considering some external factor.
TT: Related to me, I sup
TT: ...hold on.
GA: What Is It
TT: Please, just... give me a minute with my tactless leader.
TT: If you're curious perhaps you should go ask YOUR tactless leader.
GA: All Right
TT: Back
GA: Hello
TT: Did you speak with carcinoGeneticist?
GA: No
GA: He Told Me To Leave Because He Was Having A Fight With Himself
GA: And That It Was Very Important That That Brinesucking Asswipe Be Put In His Place
TT: I... see.
GA: How Did Your Conversation Go
TT: Surprisingly...
TT: Touching. John may not be the most mature person I know but he is at least sensitive.
TT: And when not direct he is at least easy to decode.
GA: May I Inquire As To The Nature Of This Discussion
TT: Well...
TT: Yes, I think so. Apparently Karkat has been trying to put, as we say, the kibosh on Troll/Human relationships.
TT: And has been suggesting preferred substitutes.
GA: Oh No
TT: John wanted to ask about the nature of our relationship.
TT: And since I am in a currently-undefined relationship with you, I figure you have a right to know that old greycaps is trying to muscle in.
GA: You Mean To Say That You Dont Care
TT: About Karkat's attempts to undermine other people's feelings?
TT: No not particularly.
TT: If he wants to have an ashen crush on the world that's his business. He certainly hates it enough.
TT: So long as you don't mind, I certainly don't.
GA: I Dont Know
GA: He Is My Leader But
GA: I Do Not See How This Means He Knows What Is Best For Me In This Regard
TT: I'm glad we can see eye to eye on this.
GA: Heh
TT: Now, where did we leave off?
GA: Wait
GA: What Did You And John Decide
TT: The same thing you and I did. That this was not the time for that kind of discussion and that time together would better tell.
GA: Fair Enough
TT: Are you worried he'll play a matesprit rival for you?
GA: Are You Asking About My Intentions
GA: Because Im Trying My Best Not To Have Any At The Moment
GA: Until We Have Met In Person
TT: I believe you. I just wanted to be sure.
GA: And What Do You Think Is Johns Perspective
TT: I think the whole deal is taking him more than a little by surprise.
TT: He found the idea of waiting a great comfort.
TT: In fact, he suggested it independently.
GA: I Take It This Is Hardly The Proper Course Of Human Courtship
TT: No, being ordered into pairings by a teenaged alien god-analogue is not our normal course of action when looking for mates.
TT: But nice segue.
GA: Thank You
TT: Human courtship in my demographic etc, etc, is divided into one or two stages depending on one's end goal.
TT: Generally it begins with dating: one party asks the other "out" to some event or location of interest.
GA: To What End
TT: Early on, to get to know one another. Later, to just have fun, I suppose.
TT: Come to think of it, it's really just an invitation to a private get-together. I suppose as a courtship ritual it draws more of its appeal from intent than the actual structure or activity.
TT: I'd never really given it much thought.
TT: Do you have an analog?
GA: Well Yes
GA: But There Is A Major Difference In Its Use As An Initial Encounter
TT: Since Troll relationships develop from the trial stage, yes.
GA: Exactly
GA: Early Kismeses Plan Ambushes In Advance I Suppose
TT: Not really what I was thinking. I'd say both parties are usually aware of a date.
GA: Yes It Is Not Really All That Similar
GA: As For Early Matesprits It Is Not That They Do Not Spend Time Together In Private
GA: More That They Do So More Out Of Hand
TT: I wouldn't say spontaneity is alien to the human system but I think we can assume a certain dissonance.
GA: Would You Say Some Human Relationships Start Without The Dating Process
TT: Yes, I would.
GA: Rose
TT: ?
GA: I Am Getting The Impression We May Not Be Very Dissimilar On This Topic
TT: Ha, maybe that's for the best, considering.
GA: Yes I Agree
GA: Earlier You Mentioned Human Casual Dating
GA: Does This Mean The Optional Second Stage You Mentioned Is A Formalization
TT: Not my original intent, but good point. Make that two and three.
GA: And Do Humans Sometimes End Up In Competition For The Affection Of The Same Matesprit
GA: *Dating Partner
GA: Before This Formalization
TT: Don't hurt yourself trying to parse it, I don't think there is an English word for members of a couple.
TT: Yes, I'd say that happens from time to time.
GA: Given The Formalization Of The Early-Stage Relationships
GA: Is The Object Of Affection Generally Aware Of These Competing Attempts
GA: And
GA: Would You Say The Same Regarding The Competitors
GA: And If So What Is The Procedure For The Competitor That Does Not Succeed
TT: That's an awfully detailed series of questions, I'm not sure I'm capable of answering all of them.
GA: These Sorts Of Tangles Often Occur When A Troll Is Courting Both A Matesprit And a Kismesis While The Latter Was Regarding My Curiosity For How A Relationship Falls Apart When Its Not Yet An Actual Relationship As It Is Not Exactly
A Situation We Had On Alternia Or Could Have Here In The Lab
TT: It's all right, I didn't need you to explain yourself.
TT: Though now that you have I'm more curious than ever.
TT: Are you all right?
GA: Have I Given You Reason To Suspect I Am Not
TT: Defensive replies, left field approach to questioning and that explanation was the longest contiguous block of text I've ever seen you type.
TT: Typing habits aren't exactly sight and sound but I get the impression that this topic bothers you.
GA: Could You Answer The Question
TT: As best I can:
TT: a) Not necessarily b) Same c) I can't imagine there is a procedure.
TT: Hoping to find answers to personal situations in other cultures?
GA: Rose Please
GA: Youre Blowing This Out Of Proportion
TT: If you say so, I'll believe you. I'm concerned is all.
TT: This is my concerned face.
GA: Youre Also Blowing That Out Of Proportion
GA: And You Look Like A Sad Nepeta Which Is To Say Pathetic And Then Pathetic Again
GA: Intentionally And Unintentionally
TT: I'm not sure how to take that.
GA: Im Not Sure How She Would Either Its Not Something I Plan To Bring Up
TT: But I suppose I should move on to the next part of your initial question.
GA: Wait
GA: Rose I Know This Is Hard To Understand Through Text But Im Not Upset
GA: And Im Sorry For Implying Such
GA: Well I Technically Am Upset But
GA: Its More Embarrassment Over Still Being Upset
TT: I hope you realize that every tantalizing detail is only making me more eager for the rest of the story.
TT: So many sordid possibilities.
TT: I can already picture the buckets.
GA: All Right
GA: I Will Tell You If You Stop Making Light
TT: I'm not making light.
GA: You Are
GA: I Can See Your Face And Youre All Smiles
GA: Youre The Most Horrible Human Being
TT: You've found me out. Unbelievable.
TT: I admit it. I am a vampire that feeds on despair and suffering.
TT: Especially of innocent alien girls.
TT: But now that you're joking back I find myself powerless.
GA: I Cant Help It If You Keep Making Me Laugh
GA: When I Am Supposed To Be Filled With Righteous Early-Mid-Sweep-Aged Angst
GA: ...
GA: Put Your Damn Tongue Back In Your Mouth
TT: Yes that wasn't very noble or vampiric of me.
TT: So should I assume this tale of yours has something to do with you precariously positioned between two suitors?
GA: No
The opening scenes of the chapter are all-new and based, at best, on a scattershot sampling of chapters from the original draft, largely from Original Chapters 8 and 9. Now, the general idea for these commentaries is that I'll summarize the scene while talking about my thoughts on why things were included, but this chapter has so many bits I did write before stopping that I'm just going to let those run generally without interruption.

Back at the pool, the party carried on as it had until Feferi returned and noticed that two more of her guests had gone. This called for desperate measures, and she grabbed hold of Gamzee (who had started stuffing balls back in the filters just out of a sense of obligation at this point) and set him up in front of some sort of Troll barbeque. A few minutes later, Kanaya had prevented a hazard by venting the smoke with her powers and soon everything was on track for dinner.

What with food being a frivolity with their limitless grist, the partygoers were spoiled for variety. On Feferi’s orders, everyone had brought something to share. Jade, who had talked to Sollux the day before and confirmed her worst suspicions, brought hot dogs, chicken and burgers. Feferi, the source of those suspicions, had brought trout, walleye, shrimp, oysters, and dulse for the snack table, which Tavros mistook for one of John’s pranks.

Nepeta plopped one of her skinned, yellow rats on the table. Gamzee looked from it to her eager smile, and Equius supplied: "I did ask her to."

The snack table showed the true variety. With Karkat and Terezi’s donations left behind, it showed the tastes of all nine remaining guests to some degree, and Rose made a point of sampling all the Troll items she could as per her usual mealtime mandate. Her own donation she ignored. While she had considered bringing some summertime cocktail mixes – it was an unsupervised teen party, after all – she had decided against and brought nuts instead. Her mother always had a heady supply of beer nuts on hand, but Rose preferred cashews and had once made the mistake of cherry-picking some from a bag of mixed nuts and had been rewarded with so many as to have lost her taste for the whole subcategory of food.

Rose returned with her food to her chair, and began to wait for Kanaya. It was a bit of a hard wait, since Gamzee had come alive at the grill and had begun a particular show of ingenuity. Rose’s plate was almost subdued, with a small taste of Alternian walleye and familiar chicken set aside a salad of cross-universe greens and terran olives that Gamzee had brought as his own donation (or, at least, that had been in his sylladex at the time, for whatever reason). Kanaya was held up in an animated conversation with their cook about fire antlion steaks, and whether or not they were better fed live (hearty!) or undead meat (piquante!). Rose had no doubt they would be eating both within the week, somehow.

As she waited, Rose was treated to an odd sight, as Vriska came to where Tavros had stayed behind in the pool. She came carrying two plates, and dropped them to the ground as she sat at the ledge.

"You ready?" she asked him.

"As I ever am," Tavros reassured. Shrugging, Vriska held up a foot, and Tavros used it to pull himself in toward the edge. There, Vriska anchored him with both feet and passed him his plate. Tavros smiled. "This is still, the best idea," he said, and began to eat in the pool. Feferi cast him a cautious look, but he paid her no mind.
Both of them took a moment to eat, before Vriska spoke up. "So I was thinking," she said. "Maybe we should bring Bones back in a new chapter? I mean, he did get away in the end, and we haven't seen him since…"

"Oh! Well, uh…" Tavros looked around. "I can't really take out my laptop here."

"That's okay," Vriska said, "we'll remember."

"We actually don't tend to remember, most of what we write," Tavros noted, in between chews.

"Don't be stupid," Vriska said, "just because it doesn't go down on page doesn't mean it didn't happen!"

"I THINK, THAT YOU ARE GREATLY MISUNDERSTANDING, THE POWER OF MY WRITTEN WORD," Tavros boasted, or at least that was the word Rose would consider closest to accurate.

Vriska snorted a laugh and pulled Tavros back to the edge from where he had floated. "Okay, c'mon, we can do this. Where were we?"

From her spot on her chair, Rose became privy to a surprising discussion, as she learned about the ongoing novel Vriska and Tavros had apparently been writing all the way back to the Land of Maps and Treasure. It had begun as a roleplay, judging by a few jokes, but had soon become a sprawling epic long before Aradia had arrived on the scene, and had only intensified as memory of Jack had begun to fade. The leads were the Marquise Mindfang, who was as she was ever, and Rufio, who was more Pupa Pan than Tavros, but compared to Mindfang in terms of sue tendencies. Details about rocket cars had been gradually decanonized. Details about rocket boots had remained. Mindfang's stock in pixie dust and happy thoughts was… questionable.

Kanaya arrived in the middle of the discussion, distracting Rose with a giant cheeseburger that would have looked like the depths of American excess if it hadn't been held together by a bakery-class glazed bun Rose was positive that no one had actually brought. Rose was beginning to worry that Gamzee was going to spoil them, and was thankfully reassured when the filter he had clogged with pool balls prior to the barbeque activated and began to spit ugly water in the pool, the smell of melting plastic into the air. Feferi, Sollux and even Equius put aside their differences and set to work immediately.

With the others back from the barbeque, Eridan would return and interrupt Tavros and Vriska's conversation, which both of them clearly don't want to continue in front of him, one for petty reasons and the other out of embarrassment. Vriska and Eridan finish their lunch and get back in inner tubes.

Some insight into my writing process: sometimes, when writing these crowd scenes, I would start to write a scene but then decide it would be better served as ambience in the background of other scenes, just showing other characters hanging out and doing their thing. The scene would then be crumbled over the others. This happened to Jade and Dave and John's pool fights, and to most of Nepeta's scenes in the previous chapter. This Nepeta scene is no exception. Here it is, still in its original intact form, just waiting for someone to scatter it around.

[Nepeta reveals to Equius and Jade that she never intended to eat the cooked ratling and it's actually for them.]

"I suppose it's only fair…" Jade said. She took the kebab and tried a cube of Troll vegetables, just to
stave off the inevitable, and then the meat. Chewing, she passed it to Equius, who between a submissive look at Jade and a plaintive look at Nepeta, did the same.

Rose did not learn Jade's reaction until later, but Equius was effusive. Rose later caught up with Jade and heard all about the rat-meat.

"It's actually pretty good!" Jade admitted to Rose, "I mean, I don't know how much of that was Gamzee and I'm not going to start eating it raw… but good!" As for Equius, she passed that on as well. "Actually, he came and talked to me, did you see? He told me… I realized, in that instance, with your brave and heartwarming show of trust for my moirail, that I should consider advantages to this source of meat if someone with as… esteemed a background as yourself was willing to take the plunge."

"So he tells me," Jade continued, "that he had always worried about Nepeta being killed on a hunt, and that if she wasn't, she would be harming, the, uh… glooruous musclebeasts."

"Whoa, wait," Rose said. "What was that?"

"What was what?" Jade asked.

"You said, uh… glor… gul…"

"Gloorious?" Jade attempted.

Rose shook her head. "Lost it."

Jade shook her head. "I dunno, Rose, I was just imitating his voice? Like, I can do Dave pretty well, like…" Her voice dropped half an octave: "I only bother with high quality blades forged by stoic Asian masters."

Rose laughed. "Okay. I guess in a sense anything they say can be duplicated, I've just been wondering why it comes along at all, really. Give it some more shots," she suggested. "Maybe it's so alien to us it'll be like a birdcall. You can do it but it's just a sound-alike? But maybe not!"

Jade continued about Equius after some prompting. "Oh, right! He figured that her hunting 'the pestilent vermin of the fields' would be better for everyone. I told him that maybe he shouldn't stop caring about the 'pestilent' part but he wasn't listening at that point, even to me."

In the original draft, Jade begins her impressions of the Trolls quite at random and it made sense for me for them to be brought up as an explicit point. Over time, Rose begins to wonder exactly why the tone is even happening, and its relationship with the "phantom sensation" of a Troll standing behind you that occurs often at the same time as the tone. That sensation is emphasized later down this very chapter, when Eridan provokes it again. Really, I had let it go too long without mentioning it.

During Vriska, Eridan and Tavros' conversation, Vriska gives Eridan an annoyed shove, harder than she intended thanks to the moult, and he ends up capsized. Since Vriska is more interested in spinning him by the legs, Rose goes to help.

Under the water, Eridan sat upside-down and arms crossed, looking most displeased. Purple had begun to well up in his face, which Rose saw in passing as Vriska turned him about. He caught sight of Rose, arced and eyebrow and greeted her. "Roz," he said, when Vriska stopped. His voice sounded just as clear as it would have in the air. Rose's Seer's eyes told her the mouth movements were different, but for all he had been out of the water all his life, Eridan was keeping up well
enough. "Oh, don't mind me."

Rose knew a poor attempt at reverse psychology when she saw one, but was not as capable of underwater repartee as her tactless associate. She swam up and Rose gave Eridan a push. The tube made sure this failed, but with the help of Tavros, they were able to push and pull him through the bottom of the tube and out into the water.

When they surfaced, it was to find Vriska resting with her arms up on the edge of the pool, chatting to Tavros as he fished out his matesprit. Tavros talked back, even as he worked. On a second observation, Rose realized that Vriska was even helping: she kept a hold on Tavros' seat to keep Eridan from pulling him over, though she would slap the plastic whenever she laughed or agreed with his points.

"So okay, if we can get everyone to the ships by the time we're done, we can get them to partner up," she was saying.

Tavros nodded. "Except Pupa doesn't really have, uh, any reason to trust Mindfang until she lets him keep the Gold Spyglass."

"Well of course not!" Vriska said, "It's the only thing that can help you find the Kraken's Horde!"

"But Pupa doesn't really have any reason to go to her ship," Tavros pointed out, "considering that the last time he went there, she turned him over to the Privaterrors."

Vriska waved this away. "That was an honest misunderstanding! She thought they had money!"

"Not to interrupt and shit," Eridan said to interrupt, "but what the heck is this?"

Tavros smiled and looked about ready to break into a long explanation, but Vriska sneered and so warned him down to simply: "It's our story. We've been writing it for months!" Since during the game, Rose supposed. "It's a crossover between the old Pupa Pan stories and—"

"And Vris' FLARP character, I get it," Eridan said. "Fuck, I didn't know you had such a big thing going."

"Oh, it's huuuuuuuuuge," Vriska crooned.

Rose's brow furrowed. Where is Strider when the world really needs his brand of blunt genital-humour?

Vriska floated over to Tavros and draped an arm over his neck. This did not quite work as planned, nearly toppling him into her lap, but they were soon rearranged with Vriska's arm still clasped on Tavros' shoulder. "It'd take forever to explain it all to you, but I suppose we can m8ke t8me."

Rose was still close enough to feel Eridan clench a fist hard, under the water. "Sure Tav's got plenty of time over the next few days."

Vriska's smile faded and she pushed away from Tavros, sending him into a slight spin. "Be missing out on half the colour," she protested, but made no motion to intervene.

Despite Vriska's initial attempts to back down, things soon turn worse. This chapter was meant to represent a combination of scenes from the original draft, all of which failed in their original forms. Original Chapters 8 and 9 weren't exactly that well regarded. One central point is that Rose would learn Eridan has begun to take Vriska's friendship with Tavros very personally, as had she in terms
of their matespiritship. Vriska is the calm one in the fight, not just reflecting the scenes in question, but the simple positioning of the speakers: since Eridan has swam in between her and Tavros, Vriska has to look at Tavros as she talks, while he does not. During the scene, Vriska begins to clutch at the edge of the pool, initially to look casual, until she distinctly reacts to Eridan gets angry as he begins to suspect that Vriska has feelings for Tavros, and his tone slips into the "phantom sensation" range. To Rose's surprise, this makes Vriska angrier – it seems the Trolls are aware of this vocal shift on some instinctive level – and Vriska nearly grinds through the stone as a result. Rose feels she has to intervene.

Tavros leads Eridan away, and Vriska gets even more pissed that Tavros doesn't argue in her favour. Rose asks Vriska if she has feelings for Tavros. Vriska pushes Rose away with a clawed foot and replies with a now-infamous confusing line from the original: "You don't get it. […] I'm perfectly happy for Tavros." Her point is this: Vriska at least claims to be okay with Tavros dating, but the problem is Eridan, or maybe even so petty fact that he is happy. Vriska is coming to hate her rival, and Rose remains unwilling to act. Indeed, she leaves the pool, and returns to Kanaya.

Kanaya is getting up as Rose approaches, and she suggests with a nod of her head that she and Rose got to the hot tub.

"I don't know how you do it," Kanaya said, as she settled into the water and sighed with pleasure. She lowered her shades to look Rose in the eyes, so Rose went full stoic. Seeing that was going to be Rose's game, Kanaya picked up her magazine and propped it carefully on the edge of the tub. "Keep from interrupting them, I mean."

"That's funny," Rose said as she pulled into the water, and shifted her position in regards to the jets and Kanaya herself. "I was about to ask the opposite of you."

"Well, if it helps, I don't exactly relish the idea of the three of them turning the pool into a chum bucket," Kanaya said.

Rose had to side-eye that. "...You've been reading too many Human websites."

Kanaya licked a fingertip to turn her page. "No. No, 'chum-bucket' is a real expression."

"Do—"

"No, you don't get to know," Kanaya interrupted.

"Noted." Rose made a mental note all the same. "I guess I just don't see the appeal in suppression. Auspistice."

Kanaya made an agreeable sound. "Well, it's not for everyone. Even if every Troll on Alternia was in an auspistice, and only one auspistice, only a third of us would be mediating, after all. The real numbers aren't so far off." She thumbed the book as she said so. Rose suspected that those numbers may very well have come from an earlier issue of the magazine.

"But why?" Rose asked, but feeling the need for greater formality, she substituted: "'To what end?' is what I'm asking. ...In the name of mutual cultural understanding."

At the sound of their eighteenth pesterlog's byword and motto, Kanaya lowered her glasses a second time, and put aside her magazine. "All right." Rose leaned closer herself. "I'm going to warn you, though. I may be too young to answer this myself."

"Oh? So your previous attempts at auspistice have yet to strike that particular, magical relationship
chord?" Rose tapped her book to Kanaya's magazine. "If I'm not being too florid."

"I Suppose You Could Say That" Kanaya replied, "but the core issue isn't so much that I haven't had a fulfilling ashen relationship then… that I haven't even been in a serious one at all."

Rose raised an eyebrow. "Pardon me?"

"Exactly what I said."

Rose set down her book. "But haven't you been saying all along that you're the… go-to auspistice in your group? Constantly bogged down by unwanted requests and solicitations?"

"That's right," Kanaya said, "…but just because I'm in demand doesn't mean I've accepted!"

"Oh, Kanaya, no." Rose reached out a hand to take her friend's. "Goodness' sake, I understand the unrequited crush angle with Vriska, but at this point I think it's clear you're taking the virgin thing too far."

Kanaya was distracted from their linked hands to meet Rose's gaze and lower her eyes. "The what thing."

"A 'virgin'," Rose started, "is someone who's never had sex—"

"Thank you, my Human Dictionary," Kanaya interrupted, "but I know what the word means. I just wasn't aware I was making a thing of it How Is This A Thing"

Rose glanced across the pool, to take stock of her friends. "…You've never had a single quadrant filled but Vriska, have you?"

Kanaya was beginning to blush. "Scandal And Lies. Besides, I happen to know you're far worse off than me."

Rose laughed at that. "True. But I'm not trying to start a dating history competition. I'm just curious about why you chose to turn down what you've described as almost a cavalcade of hating suitors."

"I don't know about 'cavalcade'," Kanaya said, as she set down Rose's hand, gently on the arm of her chair, "but there have been at least seven pairs."

"Seven?" Rose asked, surprised and looking out at their company.

"Ah, not them," Kanaya said. "Well… some of them." She nodded towards Eridan, Vriska and Tavros, now somewhere between bickering and play. "I'll exclude Eridan's attempt to get me to mediate him and Vriska just prior to the game."

"Oh, does that go back that far?" Rose asked.

"Further," Kanaya said, though she turned in another direction. "Though on that note, the first pair was actually Karkat and Terezi."

Rose looked up to see Karkat snap the shoulder of Terezi's suit, leaving her whirling and looking for a culprit that had long since slipped out of the air above. "That goes back that far as well?"

"Not in a solid block, but here and there," Kanaya explained. "We were three sweeps old, it was not very serious. I suppose my help may have kept it that way."

"Ah! Childhood relationships," Rose said, understanding. "I think Strider once dated a young
something in third grade before she left him, surely heartbroken I don't doubt. Well, of course, he refuses to frame it that way, but I like to picture him watching her go with a single tear welling up behind whatever ridiculous eyewear he was most assuredly already wearing at the time."

"You find this entertaining," Kanaya said with some surprise. "…Friendship baffles me." She pointed back to Terezi, who was having trouble getting information out of Gamzee after he became the newest victim of the Shippershark, in a manner of speaking ("the elusive shippurrshark fights against her opponent and the desire to spit out face paint!!"). "For their part, Karkat and Terezi stewed in ignominy for a few nights over whatever minute slight made them declare eternal hatred for one another in the first place. I honestly don't remember, myself. A few days later, she had sown her first plush and was so excited to show it off online that Karkat forgot to insult her and it petered out from there. I was barely involved at all."

"Any others from our current group?" Rose asked. Before them, Tavros and Gamzee were trying to coordinate to pry Nepeta off, confusing the shippershark into trying to go for two luckhares at once.

"Well," said Kanaya, "it was how I met Nepeta."

"Nepeta?" Rose asked. "The girl who just realized she couldn't ship Tavros because he's 'done'?"

"Yes."

Rose looked back. "Because she seems to have forgotten two, let's say, 'darker' spots."

"…Yes." Kanaya shook her head. "I don't know much about it. Equius recommended her to me, but by the time I had caught up and met her, she had lost interest in the young woman."

"That's fair," Rose said. "I mean, you're only six sweeps old. If our culture's dating habits come even close to one another, I imagine real attempts at serious relationships would just be starting. I wasn't expecting an outline of torrid affairs or something like that."

"Fair enough." Kanaya seemed at first ready to leave things off after that, but did continue, slow at first. "I suppose… some of my earlier solicitations may have been made under false pretenses."

"False?" Rose asked. She was now almost glad that Nepeta and the others had turned the pool party into such a ruckus in the opposite direction. Kanaya was able to continue without worrying about being overheard.

"'Malicious,' maybe. Older landed Trolls from our alliance seeking a weak auspistice to place the blame on for their own planned… or maybe active infidelities." Kanaya began to fiddle with a chastity key she had plucked from somewhere or other. "I suppose, if I had been less finicky, they may have been useful allies for the cause, since they would have been able to infiltrate the fleet ahead of us. Not that that became an issue."

"Is it…" Rose glanced over to Feferi, who had joined the fun as one of multiple "hunters" going after Nepeta with noodle harpoons. "Is it normal to pair off allies into relationships just to grab more allies?"

"Well of course," Kanaya said. "We were at war. Those willing to take extra measures did so. And what's a greater orange keratin-rich root vegetable before the domesticated hoofbean than sex and its trimmings, and so forth?" She pointed toward, for her own reasons, Eridan. "Our former Empress was matespritted with a powerful warlord in an effort that gained her a third of the Imperial Fleet to join her cause. That sort of thing."
"Sounds like some of the old monarchies back home," Rose mused, and she drummed her fingers on the arm rest of her chair. "...But we're straying. Tell me: did you turn down all of your ashen proposals?"

"Not quite," Kanaya replied. "For four perigrees in my fourth and fifth sweeps, I was auspistice for a couple about our age. But I wouldn't really say we were close enough – emotionally or geographically – for me to really feel any sort of ashen connection. Or them for me."

First drafters will note that this conversation is actually just a rephrased pesterlog, this one from the original Chapter 14 (but don't go there, the rest of the chapter is spoilers!). Here's the remainder of the pesterlog, as I never finished the conversion.

GA: Not Quite
GA: For Four Perigrees In My Fourth And Fifth Sweeps I Was Auspistice For A Couple About Our Age
GA: But I Would Not Say We Were Close Enough Geographically Or Emotionally For Me To Really Feel An Ashen Longing For Them
GA: Or Them For Me
TT: Would you mind if I ask about that?
GA: Not At All
TT: Their names?
GA: Nerida And Taxxon
GA: She A Purple Blooded Landdweller And He A Teal Blooded Desert Type
GA: Taxxon Might Have Very Well Be Considered A Neighbour Of Mine If One Keeps In Mind The Scope Of The Desert
TT: I'll have to use my imagination.
GA: Beyond That Theres Not Much To Tell
GA: Taxxon And I Had Known One Another For Some Time Since We Would Run Into One Another While Trying To Flag Down A Delivery Droid Or Such
GA: For All I Know We Crawled Out Of The Nests Together Given Our Age And Locale
TT: I'm afraid I don't understand this part of the process very well but I'll take you at your word and save it for a later question.
GA: Ah Of Course My Fault There
GA: Should I Continue Or Divert
TT: No, continue, I'll keep up.
GA: Gamzee Knew A Troll Who Knew Nerida
GA: Beyond That I Dont Know Much About Her Background
GA: Both Ended Up Inducted In Our Budding Conspiracy And Came To Hate One Another
GA: Nerida Did Not Trust Him To Stay Loyal To Her Or Us Any More Than Any Kismesis Should So She Turned To Feferi Who Directed Her To Me
GA: Taxxon Approved And There Is Not Much More To Say
TT: Was it really that boring?
GA: Not Really
GA: Nevertheless I See No Sense In Retelling The Details And Derailing Our Entire Conversation
TT: But you wouldn't say you felt any deep emotional attachment to the relationship?
GA: No I Suppose I Didn't Even At The Time In Hindsight
GA: Taxxon And Nerida Hated One Another Well Enough But I Just Did Not Fit Into The Equation
GA: Even When Nerida Did Start To Waver Toward Hating Eridan
TT: Another long-lost ally?
GA: Oh No Im Referring To Caligulasaquarium
TT: Oh?
GA: Im Afraid That Part Of The Story Actually Is Just As Dull As I Have Been Casting The Rest
GA: Perhaps If I Had Been More Challenged In Keeping Nerida In Line I Would Have Felt More Involved
GA: But Keeping Her Away From Eridan Took Up The Smaller Part Of A Ten Minute Trolling
GA: Thats About The All Of It
TT: So what is it, then, if Im not going to get it from a story?
TT: What's the reason someone would want to become an auspistice?

[In the original draft, there was an interjection here that no longer works since it involed Aradia and she does not actually come to the party, perhaps trying to avoid Feferi. But a new scene probably could have been worked out, wherein Kanaya stops a minor fight in the pool with a glare. Kanaya's response to that scene:]

GA: Do Humans Derive Pleasure From Dominating Others
TT: Yes, sometimes.
GA: Then "Dominance"
TT: I like it.

Ambience during this scene, not yet prepared, included an irritated Vriska going to talk to John about Eridan, but being interrupted by Nepeta and Jade's ambushes. Vriska leaves the party in a huff, telling John not to come with her. John's not sure how to interpret this, and ends up staying after Tavros remarks that sometimes she means things and sometimes she means things. Nepeta ends up playing (ultimately tickle fighting) with Jade, John, Tavros and Eridan, and is called away by Equius (Nepeta observes, with a roll of her eyes, that this was "probably because I was having fun."). Rose is not paying attention to their conversation, when suddenly:

"Fine, fine!" Nepeta suddenly shouted from one side. Rose – and indeed, several others – turned to look, and she blushed and pushed Equius back in the water so they could whisper. Unfortunately for them, Rose was listening now. "I'll think about it, okay?" Equius nodded, and Nepeta said goodbye with a squirt of water from her fist, after which she went back to playing with Jade.

"Hey," she said, more than a little morose for Nepeta, but trying to keep up appearances.

"Everything all right?" Jade asked. Nepeta nodded, and everything seemed to go back to normal from there.

At this point, the pesterlog might carry a bit towards its second half (the original draft split it), but each new question makes Kanaya more flustered.

GA: Well I Suppose I Should Say That That Is Hardly The Only Reason Someone Would Become An Auspistice
TT: No, I figured you were just being facetious.
GA: In A Working Relationship One Truly Becomes A Part Of The Kismesis
GA: If The Arts Can Be Trusted Its Quite Unlike Any Other Feeling
GA: But I Wouldn't Know
TT: Interesting!
TT: Tell me, Kanaya.
TT: You've been talking a lot about your allies in the rebellion. I know those aren't friendships, but I have to ask...
TT: Do you ever miss them? Or feel bad about how it all ended?
GA: I'm afraid we did not have many allies remaining after the princess abandoned her revolution in favour of attempting to survive Sgrub.
GA: Before our fifth sweeps were half over, everyone was gone.
GA: Even that's misleading.
GA: I could not have identified our regular group ahead of time.
GA: We are simply the ones that stayed together through one thread or another.
TT: Not even based on your smaller circles prior to your interrupted revolution?
GA: No, even those were sundered in places.
TT: What about the kismeses you auspisticed for?
GA: No, I do not feel any guilt over Taxxon and Nerida in particular.
GA: They were both dead long before we started Sgrub.
TT: Oh dear. What in the world happened? I hope they didn't go after one another.
GA: No, they were never really in any danger of turning on one another, in my opinion.
TT: Then what happened?

Rose and Kanaya are interrupted (too conveniently, would have needed work) by the arrival of others, probably Jade, John, and Nepeta. I wanted the opportunity to include more adolescent anxieties, not just hopes and excitements, and with Rose too focused on Weird Alien Shit and things with Kanaya, that meant turning to our remaining Humans. They would be held in reserve for Jade's POV to return later in the chapter, while Rose and Kanaya would slink out of the party to continue their conversation elsewhere. They end up at Kanaya's room.

Following her, Rose stepped through the transportalizer.

As Rose understood it, the Troll's sections of the lab had not been divided entirely at random. According to Karkat, the long straw had gone to Nepeta, who had immediately selected the dilapidated, rat-infested Underlab to make her den, and so on down a chain until Sollux, who was left with the custodial and laundry rooms. Kanaya, who had received one of the later choices, had still managed her favourite thanks to her completely esoteric sense of décor compared to the other Trolls. She had taken the executive offices and adjoining dormitory, easily the smallest section of the lab, comprising of a waiting room that played home to the transporter pad, the main office, the kitchen of mysteries (or at least one in particular), an expansive bedroom decked to the nines with plush carpeting and wood finish, and an en suite bath. Kanaya stood between the waiting room and the office, glaring down the room beyond.

"...Right," she said, once her ears told her she had an audience.

Rose came up behind Kanaya, and saw beyond. The desk remained clean, polished and ready for use (not that Kanaya ever did) and the windows behind it remained locked and heavy-shuttered. Were they open, they would have overlooked some part of Karkat's section of laboratory left to gather dust. Every other surface was criss-crossed with clothes and racks of clothes.

It's here that we meet up with Chapter 11 of the original draft. But let me provide context: much has
changed. In the original draft, this was the plan: Rose and Kanaya would be seen only interacting via their flashback pesterlogs for the entire fic up to this point, beyond some hints that they were having trouble picking a quadrant. Their discussions in these logs, of course, are all about the quadrants, and friendship, so I hoped it would seem natural when they talked in person and it seemed like an extension of those conversations.

For further context, the chapter takes place just after Tavros and Eridan's kiss in the original draft. 

Feel free to read the chapter now, if you haven't. Please stop at the break, just after Rose leaves Kanaya's room, specifically after the line "lacking the energy to take another step […]". Be careful not to go further, the scenes after that have been both moved (one bit to chapters and chapters from now!) and changed, and so would count as spoilers! I know this isn't ideal, but it's what I have, sorry. Leave the tab open, we'll be back for a later part of the chapter in good time.

If you don't care to read the chapter, here's a reminder summary: after some playful chit-chat, Rose discovers that Kanaya is also moulting, like Eridan, Tavros and in her own weird way, Vriska. However, we also discover that female moulting is just straight-up painful. Rose tries to comfort her with a hug, but she realizes that their relationship has reached a point where it's impossible for her to truly comfort Kanaya without crossing some bounds. Unsure of what to do, and ashamed at her own indecision, Rose makes a few pithy excuses and flees.

Razulude drew fanart of this particular scene, which you can find here.

(There are also a few pieces of fanart I still need to link for earlier chapters. I'll post them during the next chapter, the Second Recap, during the Recap itself.)

You probably have your own thoughts on the chapter. Personally, I feel it did not accomplish its goal quite as intended. Indeed, I spent much of my liveblog of that comparing it to Eponine's plot in Les Miserables: deeply sad, but also somewhat childish (in my case, especially Rose leaving the scene), and if we're being honest, perhaps even easily solved if those involved would just try to communicate!

Plus, I just keep going on and on it used to be even worse. Oh well.

The new draft would combine this chapter with Chapter 14's pesterlog, still ongoing, which ended up hanging somewhat in the original draft. Rose and Kanaya would first go to change their clothes, Rose changing in the large office portion of Kanaya's room, which past-me conveniently had a lock installed on its front door. I don't even remember why. But mistaking Kanaya's wording to say she was going to change in her bathroom, not her bedroom, Rose would go to the bedroom and see Kanaya fussing over her moulting welt. This, not sex appeal as Jade suspected, was Kanaya's reason for swapping her swimsuit earlier on (Kanaya would be offended by Rose's suggestion she switch to something with more coverage out of refusal to let the moult control her style. Besides, one piece suits are clearly less stylish right now No Offence Rose But Its Just True). Much of the conversation would continue from there as before.

But with Rose's relationship issues swirling in her head, Kanaya would come out with the worst news. She decides to answer the questions about her auspistice with Taxxon and Nerida, not wanting to go any further with her relationship with Rose when she realizes the facts of that past relationship will have a deep impact. Here is the remainder of the original pesterlog, with a few modifications, showing how the conversation would go.

[Kanaya begins anxious, almost scared. She does not get the words out easily.]
GA: I Killed Them
TT: You what?
GA: Taxxon And Nerida
TT: The couple you were auspisticating?
GA: Well I Suppose Gamzee Killed Nerida But It Was On My Request
TT: You KILLED them?
GA: Yes
TT: WHY?
GA: Well Nerida Was Self Defence Since She Was Going To Kill Me For Killing Taxxon
TT: So you called in a hit.
GA: A Favour
TT: And Taxxon?

[Kanaya begins to become matter-of-fact, slowly, if a bit grim. She comes to the realization that she has to finish her story, even wants to to get her point across, but that Rose's mood is not going to improve.]

GA: I Don't Really Think You'd Understand

[Rose physically withdraws.]

TT: TRY ME.
GA: In A Manner Of Speaking I Have Already Told You
GA: Auspistice Is A Black Quadrant
GA: While I Suppose It Is Often Occupied By A Friendly Ally It Still Requires One To Be Immersed In A Passionate Hatred
GA: I Never Felt Any Particular Attachment To The Two As I Have Specified
GA: In The End Killing Him Seemed The Only Fitting Way To Go On
TT: This is unbelievable. I'm not hearing this.
GA: I Was Not Going To Hide It From You
GA: Not Forever
GA: I Realize This Is Not A Particularly Compatible Aspect Of Our Cultures
TT: Goddammit, Kanaya, are you even listening to yourself?
TT: I've been thinking about forming a relationship with you and you've been hiding that you're a MURDERER?
TT: Were there more?
GA: I've Killed About Four Others
GA: Most About My Age
TT: Oh god.
GA: Yes That Is Why I Was Trying To Get It Out
GA: But You Don't Understand
TT: Oh this should be rich.
GA: No Im Not Making Excuses In Fact Im Certain This Will Only Make Things Worse
TT: What? Why?
GA: Because Its Important
GA: …In The Name Of Mutual Cultural Understanding
TT: You're honestly still going on about that?
GA: Of Course
GA: I Promised That In Good Faith And Meant It
GA: My Past Does Not Make Me Any Less Honest No Matter What You Might Think
TT: All right, what?
GA: Im Not The Only One Whos Killed Here
GA: This Is Just How Trolls Are
TT: You mean... all of you?
TT: This is just a culturally accepted... THING?
GA: Well
GA: Probably Not Tavros
GA: But Him Aside I Feel It Very Likely That All Of My Companions Weapons Were
Bloody Before They Slew Their First Imp
TT: Is that what you're holding up as your defence?
GA: Certainly Not
GA: My Intent Is No Different Than It Ever Was
GA: I Want You To Understand Even If You Dont Accept
TT: ...Kanaya, this is unforgivable to me, I hope you know that.
TT: You killed someone that trusted you.
GA: Ah But I Also Showed You An Answer To Your Questions
TT: What?
GA: About Auspistice And Friendship
GA: There Are Some That Might Tell You Trolls Have No Friends Because Its
Promiscuous
GA: Perhaps It Is
GA: But I Think Trolls Invest Their Pity In Only Two Persons Because We Know Its
Safe
GA: If You Spread Yourself Between Many Its So Much Easier For You To Lose
Someone
GA: Suffering Through Constant Loss At All Turns
GA: If I Felt As Strongly For One Friend As Another What Happens To Me When One
Dies Or Both
TT: Good God, Kanaya, that's the fault of the other Trolls! If you stopped them there
wouldn't be a problem!
GA: Tell That To An Angry Troll
GA: When You Want Someone Hurt So Bad That Even You Cant Help It...
GA: I Don't Think You Could Understand
GA: To Know What It Means To Want Someone Dead
GA: And To Want Those You Pity Alive At The Same Time
GA: Its A Terrible Balance
TT: I don't think I'd even want to TRY to understand.
TT: Kanaya, you're scaring me!
GA: I Understand
TT: You—
GA: Or At Least Ill Try To
GA: That Leads Me To Auspistice
TT: Please just stop.
GA: Rose Please Listen
GA: This Is Important As Well
GA: If You Want To Understand Us You Have To Understand This
GA: Auspistices Have A Hand In Holding Two People Together
GA: Together They Can Vent And Dont Want To Kill
GA: The Only Hand
GA: Without It Our Society Fails
TT: Excluding the venting bloodlust, that's what our friends do for us, I've never once
felt that was drawing too thin.
TT: Tell me, Kanaya. When Nepeta "lost interest" in that kismesis of hers, and didn't have an auspistice to support her thanks to you... did Nepeta kill her?
GA: I Told You Already That I Don't Know
TT: Unbelievable.
GA: Rose Please
GA: I'm Not Trying To Lecture Against You And I Wish You Wouldn't Against Me
GA: If You Want To Revoke Any Of Our Plans I Will Understand
GA: I Will Try To Understand
GA: But If We Are Going To Live Even Near One Another As Trolls And Humans
GA: You Have To Understand What We Were Once
TT: Just "once"?
GA: Certainly Not Now
GA: I Don't Think We'd Hurt One Another Any More
GA: Or At Least I'd Like To Believe That
GA: And You Have Nothing To Fear
GA: Things Have Changed And Are Going To Change Further
TT: I'd like to think that.
TT: But Kanaya, this is MONSTEROUS. I don't think you understand even though you're saying you're trying.
GA: I'm Saying I Will Try From Here Out
GA: This Conversation Has Always Been Asking A Lot Sometimes That Takes Time
TT: Kanaya
TT: ...I need to talk to someone else.
TT: And I need to not talk to you.
GA: I
GA: I Understand
TT: Thank you.
GA: I'm Sorry I Didn't Tell You Sooner Rose
TT: ...Yes. Yes you should be.

Rose leaves, but while it's hard to tell from the notes, her emotions are far more mixed than in the original chapter. In the original chapter, she was purely upset, and overreacts to what happens next with rage (and what happens next isn't even the same thing! As I said, it was moved ahead a good number of chapters). In this chapter, she is equal parts sadness and rage, and the upset side wins out.

Leaving the room for the entrance, Rose steps into the transportalizer.

The scene continues from there for some time. Be with you in a few minutes.

Pulled into the void, Rose's retreat was stalled in that strange place in between. In entering, she had escaped from Kanaya on the brink of tears and found her mood now the subject of crushing observation by the thousand eyes of greater minds above and in every way around. Rose clutched her arms close about her chest, head bowed, waiting for the forces of the Game to pull her from that exulted place; freezing cold. But as her thoughts lingered on that hall of greater things, Rose's heart seemed to anchor her in their gaze. Her heart demanded its say and she shunned it, the flowering flame of Light within contesting her conscious mind's every decision. Half-hiding, half-buckling, Rose began to feel her own weight.

Rose was pulled from her reflexive crouch by the feel of a hand on her shoulder, a firm, broad hand with the weak grip of one more tired by years than Rose could admit to being weakened by her current pain. Rose jumped and turned, and saw a man standing there. A Human man, both white and...
grey, who stood over her, dressed the heavy robes of a British cultist, as Rose understood the
distinction. Behind him stood Mirann.

"Rose," she greeted, strangely hesitant.

The man gestured over his left shoulder towards the Troll, though his arms seemed heavy to lift, even
under his own power. "I'm afraid my associate may not be the most familiar with grief and tears." He
turned back and looked at her with drained, grey eyes. "…Anger, maybe."

The remark was a jibe, almost childish, and in return the Sea Troll shot him a look from the corner of
her eye. Still, Rose could see what he had meant. Mirann could not shake the look in her eyes: a
Troll's look of confusion and also disappointment, both so unlike a Human's, with the hint of
imminent confrontation teasing at the lines of her face, hoping to address the unfamiliar with the only
course of action a Troll had at their disposal. To Rose, it was a familiar look. Kanaya, mixed with her
mother: violent on one hand, a hand in which she held her harpoon; brusque and inapproachable on
the other; on both sides, baffled.

The comparison to her mother quickly got Rose's hackles up. "Pardon me, then," she said to the
man. "I'll be more careful to keep my quadrant issues where they'll be less likely to make you both
uncomfortable."

Of course, there had been no Troll born under Alternian skies that understood passive-aggression on
their own, but the old man laughed – "Hah!" – and then turned to leave. But as he went, he clasped
his hand weak, but without fear, about the Sea Troll's weapon hand and drew it back into a rest
position as he passed. Once behind her, he touched on her shoulder, and kissed her behind her fin.
Mirann sighed, annoyed that this would work, and her grip on her weapon relaxed. For all the other
pressures pushing down on her, it hurt Rose to see them. Though the Troll appeared younger by
virtue of her caste, it seemed to Rose that Mirann's came closer to a gentle medium near the man, and
he younger, toward her. After the kiss, the man lingered only a moment, but then stepped away into
the darkness, for all he seemed to have been at home by her side.

"I see you don't have those problems," Rose said, low. Her mother was still at the forefront of her
mind, and this, this was how they dealt with these sorts of emotions. Rose continued out of practice.
"By all means, I put myself on my knees before your boundless experience."

But any comparison Rose might have made for her mother faded as the Troll woman, hardened in
the way Rose knew so well from Vriska and Karkat, came to stumble. The fault was simple. At
Rose's accusation, her unfamiliar childishness, Mirann shifted her arm as though to reach back in
reassurance towards her partner, before she remembered that he had gone and stopped. Memory of
lost comfort caught Rose in turn, and she so stumbled from her attack. "Please," Rose said, and
began to regret it. "I just want to be alone."

Mirann went faint, but Rose heard her whisper: "So did I." But then she became firm, and hefted her
weapon, back to the hunt with a junior huntress. "Clear your head of us," she ordered. "Big and
small. Air and void."

"I've been trying," Rose protested, though she closed her eyes. The air she was meant to forget
carried in the sound of giants shifting in their rest. "I can't keep it out."

"I didn't say to clear your head of everything," Mirann said. She seemed almost concerned as Rose's
mood plunged into anger. "…Just of us," said Mirann, and once again, Rose felt the wizened hand of
the man on her own shoulder. How he had gotten behind her, she did not question, given her
location.
"Think of your friend," he said. "Distract yourself." And he squeezed her shoulder gently. His voice was apologetic, and caught on some childhood chord in the back of Rose's mind which still reached for the comfort of some authority, for all she had built herself up to the contrary. Rose's breathing began to shake.

For her part, Mirann's plea went to Rose's intelligence. "Bend your drive where your will will not suffice." She spoke in Eldritch: for Rose, a language of spells and formulae, and so the instructions became a spell. Eldritch was the timbre of that resonant hall, and it guided Rose's inner mind to such a degree that she barely heard the closing instruction: "Bend your weakness to your service, and overcome."

As it happened, Rose did not forget the air, or the void. Still vulnerable from her brush with long-forgotten childish understanding, Rose's mind began to drift naturally to similar comforts. The soft never-wind of the void brushed through her hair as it flowed about the trail of her mind given loose form in the void, and Rose felt the near presence of John, and Jade, and Dave. She had to laugh at the very idea of seeking comfort from any of those three, each for the same, petty reason, since it would mean she'd have to fall from where she stood in their minds, in her mind. Soon, the never-wind took on a tighter form, and Rose's imaginings drew her friends up, as though they stood before her, and she felt their presence. Rose kept her eyes closed, fearing her little spell would break if she saw an imperfection.

There was no laugh for Kanaya, as Rose called her up at her side, though she stood so strong in Rose's mind that Rose felt that if she would open her eyes, she would see Kanaya standing there where her friends would not. Rose could turn back, and say what she had swallowed hard in the real world. She had no laugh for Kanaya, but even as her other friends fell away in the back of her Rose's mind, to keep concentration on the shade before, Rose reached back to the others, instead. And as Rose turned her back to Kanaya a second time, the void fell away, ghosts and all. Rose opened her eyes a crack, to look down and see the Virgo platform beneath her feet.

"…Done, then," Rose said. And slowly, she shuffled the weights on her heart, and shook with sudden tears. Pulled down by exhaustion, Rose once more considered the pad beneath her feet, and found herself unwilling to step aside, lest Kanaya be able to step through and follow her.

"Selfish," she chastised, and then, in audit: "Heartless, hard, disimpassioned, useless friend." She tried to force her legs to move. "Not a friend at all," and then she observed: "Lovely evening."

Feeling a tear on her hand as Rose tried to cover her mouth and keep more sentimental nonsense from spilling forth, the rebel Light in Rose's heart chased her from the platform. The Virgo sign lit with green as Rose heart filled with apologies, stumbling almost full the way to the Libra pad. But Kanaya did not come, and soon, Rose came to accept it.

"Tsk," clicked a tongue behind her, and Rose's heart fled behind its veils in base humiliation. Humiliation turned to anger, and anger set her mind aflame, as the intruder added: "Looks like I have 8ad timing."

Rose clenched her fist. "What do you want?"

"Me?" The sound of footsteps was all Rose had to guide her, as Vriska stepped off of the Scorpio platform to cross the small gap between them. "You're the one who sprang in here on me, Lalonde. I'm just back from getting changed, going to head to the lab…" Vriska passed Rose by, drawing a finger across Rose's arm as she went. "…maybe go visit some… friends."

At first, in her anger, Rose assumed Vriska was referring to the Virgo pad and Kanaya, but before Rose could protest, Vriska turned to face her instead. She was crisp and clean, her clothes dry and
her hair cleaned out of muck and chlorine, left splayed and undressed and a-curl as it dried in the air, in what Rose saw as a typical carelessness. "Wasn't sure where to look for you, but I guess today's my lucky day."

"So you do want something," Rose observed. One last tear still curled below her chin, and Rose found she had no desire to bandy with Vriska; indeed, it was only by holding her breath that she kept down the urge to cry that had pushed her pride fully from her mind. "I'm not interested."

Rose made to walk past Vriska, but found an arm cut across her stomach, struck at the base of her ribs. "Oh, well that's just a shaaaaaaaaame," she crooned. "And I had such a good idea." Rose, choking between the strike and her need to cry, could not prevent Vriska from saying more. "Brighten you right up, the way things must be going with Fussyfangs."

Rose's hand snapped up into Vriska's wrist, and she shoved it up and away. Rose did not even look up at her tormentor, that old guideline not to look Fate in her eyes holding true now in instinct. Swallowing the urge to scream, she went to pass Vriska, pushing by with force, not letting Vriska's arm go until she was fully past.

But as she freed Vriska's wrist, that same arm lunged, and seized Rose's wrist in turn. And though Rose's grasp had been more than firm in anger and Vriska was happy and calm, Vriska's grip crushed down on Rose's bones, and her claw-nails cut a thin cut the skin as she closed her grip. Rose called out and turned, but Vriska held strong, without effort, smiling and unaware that she had done any harm at all. "...Nnnooo," Vriska said to enforce her physical response. She was entertained.

"Fuck it, Vriska, I'm bleeding," Rose shouted, and to her credit, Vriska did loosen her grip, somewhat. Rose checked her arm: the wound wasn't bad, only a little worse than a papercut, and the blood was little more than a few droplets already stopped. If Vriska had meant to do worse, she probably could have, but that was little more than a cold comfort. Rose tried to free her arm, but Vriska was now immovable. Vriska pursed her lips for a moment, and tapped her chest, telling Rose to go to her inventory for a healing candy. Rose refused. She was not about to debase herself in front of Vriska when all she wanted was to retreat to her room.

"That's why I like you, Lalonde," Vriska said, and this time her smile seemed genuine – conspiratorial, perhaps, but for Vriska, no mood could have been more true. Gently and slow, as if she were hoping to see what Rose would do in reply, Vriska reached out her opposite hand to grasp Rose's wrist with both, and intertwined her fingers in the slick of Rose's blood. "You see, a funny thing happened today, Lalonde."

"I wanted to grab him... by the back of the head... and drive his face into the edge of Princess Bubblyguts' new favourite pool, over... and over again until I could feel the brick slap against my palm."
Rose felt Vriska's grip tighten – like it had against the poolside – and then waver, and she wondered if Vriska was waiting for her to react, in fear through violence of flight. "Finish talking, Serket. I've got things to do and don't need your torture porn wasting my evening."

"Oh, because you've got l8ts to do this 8vening," Vriska said with a nod back towards the Virgo pad, unable to shake a chuckle from her voice and Tone. "But then something else happened, Lalonde. Do you know what that was?"

"Tavros," Rose spat.

"You." And now her grasp tightened, and Vriska pulled Rose up a step. "You. This do-nothing Human, with no place in my life, stepping in front of what I deserve to do. You with your perfect observations, you who knew what would... destroy me better than I ever would! You who put me down in single shot, sniffed out my plans and pr8ved me wr8ng!" And Vriska riled as she spoke, her final words snapped out with fury, as she tried to pull Rose closer in, where her teeth were barred in a grimace that challenged Rose to prove her wrong again.

Vriska hefted Rose another time, to bring her in one final step, but this time, Rose refused to let her. She pulled first. Her left hand, still holding firm to Vriska, resisted with all the strength the game had given Rose, and she pulled the Troll off-balance. Twisting, she jammed her fingernails into the soft spot on Vriska's wrist, and found it just as sensitive as any Human's. Now it was Vriska's breath that shook with pain and fear, in excitement and surprise. Meeting Rose's eyes, Vriska freed one of her hands and held it up flat, like half-surrender, light smears of red on its surface. Rose stopped her attack, but seeing no sign from Vriska that the other hand would go free, she wrapped her captured hand to hold Vriska by her wrist. Then Vriska started laughing for sure.

Rose shook her head. "You don't know him. You don't know yourself. You don't realize what you were going to do to him."

"Eridan? Oh, Rose. Oh, I know Eridan, Rose. I think you'll find I know him better than he knows himself." Vriska grinned. "...There's not much to know."

"I think he'd surprise you," Rose said, thinking back to Eridan's angry message to her at the pool. "And I don't mean that admirably. We've got words for people like him, back home. And you."

Vriska shook her head. "You'll tear each other apart, Vriska!" Rose warned. "...And I almost hope you do."

"But you don't want us to, do you Rosie?" Vriska cooed. "We're just two craaaaaaazy Trolls, lined up for you to probe our brains, but if you let us loose, that'll 8e all on your shoulders." Vriska was almost sing-song as she went, but at this point she stopped, and leaned in close to growl: "Won't it?"

"You want my help?" Rose shouted, finding her strength. Vriska began to grin, licking her teeth, and nodded. "You want my help? Okay: here's my terms."

"Wait," Vriska said. "You don't get terms!"

Rose spat, bile and the iron tang of blood. "Don't I? Well how about this? I'm not a fool, Vriska Serket. You have twenty-three game levels on me. I know it, and I think you know it too. In fact, I think that's why you're here!" Vriska's smile turned to a scowl, and Rose went straight up into her face. "You think you can pick an auspistice you can just ignore and get away with anything? Not a chance. I want you to show me you're actually going to listen. Then I'm in. Oh yeah, I'll help," she confirmed, to Vriska's clear pleasure. "I don't expect you to understand why."

"Oh, suddenly it's inter8sing!" Vriska yanked Rose closer to show she was not intimidated. Vriska
Any intimidation Rose felt was shoved aside. It was time for business. "All right: one! I want you to find a moirail. Someone level ninety-nine, just like yourself. So not John, Vriska! You're a menace." Vriska tried to look flattered. "And if I can't curb you, someone else had better."

"Fine," Vriska said, and pointed past Rose's shoulder. "She's my moirail." Vriska feigned a gasp. "I guess she never told you!"

Rose turned her head to see if Vriska was pointing where she thought she was: yes, straight at the jade green Virgo symbol. Rose's emotions toward Vriska roiled. "Oh my god," she said instead, back on the clubbed path. "You actually are this deluded, aren't you?" Vriska did not look a mite offended, but as Rose continued, emotion surfaced: "Vriska, you and Kanaya haven't talked in two months! What, did you think you were doing so perfectly that she had no moirail advice for you whatsoever?"

"I..." She whispered, and Rose barely caught it. "But..." She said something else, whispered it under her breath, and it sounded as though she had said: "...Fussyfangs..."

"Oh, please say you really did think you were that perfect," Rose interrupted. "That would make my terrible day." It was mean-spirited, and Rose knew it. It was horrible, rubbing the salt into what was clearly striking Vriska as a wound, and it was exactly what Rose was supposed to do. Vriska's response was immediate and, most importantly: pointed her straight back towards Eridan.

"All right, deal. I can find a better moirail than her, no problem."

"Good self-confidence," Rose said. "Too bad there isn't a better one to find." Defending Kanaya like that treated close to moirallegience, but Rose switched topics fast to keep both her own mind and Vriska's off balance. "Second, and listen close: you're going to apologize to Aradia for killing her."

Vriska burst out laughing. "I'll what?"

"Oh, you heard me," Rose said. Still joined at the hands, she advanced, pushing Vriska back a step. "My job's to stop you both from running around hating everyone and their matespirit. You want to prove that you'll listen to me? Then you will make nice with the person you killed and who killed you back. Because I think you can't do it, am I right?"

"Won't apologize to Megido, or won't listen to you?" Vriska asked.

"Can't," Rose clarified. "...And both." No response. "Until then, I'm not your auspistice, and I don't even care. Deal?"

Vriska had not truly stopped laughing, even during the demands. "W-what the hell did Kanaya even say to you?" Rose realized she should have expected that. Certainly, if she was entitled to take shots at Vriska, retaliations would be inbound. But Vriska was finished, and decisively so: "Deal!" She shouted. "I'm in!" She broke their mutual grip and headed off towards her own transportalizer. "You'll see, Lalonde. This is going to be a cakewalk. I'll see you tomorrow."

Rose was left alone in the transporter room, heart pumping and adrenaline flying, now enraged. Somewhere beneath her burst of energy was all that mass of feelings that she had picked up in Kanaya's, but her urge to go hide in bed and wish the day had never happened had vanished, replaced only with a wary apprehension regarding the conversation that had just occurred. She had to do something to vent off her frustration.

[Rose heads off to the kitchen in search of the alchemiter, to make something worth working with, or
Hrm. In hindsight I think I should have brought up Vriska killing Aradia recently, Rose pulls it from nowhere. Oh well.

At this point, we enter some sort of textual montage, as we meet up with the other characters of the fic. If you're a second drafter, it's time to turn back to the Original Draft. Here is your context: Feferi and Sollux weren't quite fighting about what they were in Chapter 9 here, but about something... ill-defined and stupid. I take the blame for that. Among other things, Sollux was worried that Feferi wanted him to hook up with Aradia at Feferi's expense. Dropped that like a hot iron. Lastly, Rose was travelling through some of the lab's access tunnels to avoid the hostile transportalizers at this point in the Original. We'll get to why later on, when she picks up the same habit in this one.

Now, to show you where to go, head back to Chapter 10, open your Find bar and past in this line…

"Even though they were well within"

…and you'll jump to the starting point.

Read through to the end, no worries. Then, we'll pick up the commentary.

A scene we keep (sloppily) returning to in this section is of Kanaya coming to talk to Karkat about what happened with Rose. They go off to somewhere private and Karkat turns the whole thing into one of his relationship discussions by talking about various forms of comfort. In the new draft, this would have been a contiguous scene, as there was no good reason to break it up but to ram home my point. Kanaya probably would have thrown Karkat a few words of advice about Terezi in this Draft, while we're here, which would have provided a nice segue to Dave and Aradia, who I would have made the next scene, so let's skip to them.

Dave and Aradia talk, and Dave confesses his troubles with Terezi. However, what actually wins Dave's attention is that Aradia is willing to leave him be when he asks, having learned that that's what he wants when it comes to emotional matters, something Jade and John specifically have not yet learned to do. Indeed, most of the scenes leading up to this scene were tailored to it rather than reverse. It would not much change between drafts as a result. Seeing an emotional compatibility alongside his attraction, Dave asks Aradia out, and she suggests they go do something fun instead of sappy, which makes Dave feel even better about things. Realizing she must be seeking a bit of an emotional escape as well, Dave thinks about trying to get her mind off of things like Feferi, and transition...

Feferi and Sollux's talk would be overheard as the party dies down, and after Jade, John and Nepeta have a chat about how things are going, and certain anxieties. I would probably use this opportunity for Nepeta to reveal exactly how moult works (though that's a bit of a speed bump in our End of Act attempts here). Meanwhile, Feferi and Sollux would be talking, and would come to a mutual agreement to trust one another. The trio would leave the hot tub to give them some private time, and as a result, we don't hear what it is that Feferi is actually planning to do. In the spirit of things, Sollux can say: "No, seriously FF, I have no idea what's going on." No idea what's going on? Transition!

What do we know nothing about? BREAD FIGHTS. I have no regrets. Rose meets up with Terezi and Gamzee, whose interactions are now far more justified than in Draft 1, and they drag her into their games, which actually help her relax. The soap opera joke was lost on a few readers and would probably be cut. Beyond that, though, there is one other thing that has to happen, and the first scene I have to write Fresh For The Commentary!, just because it has to be seen. It's set late in the sequence.
Rose, Terezi and Gamzee have just been eating horrible hot dogs and are resting themselves and their stomachs. The topic turns to Karkat and Dave, and Rose is told about Dave's behaviour at the end of the previous chapter. She does not approve, and she brings it up when she meets him in the next chapter, but that's then. More important is where Rose takes the conversation next.

[The three are slumped up against the wall. If you were facing them, left to right: Terezi, Gamzee, Rose.]

Rose, still playing with her cocktail toothpick, smiled as a thought came to her. "Terezi," she said, "question for you."

"Lay it on me, Rosie," Terezi said, slapping her knees, and then Gamzee's nearest for good measure.

Rose pretended to be exclusively interested in the pick for a moment, holding it between both pointer fingers by the extremes. "...why did Karkat lie about stealing your dragon plush?" Terezi's jubilant knee slapping came to a sudden, dry stop. "And more importantly, why is he covering for the real criminal?"

"What are you saying, Rose?" Terezi said. For the first time in the night, her voice had lost its trails of play and fun. "4R3 YOU QU3ST1ON1NG TH3 W1SDOM OF TH3 COURTS"

Rose rolled her eyes, ignoring the use of tone. "You still have the case files on your recording-stick thing?"

"Of course." She seemed offended just to be asked.

"Give me here," Rose said, and she held out a hand. Terezi lowered her eyes but complied, and Rose began to flip back and back through the player until she had found the files related to the case. Finding her memory of the day's events fresh and on the tip of her tongue, Rose began to talk through them as she searched for the sound clip she wanted.

"I am questioning the wisdom of the courts!" Rose said, with a bit of Terezi's theatre from both earlier in the night and the trial itself clinging to Rose's voice. "But only within the bounds of the investigation! See, something was bothering me at the end of the case. I picked up your little checklist and... couldn't put my finger on it, but I have it now."

Terezi gasped. "Were you inspired by some minor detail in our conversation?"

"I've been struck by nothing but gastronomic trauma, I'm afraid," Rose said. "I'm just the sort of person that thinks things through far after I'm finished, I suppose. Now... what was it you had said?" Rose asked. She turned to Terezi for the first time since her accusation and was delighted to find her eyes were alight with this new mystery. "You said: whoever was in the kitchen between when you brought the doll and when Gamzee arrived with the chicken, and who had no alibi, was a suspect. Because Karkat was the only one with no alibi, he had to be guilty."

"Right," Gamzee said, apparently listening after all. "And you said it was my bro, because my other bro was too loud—"

"Eridan," Rose filled in.

"—and my other bro was off making chicken."

Terezi and Rose did not respond to that, so to speak, though Terezi did pat Gamzee apologetically on the leg.
Rose had found her sound file. She held up the player. "The question," she announced, "is one of the timeline."

The three of them were briefly paused as the game world acknowledged their proceedings. Rose felt almost proud of herself. "Well there you go," Terezi said. "Better be good, Rose, even the game wants to hear your logic... and your tricks! Better make 'em good."

Rose smiled. "Then I had better not let the world down. All right. Things are set into motion when you arrive earlier that day with your scalemates. By the time you've left the room to move to the kitchen with Pyralspite, several people have not yet arrived. Among them are Eridan and Karkat. Kanaya was briefly in the kitchen with you, after John's cleaning sweep. She saw the dragon and confirmed it at the start of our investigation, confirming that it did indeed get that far. Then Gamzee dragged her out for the whole of our suspect duration, and you threw pots at her for it the next day."

"Right, a valid alibi!" Terezi acknowledged, "Later, I left, spent too much time with John, and then Pyralspite was stolen!"

"Exactly. In fact, Karkat went past you to get to her," Rose agreed. "This is when we agreed he stole the doll. He then went off to the alchemiter to put the doll in his impractical Beehive Modus, and maybe accomplished whatever else he had come out there to do."

Terezi shrugged. "Seems pretty cut and dry, Rose!"

Rose continued. "After that, Eridan went to get a snack from the fridge, but never got to eat it, because dinner began so quickly. Since I was in hearing range with my Seer powers, you noted that he couldn't have bottled the dragon. I agree."

"Good!"

"Besides..." Rose said. "By then Karkat had stolen the dragon. Eridan couldn't have taken it."

Terezi smiled. "Pretty much!"

Rose met Terezi's eyes for a moment. No response. Holding up the stick so they could all hear, Rose hit the Play button.

Her own voice came from the player. "Look, I know we're all in favour of some good-natured nonsense from time to time, but I don't want to be dragged around the room any more than any of you want to be questioned. Did anyone actually see Terezi's doll: specifically yesterday?"

"Nah."

"I Haven't Really Seen It Since I Was On Lotaf, Really,"

"Yeah, it was over at the couch, wasn't it?"

"I'm Fairly Certain I Saw It On A Table In The Cafeteria"

"Of course I saw it, with its big red eyes staring straight through to my heart. Fuck."

Rose stopped the player. Terezi's grin had grown even larger, and she was leaning forward, shades shining in the dim light. Rose continued. "Eridan arrived after you had taken Pyralspite. He then got to the kitchen after 'Karkat' had taken her. And yet he has a distinct memory of her and her eyes, clearer than even everyone else who remembered her: even described her. You see, there was a significant, fundamental mistake in this whole investigation. Something that led us entirely off track."
Terezi leaned even closer, near leaning on Gamzee's lap, and whispered: "And what mistake was that?"

"The time of the theft," Rose said, in her full voice. The only person that could have stolen the dragon between when you entered the kitchen and dinner time was Karkat. But Eridan saw Pyralspite right before dinner began!" Rose raised Terezi's player back towards her, in calm mockery of her dramatic finger-points. The game acknowledged on the soundtrack, and Rose followed up its musical sting: "She was still there!"

"But that's not possible!" Terezi said, "after all, no one saw during dinner!"

"No, no one did," Rose admitted. "But there was one place Eridan was looking that we know no one else was. One place he could have seen the dragon, even if he didn't fully absorb what he was looking at. One place no one needs to look, once we remember that Gamzee brought dinner from a different kitchen." Terezi raised an eyebrow. "...The fridge."

"Innnnteresting!" Terezi said, flopping her head into her hand. "I hadn't thought about that. Karkat must have not been able to grab her with his bees in time, huh?"

"Of course," Rose said with a polite smile. "Of course, that's easy to prove who did it from there, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Terezi was all anticipation. "And Karkat was just a collaborator?" She was all abuzz at the idea of nabbing another foe.

"Of course. We just follow your method again. It was just off in terms of time, after all." Rose went back to her toothpick. "Pyralspite was in the fridge all through dinner. That means, our number one suspect isn't Karkat, but the next person who was in the kitchen with no alibi!"

Gamzee looked tense, trapped between the two of them, but Terezi kept her calm much like Rose. "And who would that be?" she asked.

Rose laughed. "As I recall, she stayed behind... to pick up cake. One wonders from where."

Terezi got up, a low cackle escaping her lips. She set her arms on her legs. "One little hole! How did it get in Karkat's modus?"

"I don't know about when..." Rose admitted. "But I know what... he thinks. Because after he took the bees out, he told them not to work for 'our suspect' anymore. Which tells me... that he thinks they would have. Or that they already had. Let's step even further into the realm of inference. I may not be able to prove any of this, so let's just consider some delightful sprinkles atop our sundae of intrigue. Interesting thing I noticed about someone's modus the other day, Terezi: where Eridan's modus popped bottles into existence, Sollux's encrypted cards and Karkat's beehive, her modus seemed to be entirely invisible... to the eyes. And five minutes later, Karkat put something into his modus. Something she had just handed him. A piece of paper, no thicker than, say, a playing card. Why, he'd hardly have noticed, would he?"

Rose continued: "Later that day, that person had changed her modus. Because this modus projected her inventory for all to see, it was a good thing she got rid of the dragon previously, otherwise anyone could have seen her carrying it. But sure enough, she also got access to Karkat's beehive before the end of the night. And then she said something, a blithe little comment to punctuate her victory, but also, I'm going to guess from limited experience, one of the two command word for her rather particular new modus. What was that phrase again? That brought your dragon back into the real world?" She returned the recorder at last. "Take that, Terezi."
And then, Terezi began to squeal, and she flung herself toward Rose's waist. Rose pulled away. "Watson!" Terezi laughed. "Let me hug you!"

Rose scooted aside. "No, thank you!"

Terezi did not seem perturbed. "You did it!" she said, and sat upright. "A whole room of 1D1OTS W1TH 4LL TH3 CLU3S 1N FRONT OF TH3M 4ND NO ON3 G3TS 1T! I should never have doubted you!"

"There's only one part I don't get," Rose said. Terezi nodded. "Which is… pretty much everything else. Why? Why steal your own doll? And then frame Karkat?"

Terezi grinned, picked off a piece of lint from Gamzee's pants and flicked it in Rose's general direction. "Flirting."

"You're serious," Rose said.

"Karkat got it!" she protested.

Gamzee set his arms behind his head, now calm to the fact that the girls were fighting past him. "It's like my fishbro said: it's like they were going on their motherfucking first date!"

Terezi just grinned at Rose over Gamzee's shoulder. Rose gave her a shove. "I'm starting to think you two aren't my best reference for Troll behaviour."

"I'm insulted!" Terezi said. "Gamzee, are you insulted?"

"Nope!" he replied.

From there, the chapter carries on with Rose asking Terezi "what is up" with the kismesis, but it's clear Rose and Terezi aren't close enough for that. That said, Terezi reiterates her promise to learn more about the Humans after observing that Rose has been doing the same for the Trolls: except now it's clear she's serious. Rose resolves to learn when Terezi is and is not serious, and the chapter goes on to end much like how it would have originally ended.

== END OF ACT 2 ==

Now, in addition to the actual notes I have, my primary source of plotting is a large planning document, and a timeline derived from it. As a result, I have a checklist of major and more importantly, minor details, filed by character, that I have to include in every chapter. But to make things even worse, this chapter (and 9: they were originally one chapter) was drawn from more than one checklist: the original Act 2 was full of shit scenes I had let die, and I had to make sure the details they were trying to convey were salvaged. This means I have not one checklist, not two checklists, but three: the original, the checklist made up of entries left unchecked on the checklists for previous chapters, and the checklist I made when doing a liveblog of the first draft.

Now normally when I get to the checklist, I go through the chapter I just finished and scatter these little presents about it… or forget about them and end up with Checklist #2 up there. That's a bad thing. But thanks to the miracle of this being a commentary full of notes and not a completed chapter, I can just sort of put the remaining checklist items here! Most of the checklist items are above, but I can think of three situations where they might not have ended up in place: they might be so minor that there was no sense in mentioning them in the notes (but they were "Included"), they could be
here but equally could be somewhere else, but are still so minor they would not make it into the notes ("Moved"), or they were simply "Dropped" but I wanted to include them for the sake of trivia. So let's get to it!

- **Jade:** When Jade begins the story, she serves as the opposite extreme to Dave. She is the Human least interested in escaping the lab, though this is relative: she is not at all disinterested in the idea, she simply finds the lab more liveable. Could never work out how to express this. The first heart-to-heart scene we get with Jade is near the end of Act 4, and there was never any reason to include another just for this. Indeed, we're far past the point where Jade doesn't want to escape: she's now it's primary advocate! Dropped.

- **John:** We need to see John doing doctor stuff. He can be patching someone up at the end of the flush and should talk about his techniques. Someone was going to sprain their ankle in this chapter but it started to just seem kind of pointless. I prefer these sorts of foreshadowing not exist for themselves, and that's exactly what that sprain would have been. Un-integrated, amateur. Would have Moved this item up ahead yet another chapter. And then another. Then another...

- **Kanaya:** It's important we cast Kanaya’s awkwardness around Vriska earlier on, only for it to boil over later on. Probably have wormed that into the hot tub discussion. Consider it Included.

- **Feferi:** There are numerous notes to address Feferi and Eridan's former moirallegience, as they do ultimately have a scene at the very end of the fic. Unfortunately… I could never think of a good time! I have a feeling this note would have been nudged up and up and up and up until Act 5, where I actually have room for things to happen, and it would be closer to the scene in question. Every other act is just too tightly wound. Moved.

- **Eridan:** Here's something I would have included, but not having to bend my brain to it, I'm glad to let it go: having Eridan interact with Rose in a way that combines the "nice guy" school of manipulation to ashen relationships. Probably during the scene with him upside-down and then again maybe just after Rose leaves her talk with Vriska in the pool, and is trying to go back to Kanaya. Indeed, it seems that standing up for him has only made him more attracted to Rose. That said, he is genuinely concerned for her wellbeing after the (pool) talk with Vriska, but he just overdoes it. Included.

- **Vriska:** The scene where Vriska gets Tavros lunch led into a different writing scene from the original Draft, not the one I have here. But that "lunch" transition had Vriska tossing her plate down, which just seems somehow characteristic? Also, comments on the lunch itself made after some internet research, also not valid at a pool, or arguably at a barbeque. I wanted to salvage it, but it's probably lost. My note explains: "It’s just one of several small gestures that she how, when she’s calm, she seems to have kicked the habit of being outright abusive. Also, I like her utter disregard for plates, Rose, and turkeys." Dropped.

Next up: the Act 2 recap, and an explanation of the entire Roxyverse "plotline". Yeah. Let's call it that.

Chapter End Notes

The idea is that Rose realized what Terezi had done when she noticed the Clue sheet had multiple columns (for multiple games) and began to imagine them indicating multiple time slots. It was there that she realized the person who told her to confine her timeline in the first place was Terezi herself. Suspicious, she worked the rest out backwards from there.
Act 2 Recap

Chapter Notes

Currently have rough drafts for the chapters 13 and 14 as well, so expect those soon. I mean what I say at the end here: the sooner we get to new chapters, the more interesting this will be for all of us!

So what can I say about Roxy?

The central joke of the Roxyverse is to lampoon Hands by reversing it: by turning it into a two-tonne novel exploring the strange and bizarre twists and turns of introductory level basic Human relationships. Watch in shock and morbid curiosity as we join Roxy and, oh, let's say Cronus, as a hungover teenaged girl tries and fails to explain her freakish practice of bffsies through poorly placed Kingdom Hearts metaphors. That sort of thing. And other sorts of things.

Kankri glanced back around the corner. "Are you… you are! You're eavesdropping on Dirk and Jake! I want you to know, that I really don't think very highly of this. What could possibly even be your motivation behind this intrusion of privacy? Why are you doing this?"

Roxy rolled her eyes: "I don't know!" she said, feeling that was obvious, and pulled the vampire back into her belfry. Roxy wasn't sure how she had gotten into a belfry in an ectobiology lab in the middle of an asteroid, but these sorts of concealed places tended to crop up when other people were having a conversation. It was pretty boss!

What little structure the plot has was to rely on two points, both of which Andrew managed to upstage in the time it took me to get from EOA1 to EOA2. Great job, Huss. You should be very proud.

The first such point was that of "Orochi Jack." In the Roxyverse, more than just the premise is reversed. In this universe, the Humans played first and were stopped by Jack, this time prototyped by 12 lusus species from the session the Humans had created… and one other. The idea was that the 13th prototype was strong enough to make Jack comparable to the Jack of the main session, and I had the perfect idea: through a series of comical misadventures, the Beforian Trolls would exile 12-prototyped Jack… into the time-capsule flower. He would then catch up to Damara's sprite and self-prototyoe as she was entering. Thus, Orochi Jack is a recursive, monstrous energy demon-sprite. A few months later, Andrew released Caliborn: Enter, where a sprite arguably prototypes another sprite. Oh, trumped in one! The Huss knows how to move! (An update the day after I posted this implies this was not the case, but the idea was already out in the wild!)

The second point was of Roxy's relationship with Meenah, Aranea and Rufioh, which is the reverse of a hate-driven platonic relationship down both alleys. Trying to explain away the troubles of the relationship, only alluded to at this point, Roxy would hold a drunken conversation in the kitchen with Porrin and Kurloz (substituting for Terezi and Gamzee, as I have no idea what Trolls would be "weird' enough together to make the scene work as intended). This conversation would change the direction of the Roxyverse.

ROXY: no, see, it's totooty normal. for me to be mackin on them all
PORRIM: No+, I understand. It's what you Humans call a "po+lyamo+ro+us relatio+nship", isn't it?
PORRIM: I'm afraid to+ say that Kankri beat me to+ the wo+rd itself but I think I've dredged up the actual definitio+n since and think that if yo+u fo+ur are actually up for the challenges—
ROXY: look, porzy, im sure whattrr you were gon say was probably right an ill listen to u later but your interrupting mommy in the middle of her shenanigans
PORRIM: …O+h, why wo+uld I interrupt a go+o+d show? Carry on+n.
KURLOZ: now you see you kids, this is what I'm talking about: TOGETHERNESS. Kurloz: Rox, I ain't wanting to interrupt you but you both just reminded me of a hymn, and I'd really appreciate it if you'd both sing it with me right now.
KURLOZ: Okay? All together now. I know you know the words!
KURLOZ: Dumbass!
KURLOZ: Bitchass!
KURLOZ: Weakass!
KURLOZ: BEEEAAAAAAATCH!
KURLOZ: Girls, you ain't backing me up here!

By the way, did I mention the Kurloz can talk in this universe? And that he's still together with Meulin? And that he acts like a deranged youth pastor that thinks the ICP are hymnists? And that first drafters might the vaguest inkling as to why that first thing is? Boy, I can't imagine why I would have forgotten to mention that.

(It's "Nothin' But A Bitch", I know you don't want to look it up.)

Roxy goes on to explain that the "four Human quadrants" are: "Bffsies" (a circle in a ring), "Family" (I was at a loss for this symbol), "like, teachers and stuff" (which Porrim calls "Mento+rship, o+r the relationship with a student or guided party, perhaps with a triangle deno+ting the flo+w of respect.") and "totes making out with three peeps at once and its just for funsies, jeeze." (it is entirely possible that this symbol would be Roxy's chibi face surrounded floating amongst a happy fish, spider and butterfly, as drawn by a 16-year-old alcoholic).

(Hussie beat me to the punch on these by pretty much actually including one of each relationship in the Beforian layout! Porrim and Kankri are family, Kurloz and Meulin are best friends (and Rufioh and Damara were in childhood), and while the mentorship relationships aren't so clear, let's be honest that there were leaders and best friends in the Alternian group as well! But the real rub was the addition of Kankri, which made the idea that the Beforians had never heard of polyamory ridiculous: thanks to Kankri, they've probably heard too much.

Luckily, Hussie paid me back by giving me Damara, who like Aradia with Dave, gets loads of private time with Jane. I wish I could have written all of this, just so I could have "been there" when poor stuffy Jane finally works out what her partner's been saying.)

The punchline is that as the recaps went on, Roxy would slowly end up in each of these "quadrants". The polyamory-not-quadrant parallels which the central auspistice of the main fic, of course, and goes up and down a similar rollercoaster. Roxy and the others would even start taking it seriously, without leaving the bounds of parody (Meenah generally standing in for Vriska, Rufioh vaguely like Eridan (though in some instances, Horuss would fill that role, too), and Aranea would just be around wishing the others would please 8ehave, you guys, seriously, I know we all value this relationship, however complicated it can 8e!). The other "storylines" are unique to the Roxyverse. Roxy's Bffsyship with Jane would recover from damage incurred along the way, Roxy would end up in a vaguely mentor-based sniper team with Jake in the fight against the Underlings (which I couldn't make funny so it probably would have just appeared in the background). Finally, after a cloning
incident parodying a different fic entirely. Roxy would discover the true meaning of family with her last friend.

ROXY: isn't it beautiful dirk?
ROXY: when we were all alone in the whole wet world growin up together i always knew that one day we'd be together
ROXY: like best siblingcoparentwhatevres
ROXY: happiest day of my lyf
ROXY: holding all three of my casual poly gamous partnertypes clonebabies all sliming over me like little muckrakers
ROXY: its all i never wanted
DIRK: …Was that one of your weird verbal typos? Because I can't tell this time.
ROXY: neither can i broseph
ROXY: annn one of you us peein on my arm
ROXY: im telling ur mommy or daddy on u u no
DIRK: Normal foreplay conversation for the Frolicking Foursome.
ROXY: strider i didn't draft you into my storge quad because you make fun of my kissy friends I drafted you to help clean up babypoops!
ROXY: OBVS

You know the trouble with parodying the original Grublings is that it's short of even 2k and doesn't hit many notes. One of those notes is infant cloacal venting. Aren't we all feeling intellectually stimulated to be reading this commentary? Of course we are. We carry on, enriched.

And that's pretty much how it would have gone. While a recap would have preceded the very final chapter, it would not include a Roxyverse section. This would instead be saved for some sort of bonus chapter, or goof epilogue.

MEANWHILE, in another timeline.

Open Monolog

AC: :(( < wwwaahahahh *sniff* aahhaa…
SR: Please stop crying.
SR: I didn't even get the impression that you liked the fic.
AC: :(( < ahk-- *choke* …auhhh… *hiccup*
SR: What's touching from the readership is really just psychologically jarring from you.
SR: And a complete waste of subpar ventriloquy.
AC: :(( < comfort me.
SR: *SR begrudgingly pats the distraut hand puppet* AC: :(( < comfort me with completed fanfiction
SR: No!

"Things in the second act got set off after DAVE informed JADE about his fights with JACK, causing her to begin working on a design to kill, capture or otherwise restrain him. Unfortunately, while temporary restraint may be possible, Jade cannot think of a better hammer to crush the SOVEREIGN SLAYER than the players themselves. She set out to combine the ideas.

"Meanwhile, in a desperate attempt to dump COMBAT MECHANICS on your head before HUSSIE josses me like he ended up doing in several other areas, we saw ROSE and some others fight several UNDERLINGs, including a type called a CENTAUR distinct from the Arthour prototype. Gifted with the power of perfect frontal defence, the group was unable to stop them, and
were forced to use SOLLUX’S ULTIMATE ABILITY, a spell players gain at MAX LEVEL, and so the Humans all lack. We also learned that some ELEMENTS counter one another, causing pain in PLAYERS and NPCs gifted with the opposite power when a spell is in play.

"With Sollux wiped out by exhaustion from his spell, KARKAT promised him a party of sorts to cheer him up, but he wanted to talk to ARADIA. After a conversation, he and she chose to restart their relationship in the TRIAL STAGE. Unfortunately, this caused confusion and trouble with FEFERI, who worried about Aradia's role in the new relationship, having just come from a fight with EQUUIS, Aradia's unstable, vacillating partner. Along the way, Rose also ran into the Troll in the void: a Sea Troll in her apparent later middle age, whom Rose called "Mirann" after the gurgles of a nearby MIDDLING GOD.

"After an awkward moment with Rose, KANAYA came to Karkat and several others looking for relationship advice, and they ultimately advised her to make a decision by a set date. Karkat then left to arrange his promised party, during which TAVROS and ERIDAN made up and kissed, upsetting VRISKA.

"The next day, Jade and Kanaya discussed pornography while watching children's cartoon shows, like adults. Feferi burst in, thrilled that she had fixed a problem with her POOLS and could soon throw some sort of POOL PARTY. But pool parties would have to wait, because just then, Terezi burst in, all bustle and nonsense about someone stealing a particular, special scalemate. Investigation followed, and Rose finally ran into GAMZEE, who mentioned that he was Tavros' MOIRAIL. Terezi completed her investigation, fingering Karkat as the criminal. He admitted his blame, the two becoming KISMESES, much to the shock and disturbance of the four Humans.

"On the day of the party, and after a long chat, Dave managed to get Rose to admit to having some concerns about her relationship with Kanaya, but she remained unaware of Kanaya's plans, which were supposed to place that very day. Having arrived at the PARTY, Rose was privy to several interesting sights, including Feferi and Sollux fighting over his relationship with Aradia; Eridan and Vriska fighting with Tavros; and Karkat and Terezi fighting so loud they didn't notice that they should have been fighting with Gamzee.

"Before he slipped away to tend to his Jack-herding shift, Dave had a long talk with Rose about the work, and managed to bump into Feferi on the way out, where she was talking to Aradia. Aradia was irritated by her 'concerns', but not as much as Terezi was by Dave's concerns outside the lab. This being their first encounter since the END OF ACT 1, Dave vented his anger at Terezi, and she and Karkat stormed off.

"Back at the pool, Rose once again prevented a fight between Vriska and Eridan, this one in Eridan's favour as Vriska held back to avoid making a poor impression in front of Tavros. This attempt to bottle her energy ended in fury, and she had soon left. Noting the exchange, Kanaya had a conversation with Rose about AUSPISTICE, but the subject of her own ASHEN HISTORY made Kanaya nervous.

"The two went to Kanaya's room to continue the story, where Rose discovered Kanaya was MOULTING, and that the FEMALE MOULT process was quite painful. Trying to comfort her, Rose found that she was unable to do so without crossing some form of quadrant line in her mind. But things got worse, when Kanaya, trying to hold to her promise to ask Rose about their relationship, felt the need to clear the air. She spoke of her history with an auspistice PAIR that she had murdered – a murder for which she could not provide a satisfactory explanation for to her Human friend.

"Rose fled the room, and found herself trapped in the realm of the MIDDLING GODS by her own
mind. Mirann, and a Human companion of hers, instructed Rose to clear her mind of the Void via
distraction, and Rose began to picture illusions that were perhaps made all-to-real in the process, like
a SPELL. Waking in the transporter hub, Rose ran into Vriska, who had been waiting for her. It
seems the exchange at the POOL convinced Vriska to change her mind about being in an auspistice
with Rose and Eridan. But Rose was in no mood for ashen conniving, and told Vriska to satisfy two
unlikely demands: to find a max-level MOIRAIL for security reasons, and to apologize to Aradia for
her murder back on Alternia. Not one to back down from a challenge, Vriska agreed.

"The story then branched, showing us as Kanaya went to Karkat for comfort, how Dave and Aradia
hooked up, how Feferi and Sollux made up and how Rose, Gamzee and Terezi became friends and
threw FOOD at one another, as you do. Rose also deciphered the truth of the case of Terezi's stolen
dragon, namely that she had done the work herself, set up Karkat for black funsies. The final sections
each served as a comparison of individuals and of sources of comfort, like conversation, distraction,
confronting the issue, a return to normalcy, and of course, letting your hand puppet write Lion King
CROSSOVER FANFICTION like a sucker."

I mentioned I would link a few other pieces of fanart that involved the past 10 chapters, but I can't
find their original sources! It wouldn't feel right to put them up without links to the artist's stuff. :( Still, I wanted to once again thank NightengaleRB for the art of Gamzee's fascination with cheese, Horosphere for drawing Karkat writing a fanfic about me<3<one of my chapters (yes really) and two others whose art I inspired (one by sqbr, the other whose name I've sadly lost!), as I'm glad to have sparked any ideas!

And now to Act 3, where commentary will be thin and links to the First Draft will largely suffice,
and to the Intermission. I figure the sooner we get to truly new content, the happier you'll all be, and
frankly, so will I, so let's get to it!
This chapter would have been a combination of two oddly undersized chapters I wrote during a transition period between "working on my external project and not getting any fic work done" and "working on my external project and then switching entirely to fic work, and then back, in sequence." As a result, First Draft chapters from this point on are pretty solid, though have enough inconsistencies to have warranted some concern in adaptation, and the Intermission has issues divorced from its general quality, but we'll get to that when we get to that.

Feel free to read the original Chapter 11, more or less without interruption!

MassMoonMurder did fanart of this chapter here!

We tune in to find that Dave and Aradia's date was interrupted by Jack, and that they're in the middle of a fight involving both past and future selves. After a moment, Jack uses some special attack of his that "nets" through reality to "catch" other things' special powers. While people understood this more than well enough at the time, I feel the amount of screen time Jack has had in canon since makes this strange attack seem kind of strange. Also, I was bothered by this section:

The first time they had tried to attack him when the lattice was up and searching, Aradia had been seized and had been forced to abandon her body as he took control. They had only been rescued by their deep future selves, from somewhere even further ahead than Dave stood now, and he had no mind to force them back again. They could handle themselves.

Why didn't I just show this scene instead of expositing about it now?

The plot purpose of the net spell is this: to make Jack more powerful as time goes on in surprising ways, so to explain how Dave and Aradia can beat him away at the start but haven't simply gathered all sixteen to stop him outright. In the new draft, they start too weak because of the Humans' level gap, and can't take advantage as that gap closes because of the net: from that point on, they have no way of knowing how strong he will be at any given point. There was also an additional stress point: Jack's stolen powers become stronger and stronger over the course of the original draft, but I didn't think either was as obvious as I had hoped. My plan for the second draft was to start Jack from scratch and so emphasize both points at once, without really disrupting the original fight scene. But why is he just learning the attack now?

I came up with a solution through my playlist, which actually isn't that odd for me. I was listening to Dogfight when I noticed the section that starts to play around 1:50. Homestuck tracks often feature these kinds of sections, which vary from the surrounding content – perhaps in hopes that Hussie will animate a scene to them! – and this section struck me in particular. This may sound odd, but thanks to whatever mood I was in, I felt is sounded like a "Dark Levelling Up" tune (or a Black Hole CO using their power in Advance Wars but that's a little off the track here). Yes, of course! I had my answer, and it was a combination of one I had no idea how to introduce, and one I had already prepared for entirely different reasons.

Picture this: Jade and John are on their way back to Nepeta's after the party, and end up fighting a small group of Underlings. The battle is won and, finally: they both level! Congratulations all
And then, in the middle of a fight with Dave and Aradia far away, the Final Boss autolevels to match the new global average. Before poor Aradia and Dave's eyes, Jack not only heals to full (as levelling so often does in games) but he gains the Temporal Net technique.

Anyone able to decipher Sgrub's coding jargon would be able to work out what was going on: during his level up, Jack's AI chose to Create a spell. The game prompts the AI for a spell and offers at most two prototyping slots. Jack combines Red Miles with the Witch and Time powers that he – like Liches, I think you're all starting to understand the purpose of Chapters 3 and 6 now! – inherited from Jade and Dave's prototypes. Able to manipulate others (Witch, Chapter 3) with his element (Time), via an energy web (Red Miles), he gets the Temporal Net attack. This all goes by in a few short lines of text prompt, most players wouldn't notice the particulars, I'm afraid, but it had to look like a computer talking to itself.

What all readers would notice is that, instead of the Trolls' lusus' powers, Jack reaches back in time to steal the Flawless Parry ability from the Centaurs in the lab. Now we're all in the same place! He would also possess Aradia, and future Aradia and Dave would rescue her. Dave's line about implicitly trusting Aradia would go here, as present Aradia, back to her senses, would co-ordinate an attack on Jack that would get Dave behind his perfect defence and scare him off. Dave and Aradia would then vow to double their shifts to prevent Jack from stealing game breaking powers like that, forcing Jack to jump from subject to subject as he does in the First Draft. They stop for repairs, however, and the rest is history.

See, I had been planning to strengthen Jack via the autolevel, and to use that to make the Temporal Net stronger over time, but it hadn't occurred to me to autolevel him on-screen: I was just going to have Aradia saying: "We had all better be careful, Jack has been boosted to Level 99," in the final few chapters. Autlevelling's intended purpose is something else, but it serves very well here!

(One sad bit about these changes is that I'm not sure where the Net catching the Lusus powers would end up. Their only purpose was to introduce the Net: now that it's introduced, I have no reasons to use them! Maybe Jack would grab them after Aradia is freed.)

All that was left to be changed from there was to stick in a few references to Dave and Rose's pesterlog in Chapter 9 while she teases him here.

The chapter would continue with scenes based on the Original Chapter 12. Go ahead, I'll wait. Chapter needs a bit of work in general but it's generally okay… though a fair bit would have been changed! Especially that joke of John's at the end. It's not even funny as a joke that isn't supposed to be funny!

A minor change at the beginning would be that Kanaya and Karkat come into the room talking about the breeding caverns, but are distracted by Rose. Then the scene would continue as planned until the major change.

I talked about the major change on my tumblr several months ago:

Original post:

If I could start all over… and I have, it just didn’t occur to me… I would have written this hearts/diamonds waffling in the Rosemary camp with far more tact than I did and am. The vast differences between late 2010 and now is staggering, what with Rose<3Kanaya being all but canon (unless Kanaya is talking out of her guthole about
the relationship thanks to Hussie’s ongoing coverage of her newest book “It’s Hard Being A Kid: 101 Ways To Screw Up A High School Relationship by Not Talking To Your Partner About Where You Stand”). When the original chapter was written, the idea of Rose and Kanaya being moirails was far more viable than it is now. The idea of describing Rose as attracted to Kanaya during the pool party [which I was writing at the time] scene seems entirely counterproductive as a result. This is frustrating. Sometimes it’s like they have no chemistry. I mean beyond the fact that I seem to write them with no chemistry.

To make this actually work, I would have to make the high-school level vacillation going on more of a central plot, if not entirely central. I would have outlined all the pale and flushed emotions I wanted Rose to go through over the fic and have her turn them over one by one throughout the course of chapters and explore each one, sometimes through inner monologue, sometimes dialogue with others or, in brave moments, Kanaya, but mostly through action, experimentation, and accident. Unfortunately, the fic’s focus is on the other platonic quadrant and focusing on moirallegience probably would have been a bad idea. Like a responsible author and all around decent Human being, I put the problem out of its misery by throwing sea life at it until it stopped breathing. [#intermission jokes]

Solving the Rosemary problem is a different matter, and I have chosen to solve it with a jackhammer and concrete. If you’ll look to your left, you’ll see the fresco Nepuppet and I borrowed from our recent trip to Universe H1. This section depicts the original Rosemary plot for A Hand in Holding Hands - you may recall my saying that Rose and Kanaya were not supposed to hook up when they did, or maybe later, when the last chapter in the first draft also did not go as planned. Well, back on track, I say.

The key point of this is that when Rose asked Kanaya out in this draft, Kanaya was going to say no. She would then point out that they haven’t really been testing their relationship’s bounds, and were, mirroring Sollux and Aradia, going to enter the Trial Relationship with eyes wide open a second time. This would give me time to correct the flaws in their development throughout the next two acts, and also to introduce some tension that I had included in the original plans but only survived in the First Draft as a wriggling, emaciated vestige of its original self. And you’ll see what I mean when we get there!
We now come to the first fully-formed taken-straight-from-First Draft chapter! From this point on, most of the chapters only require small-scale changes, and while that would have taken a long time to write, it takes almost no time at all to comment on! This is a good thing! The sooner we get to the entirely new chapters, the happier the first drafters will feel, and the second drafters will simply be able to read the legacy chapters without much interruption!

This one is based on the Original Chapter 13. One important bit of context is that Terezi and Karkat were not in a kismesis at this point in the fic, and that they hadn't really even officially broken up as matesprits. This is especially important in the section where Karkat talks about having both red and black quadrants: I'm not sure how that conversation would have gone in the new draft but we're going to have to let it by for now.

This chapter opens with a pesterlog about marriage and reproduction that seemed topical at the time (in canon, Karkat had just about fed John and Dave his infamous shipping diagram), but now seems out of date (really, the ectobiology suggestion should have ended the entire conversation). There are a few good jokes in here that I might have tried to salvage, but the general plan in the documents was to drop the whole thing. Alternately, the following note was tacked to the timeline:

- 18th: Kanaya may compare marriage to a mature relationship. It is important to mention [the details of an adult matespritship and kismesis], however this is not a full definition as such, simply an anecdote that should arise out of context of the discussion of marriage.

I'll leave that for you to ponder.

The chapter proper formerly began with Rose and Kanaya making plans, there's no reason to change this, it's just the nature of the plans that have changed. Rose goes off to talk to Jade about things and Gamzee ends up involved as well, while Nepeta attacks Eridan in the background (this scene probably would have been enhanced by having Sollux pelting them both with wads of paper). Jade would still do her improved impression of Karkat, who she's close enough to to easily duplicate his voice.

One important change here is this: Jade is initially watching Squiddles! Kids! during this scene. It is now the second half of Season 2 (under the third production team in the show's history), specifically the Season Finale of Season 2. During this season, something mysterious and Definitely Bad happens to male lead Mint off-screen, and sets off some of the major changes of Season 3. I figured it was best to seed this early. Jade does some fangirl muttering about how this is where things started to get weird, and she and Rose explain to Kanaya that the show took a Darker and Edgier plot-centric 90s turn in Season 3, and rattle off a few examples of just how weird things got. Rose mentions the season closing plotline, the "Dargon Arc," and Jade an episode entitled Ties That Bind. Rose remarks that "that one's cute!" to Jade's consternation ("Only you, Rose."), but she soon finds that Rose doesn't seem to remember the episode properly and Jade starts shuffling through her DVDs.

Jade is distracted by Nepeta's arrival, and the scene continues as written more or less to the ending! The thing about the Imperial Family is an odd bit: it's important, but I still feel this isn't the ideal way to convey it. I can't really explain until we get to the point in question, however, and that is far off (indeed, the fact that it's far off is one of its biggest faults). Right now the only purpose it serves is to underline that the Condesce we know and love does not exist (or no longer exists) in the H-Universe. Add a few minor changes to make the discussion of "professional Drones" tie in to Kanaya and Karkat's discussion of the breeding grounds in Chapter 13, and we'd otherwise be good!
(I'm not sure if canon Kanaya plans to revive the Drones them along with the Mother Grub, but this chapter makes the assumption that my Kanaya won't or can't.)

The only even moderate-sized change remaining for the chapter is that, instead of John getting the idea to fight Jack from the scene, it would instead encourage him to call Jade and Karkat over for a meeting about the Rat Trap. Rose would be spoiled from listening in, however, when news about the filthy kitchen finally reached Karkat's ears.
We catch up with Jade and the others leaving their meeting in a grim mood, and we follow Jade as she goes back to the TV and her DVDs. This is at first instinctive, until she remembers what she was searching for prior to being distracted… and also something else. Her search for her DVD soon becomes a bit more urgent, and when she finds it, she goes not for the first disc but the second. After setting up, Jade gathers a small group of fellows: Feferi and Karkat, on request, and Nepeta, Rose and Kanaya, who just happen to show up early on. She's remembered something. Something buried very deep: deep for her and deeper for Rose. Something buried in Squiddles! Season 3!

> [I] THE DARGON ARC

When I was getting feedback for the second intermission in the first draft, I realized something that had not previously occurred to me: my readers were much younger than myself. Homestar Runner's prime started back in 2003 with dragon, of course, and their peak was certainly still going strong in 2005 when Peasant's Quest came out. That was seven years ago now (but only 5 when the fic began), but it's not as though the popularity dropped off right away. Indeed, it was still going relatively strong as late as 2008 when they were picked up by Telltale, and that lasted just short of 2009. Did they really collapse so fast after that that they went virtually unrecognized in another internet-based fandom only two years later? But what was suspicious early on become confirmed when I came to The Dargon Arc. I don't get much feedback, but what little I did gave me the impression that some of the less important nuances were going over heads. I can blame myself to some degree, but I can't help but feel more than a little put out at having chosen such a poor approach.

See, The Dargon Arc was written backwards. I had a premise I wanted to get across, and then planned the fic in reverse to get there. Of course, the first step was to realize what kind of fic to make it. Since the premise was relatively simplistic, conveying it via a children's TV show seemed ideal. The issue is that my readership just didn't seem familiar with the tropes I was using, since we had different childhoods! And as a result, the constant running parody I'm familiar with loses its humour, and the impact of its conclusion (and that the medium – here corresponding to fanfiction – was able to convey the conclusion at all!) is lost on the readership as well.

It's just the icing on a cake of awfully specific sort of failure. The Dargon Arc doesn't require a second draft for the same reason Acts 1 and 2 (now Acts 1-3) did: tidying and reorganizing. Its plot suffices as a stand-alone with only minimal touch-ups. Its issue is rather one of getting anyone to read it at all. It's so divorced from Homestuck that it's almost original fiction, save in that it's trying in some degree to continue the original Squiddles joke (overly cute TV show for no good reason) plus the expanded Squiddles joke (overly cute TV show driven by eldritch horrors), taken down a new route (overly cute TV show driven by eldritch horrors into the most eldritch and horrifying decade for cartoons: the nineties). FFn tells me that hit counts are comparable per-chapter to Hands, which is remarkable as I can't even directly link the fic from FFn like I do from AO3. But then, is anyone enjoying it? Whether out of curiosity or an aggressive internalized sense of marketing, I was determined to make sure the second draft had maximized appeal.

There's also the issue of the fic's central premise, but that's a complicated issue I won't be touching on much, for reasons I've discussed elsewhere. Suffice to say, I would have spread its message throughout. The key of these changes would be to increase the involvement of the characters of Mint and Raspberry, as I've already done throughout previous chapters of Hands. Their arc is vaguely
The Dargon Arc is a funny thing. It's a parody of 90s cartoon shows, so that I could compare fanfiction as a whole to that television era of plot development and seriousness. It's also full of allusions to the later arcs of Hands, and introduces some of its key conflicts. It also discusses a key aspect Hands does not, and like any cliché children's cartoon, it has a very special message to cap itself off... and in that, a setup for the final, chronological scene of the act. It is, in a manner of speaking, about almost about everything but itself.

So let's get to it.

The first chapter would have covered I think all of Chapter 1 through Chapter 4 (the biggest downside to this approach was that TDA built up from a small chapter size to a large in order to avoid losing readers early, and this would be lost. I felt safe about trimming back this time... who knows if I was right). One major bit of context is this: I named the captured Squiddle princess "Berryboo" in the first draft, before I learned that as far as Squiddles! lead Alexander Rosetti was concerned, Princess Berryboo was a human. That was why I introduced Raspberry in the main plot, you can substitute as you please. The fact that she was now a Princess was going to be considered nothing more than a sloppy retcon.

Also of note is Hands Original Chapter 15, which was introduced after Andrew dropped a number of (accidental?) hints that Skipper Plumbthroat was supposed to symbolise Lord English. As a result, I had Scratch (alpha Scratch, even!) leave H-verse Aradia a series of messages essentially saying "The Squiddles TV Show means something different in your universe." Why he bothered is not entirely clear, but I suspect that Aradia, using her on board computers, thousands of duplicates, and fair amount of time spent doing nothing but monitoring and collating data, had probably worked out that she is not in an Alpha timeline. This section may not have been in the new draft, perhaps to my consequence, but those Plumbthroat theories haven't surfaced in the whole year since Lord English first appeared. Who knows?

The setup for the MST and the cold opening of Original Chapter 1 require few changes, save that Ox would probably be present during the cold opening and Rose and Kanaya would not be going on a date in the MST. It's when we hit Original Chapter 2 that the changes would begin to crop up, namely in the treatment of the characters.

It's worth noting that I originally considered two other means of conveying character on the Squiddles, before creating OCs. The first was to make them like Trolls, except where my Trolls had no friendship, these Squiddles were all about friendship. It was a full-out parody, and ultimately didn't work with the closing sequences. Imagine Karkat as a hug-happy Squiddle? Yeah. The second was to make them generic to the point of boredom, "defined" by a single trait. The naming scheme in the Squiddle album provides for this ("Squiddle Ruby", but in my case, "Squiddle Grouchy" or "Sloppy Squiddle") and the precedent of Care Bears would have been easy to draw from, but I chose not to take that route either. No, I chose to take the complicated route.

Prior to writing these commentaries, I did a fic meant to test out new personalities for the leads of TDA, among other things. I wrote up some detailed analyses of the results, which I will attempt to contextualize so not to bother you with the extraneous details, and also the spoilers.
Raspberry is our former lead, who gets to play the role simply by virtue of legacy: when she makes a prominent cameo, like this one, the other characters stand back and defer. Though the first draft does a poor job of conveying it, this is arguably the watershed episode in her relationship with her former best friend, Mint. I considered having her friends call her "Berry" but "Rasp" seems more likely to me for Squiddler and Squidette; "Berry" would have been Mint's name for her. Mint's vague disaster at the end of Season 2 has led to him becoming the ruthless Ox of Plumbthroat's crew. This would be his and Raspberry's first extended reunion since the change, and would be used to dwell on what had happened. Rasp is clearly upset by the change, one might almost say single-mindedly, and continues to appeal to his better nature, to no impact. Beyond that, I planned to change her personality from Diplomat Out Of Her Element to Former Hero Out Of Her Current Element.

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Once out of her tank (sorry for the spoiler, but while it would be perfectly twisted for her to have died there, the season's not that creepy), Raspberry would retake her old role as lead.

(Actually, it would have been fun to write the season as that creepy.)

Squiddler was the new lead character as of Season 3. Formerly one of Season 2's Kids! retconned aged up, I assure you that no satisfactory explanation is forthcoming, as is only ideal. Squiddler is filled from top to bottom with genericisms. His only real character traits are his relationship to Mint, his brother, and his love of Friendship! and Joy! and Fun!. He is there to anchor the show to its core principles during its 90s drive, and he's honestly kind of annoying because of it. One exception is his contractually mandated relationship with the female lead, Squidette, who humanizes him a bit, when she's also not directly addressing the audience with safety concerns and life lessons.

Squidette would not much change. She might even be more abrasive. As the co-lead, she's a lot like Squiddler, but her voice actress just refuses to let that play out straight. And I like that.

No, the major changes come once we hit the remaining Squiddles. Squidradar, Squibump and Squibella. All three of these characters would be dropped, in the name of economy of content. Squidradar was introduced largely for a reason that will be clear later, but thanks to the joy of writing a fic about a terrible cartoon being actively MST'd, it's honestly funnier if the odd plot element isn't spelled out ahead of time. Bella and Bump were there to connect the show to its original bouncy funtimes premise, and weren't really needed.

No, what was needed was a connection to the surface orphanage mentioned in Chapter 2 and 3: that is to say, I need Sebastian and Amber, the kids Bella and Bump pick up in Chapter 3 and who first drafters will remember have virtually no impact in the later plot of the original. In the name of further economy, they wouldn't even be part of a separate group: Squiddler and Squidette would take time out of their busy rescuing schedule to deliver cookies (yes) and would pick them up along the way. The kids would then go with them through the rest of the episode, except when things get intense. Yes, even underwater. Where they could still talk. The dumber this got the more it appeals to me! You have no idea!

The kids got into the shallows alongside their Squiddley friends and the footage suddenly jumped to stock. "All right!" said Amber. "It's time to dive!"

("The fuck is going on?" Karkat asked.

"Oh," said Jade, "it's, uh—")

"Time for the Dive Safety Checklist!" shouted the cast.

"First," said Sebastian, "we have to double-check all of our equipment." He was suddenly on land, and began a rapid run-down.
"And make sure you have a licensed adult on-hand to help you with your lessons!" said Amber, or Squiddler, or Squidette, as if the entire script had been fed through a parent's advisory board that only remembered children cannot actually SCUBA in the United States after receiving a considerable amount of ad money from dive shops, and had been stuck with the warnings in post.

This went on for a while. "Every time, too," Rose said.

The writers' economy of words was impressive, if potentially missing the most important parts of their lectures. After a while, though, even they couldn't keep up with their subject matter in an appropriate manner. "And when we're done, we had better make sure to take careful rests in different pressure zones or the nitrogen bubbles will expand and that'll hurt!"

Jade snorted. "If you mean you could get an embolism and die, yeah!"

"Do we have to watch this?" Karkat demanded.

"I think it's neat how they get underwater," Feferi admitted.

"Don't worry, Karkat, it's over," Kanaya said.

"Did we have to watch it?"

Come the turtle attack, the kids would probably be separated from the Squiddles, since the studio would never let them get away with putting them in harm's way, but they would arrive in time for the lecture, possibly bringing the porpoise pod ex machina along with them. What I would have done with them in the next few chapters is a bigger question, maybe the Squiddles would ask them to leave. Squidradar's role in the chase sequence would be something I could work around, and Squiddette would still take her concussion (and it would still disappear immediately later) as I need an excuse to keep her away from the ship during the next chapter.

As I've noted in the First Drafters' Club entries, the artifact Squidradar uses for cover in the turtle sequence has some significance. The weather vane-esque feature on the top resembles Lovecraft's branch-like Elder Sign. In this version it would have become the three-branched symbol drawn by Ghost Rose way back in Hands Chapter 4.

A minor note on the voice actors, namely some corrections that would have been made in Draft 2. Colonel Plack-Plack used to be Laura Marsette (Squidette) but this has been changed to MacDermott in Hands chapter 8 for my own reasons. I was going to give Marsette another (male) villain to voice in her credits instead. Meanwhile, Everett was supposed to have mention of stocks in a bottled water company, just because. Some of these notes are things I honestly could have edited back in, and it's kind of silly that I didn't.
Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for a block of commentary in the middle about victim blaming behaviour in the fandom. I've whited-out the text of that particular block for that reason. If someone would prefer stronger measures, I'm all ears.

This chapter covers Chapter 5, Chapter 6 and the first half of Chapter 7, although you'll note that the second half of that chapter seems to be set after some off-screen events that I haven't covered yet. This is true, but... well, you'll see what I'm thinking when we get to it down the page. Bear with me. Also, in terms of context, if you've never listened to Homestuck for the Holidays, you might want to listen to Billy the Bellsuit Diver Has Something to Say just to explain my treatment of his voice.

With all the other changes to this fic accounted for in the previous commentary, there's really not much left to say, until we get to one point in particular. I actually largely like these chapters, they simply require a shift so that Ox makes things personal in a deeper way than he does in the current draft: probably by actually trying to throw a Squiddle or two to the Leviathan rather than taking shots. Attacking them directly just distanced him from the central plot as well, so best he do both in one throw. And that's really all that occurs to me!

The last chapter bears some specific mention, however. This section represents the end of Berryboo's (Raspberry's) relationship with Mint, and he's not even present for the scene (in fact, that contributes to it, doesn't it?). The idea of dumping a friend is anathema to Berryboo's poor 80s children's-hero brain, and she's reacting to it very poorly. Nowadays we make fun of the stance, make fun of the ultimate goody-goody that TV tried to take with utter seriousness. The comic book storyline of Optimus Prime wanting to be shut down for killing an enemy in a video game has been making the rounds again lately, that one's classic. But I think ReBoot did the best job of addressing the phenomenon (in fact, you can see its influences throughout this fic: Berryboo is Bob, Squiddler roughly analoguing to Matrix as the new hero that defers to the old as soon as they're doing their thing... hell, Squidette and AndrAIa use staves and spears, and that one snuck up entirely from the subconscious!). Maybe you haven't seen ReBoot, so let me explain.

In the first season of ReBoot, the show was entirely episodic, showing the anti-virus program Bob fighting inside of a computer called "Mainframe" against two computer viruses: Megabyte and Hexadecimal. During his fights, Bob, like the heroes of the 80s, is adamant about giving the bad guys a chance to reform, to find their inner good and do the right thing. But Bob isn't a hero from the 80s: he's from the 90s, and the plots of the 90s were turned toward the moral gray even in children's cartoons. Characters began to question his stance, and point out that the viruses are programmed to behave as viruses at their very core. Still, he holds his course, and as a result, Megabyte betrays him and sets off multiple seasons of running plot with him lost to the burgeoning internet and the Mainframers slowly losing their war without him.

But with the Internet on the stage, Megabyte couldn't remain the central villain for long. A computer worm called Daemon appeared on the scene, silently infecting every computer on the Net and counting down to what will no doubt be a cataclysmic activation. But as Bob is found and everyone gathers back at Mainframe for the final showdown, something strange happens. Hexadecimal,
having been given the chance to do good by Bob time and time again, finally acts, and sacrifices herself to stop Daemon. It's the ultimate triumph of Bob's philosophy over the naysayers, the 80s optimism over the 90s darkness. All that remains is for a final "movie" season to wrap up the loose ends.

And then Megabyte strikes a second time, once again betraying Bob's sensibilities and leaving them open to question. And make no mistake, this is definitely held up in stark contrast to Hexadecimal's sacrifice. The message is clear. There is no moral absolute, and Bob's philosophy has succeeded and failed him, which is sadly the conclusion to the show as it was never renewed. "Just because it's trite," says a character from my test-fic, "doesn't mean it's not true." But it doesn't make it true, either. Certainly not always true.

That brings us back to Berryboo. Let's picture the sequence of events in the new draft, then. Berryboo goes to the Leviathan, to try to talk, but then Ox appears and knocks her into a tentacle. Berryboo is saved only by Gl'b's strange desire to talk to her instead, but she realizes Ox's intent, maybe too well. In the new version, perhaps, Berryboo would take on Gl'b's colour the way Squiddles do with their friends, but she took on none of Ox's when he jostled her. Ox cannot be trusted, Berryboo's philosophy is shattered. But then, from the depths of the storm, her friends arrive, and save her from grimdarkness. Friends become enemies, other friends become saviours. Moral ambiguity enters the picture for the first time, but childish, Berryboo can't accept it. Knowing Ox is a lost cause deep inside, Berryboo refuses to accept that she can't save anyone. She goes to Plumbthroat, instead.

Plumbthroat's argument comes from the world of moral grey Berryboo's been loath to understand. His role is cemented by his future relationship with Prince Dargon: he is obviously better than Dargon, but a far cry from the Squiddles. When Berryboo comes to him with her childish plan, he tries to warn her off of it bit by bit: first from Ox, then from him, and then from the idea as a whole. Only the last fails entirely, as she's not entirely wrong in believing that people can help each other. He rephrases, to warn her of the danger.

To the audience watching at home, the message is aimed at the older kids, who have been watching for three seasons. "You don't have to be in any specific relationship," and "The people in your relationships have no right to hurt you." Even so complex as: "You have to realize you can't fix the people in your life, and can't even help them if you don't want your help." The three messages would have to be spread backwards through the episode for better coverage. Trite, perhaps, cliché, but just because they're trite and cliché doesn't mean they're not true, or sadly, even well-observed in the real world.

Trigger warnings on the next block.

One unpleasant phenomenon that has made The Dargon Arc so hard for me to revise has been the prevalence of hateful, sorry people in the fandom who see various aspects of canon as excuses to vent bile contrary to these simple, After School Special bits of advice, shaming or attacking the abused, the suffering, the trapped. Indeed, the SR and Nepuppet intermissions were not introduced for my own sense of meta-humour, but for this purpose. I seeded them well ahead of time in an attempt to maximize the opportunity to use them, but their birthplace was here, trying to confront this ugly phenomenon. This chapter was going to be followed by a comic with the two of them trying to solve the narrative problems with the intermission, but they were going to be constantly interrupted by victim blamers, abusers and worse, who seem to have decided that Troll Romance means they're finally found a corner of the world where they're safe to terrify their victims. The reason I say "comic" is because the Homestuck fandom, I've found, loves nothing more than a comic with exaggerated facial expressions, and while I wasn't sure how I was going to go about getting one, I couldn't think of anything that would provoke a more exaggerated expression than an author and a
shipper trying to write a little kiddy cartoon fic only to be constantly interrupted by someone that demands you acknowledge that someone who breaks up with someone else deserves to be shot through the chest, no wait, that's not what I meant, I actually meant that someone who breaks up with someone else is a slut, and it doesn't particularly bother me if sluts are shot through the chest.

That brings me to moirallegience. The relationship Berryboo is proposing to Plumbthroat is, after all, even if she doesn't realize it, that very thing. She also doesn't understand it. Doesn't understand the need for a personal connection, doesn't understand the gravity. The Dargon Arc was written backwards, from a single intent: make moirallegience serious. The fandom's treatment of diamonds as the "bffsies quadrant" takes away any gravity or indeed romantic intimacy from the quadrant, and there was no way I could have treated it seriously in the future chapters of the fic. I decided to make it serious by showing it from the worst possible angle, how bad it could be, through the lens of the medium used to talk about those sorts of basic lifestyle details: children's shows, with all their filters and blinders. Perfect.

This leads to the final scene, the one between Karkat and Kanaya. Here, two of the characters from Hands, having had this lesson about moirallegience's dangers put up for their perusal, enter one all the same. Indeed, in the second draft, this is even more important, as Kanaya makes the decision while in an Intro relationship with Rose. She thus is saying two things, which would have probably been spelled out: firstly, that Kanaya would like to be flushed with Rose, if anything, and secondly: she is not as pale-attracted to Rose as she is to Karkat. This is not only a major shift in the story, but another jab at the "bffsy quadrant" mentality, as it implies attraction and a rigid "I'm sorry, but I care more for you than you," sort of traditional monogamy that the former does not, whether to its benefit or consequence I lead you to decide on your own.

A minor change to the scene would be an emphasis on Kanaya's plans for the breeding caverns, which appear to be taking form now that she's talked to Karkat and has Sollux as her Drone guinea pig.

The one major issue with this last section is the timeline. When The Dargon Arc was originally released, it was a true intermission, placed in between acts. I wanted the act to end with its proper ending in this version as well, but "Act 3" was just too small, and I merged it with the Intermission as a result. Was that an ideal choice? Probably not, but I'm still at a lost for what would have been ideal. I just feel the Karkat<>Kanaya scene loses more if divorced from The Dargon Arc than it loses being away from its chronological context. Indeed, a reader recently talked to me about The Dargon Arc with the presumption that this scene was chronologically connected to nothing at all! All I would have needed was a little editing to the final scene of the very next chapter…

> END OF INTERMISSION
"At last, it's time! After spending so much time with our other three points of view, it's finally time to go to the fourth and final: our fun-loving friend in blue, so long excluded from the limelight!

You are now Vriska Serket."

I love this chapter. It's actually a real mess and would require a lot of low-level fixes and rewrites, but it gets most of its ideas across and, moreover, I loved just being Vriska. At the high level, however, it's more or less intact, and there's very little I have to say about it here in the commentary. In fact, welcome to the Hand In Holding Hands Official Firepole. For the next few chapters we're practically going to slide to the bottom, since I have so little that has to be address at the commentary level.

I'm serious, the only changes that need to be touched here are serious issues with the mistaken definition of auspistice in the original draft (Vriska being (pretending to be?) attracted to Eridan), and the need to connect Kanaya's actions at the end of the chapter to her going to Karkat in the previous, chronologically superior chapter.

Go read Original Chapter 14, and ignore the pesterlogs: you'll find you already read them, since they were moved to this draft's Chapter 11!

As a minor addition, however, I wanted John to be there in the scene with Dave, Vriska and the others. The line "How's the chafing?" would be his. Vriska would give him a high five. While it was cute to see Vriska and Dave interact, it seemed stranger to me that Dave and John had done so little.

I'm serious, that's it. At this rate we'll be caught up in no time! Thank goodness.

> END OF ACT 3
"Hey, I should make sure the commentary follows the planned structure of the actual fic, that would be neat."

"But what are you going to do for recaps?"

"I don't know, do you think they're not going to need recaps?"

Well, that may be an issue in the future, but for now there is one group that very much might need a recap: first drafter's that didn't actually read the old chapters again. People who did just read them can just carry on but for the sake of the others, let's do this at least twice more, here and after the next break. After that… eh, we'll see.

Confronting JACK on their first date by a cruel twist of circumstance, DAVE and ARADIA discover that he is AUTOLEVELLING on a global scale, meaning that the stronger they get as a group, the stronger he will be. They will still technically have an advantage with a full team, but he has done his best to neutralize that as well: by gaining a technique to STEAL POWERS from other entities through space and time.

Dave and Aradia resolve to start blocking his future attempts. While doing repairs on Aradia after the fact, they kiss.

In the morning, ROSE is met by KANAYA, who talked to KARKAT through the night and has a plan on how to fix things… only to renege. She wants, instead, to do like SOLLUX and Aradia, and start the TRIAL RELATIONSHIP from the beginning now that their feelings are clearer, as they treated the previous attempt to frivolously. Rose agrees.

Aradia and EQUIUS soon arrived on scene, sharing a HATING-ARGUMENT about whether or not she was cheating on him with Dave, which she played for all it was worth, to NEPETA's distress. Nepeta tried to explain that Equius "really likes" Aradia, but further complaints were cut off by the clearly more urgent need to update her SHIPPING WALL at hints of Dave<3Aradia.

Karkat then tried to lecture the group about their emphasis on pity relationships, and brought up the TROLL EMPRESS as a means of inspiring their hate. This does not appear to be the CONDESCE as we know her, but it is not clear why. Rose bothered Karkat about why he was so annoyed about relationships and concluded it had something to do with the lack of IMPERIAL DRONES. Inspired, Karkat decided to continue the practice of DRONES at least for one generation, using a Troll in place: SOLLUX, who accepted the role only begrudgingly.

Soon after, a group of kids began watching The Squiddles on Jade's request. This was an odd episode, wherein a kidnapped Squiddle was nearly fed to a "Leviathan", which turned out to be Feferi's lusus, or at least a convincing double. This Leviathan touched on the Squiddles and turned it Grimdark, which only exasperated things in the real world, where Rose had forgotten all about this particular episode of the show. The Squiddle was ultimately rescued by her friends and the Leviathan defeated. Karkat began to investigate in earnest, prompting a discussion of the episodes following this one. For reference purposes, here is the plot of the entire season, in brief:

The season opened with numerous retcons, which took one now-Princess RASPBERRY out of her role as lead character in favour of some others. Raspberry's best friend, MINT, had turned to the bad guys, and had joined Skipper PLUMBTHROAT'S crew of Chinese Zodiac themed crewmen as "OX". Finding herself unable to bring Ox back to the side of Good (in her mind), Raspberry turned
to Plumbthroat, who rejected her, though he tried to avoid the Squiddles from there. In his
distraction, he fished up an ancient ARTIFACT and attracted what appears to have been an
ELDRITCH AMBASSADOR from the NOBLE CIRCLE, "Prince DARGON", who possessed him.

Dargon appeared as a villain in several episodes, however his primary aim seemed to be to trick a
certain child into saying a code-word to the artifact, which while not clearly explained, would have
been BAD. Telling the boy that the artifact can grant wishes, he makes the following three attempts
to get him to "wish" on it:

1. Dargon tells him to wish for friends, because the good fortune he had from being a "new kid"
   was transitory. The kid made a conscious effort to find new friends.
2. Dargon tells him the friends he has made between Attempts 1 and 2 are false, and will soon
drop away. The kid instead made an effort to make the best of their remaining time.
3. Dargon tells him to wish for his friends to stay, because they've been adopted and he'll soon be
   alone without them. This proves even more true than suspected, however, when the friends die
   in an accident. Dargon then tries to get him to wish for them to come back, but the boy has
   matured and wishes instead for the strength to carry on. Dargon's plan fails on a technicality,
   and the kid he finds strength on his own.

Thwarted (cartoon villains never try again after they fail, it's a union thing), Dargon goes instead for
a FINAL ASSAULT, during which he is unmasked as using the body of Plumbthroat. Raspberry,
appealing once again to Plumbthroat's better side, reaches him, and Plumbthroat is able to free
himself. Meanwhile, Dargon is defeated.

The kids wrap up the episode and go their separate ways, Karkat staying behind to watch the entire
show for more "clues".

After the intermission, we cut back a few minutes chronologically, where point of view switched to
VRISKA. Attempting to fulfil Rose’s second TASK ("apologize to Aradia") she began to tail the
Maid of Time, waiting for an opportunity and for her own gumption to build up. Eavesdropping as
an excuse to not go through with it, she picked up that Feferi was truly bothered by the idea of
TROLL FRIENDSHIPS, but that Sollux was still friends with Karkat (which Feferi knows) and
Aradia (which she does not).

Similarly, Vriska discovered that TEREZI'S fight with Dave was upsetting her ability to TRUST her
new friends. As GAMZEE had long been friends with Karkat, Terezi asked Gamzee outright if he
was "actually interested in [her]" for any of their free quadrants. Terezi's worry was that his should-
be temporary friendship, as expected for Trolls, was just leading her to another dead-end long-term
friendship, like with Dave. This made even Gamzee feel awkward, so she took it back and felt awful
for not considering him as a friend when she remembered her promise to Rose to consider Human
ideas. Vriska also found that Gamzee, unlike the other Trolls, has a second special TONE OF
VOICE, entirely in undercase, which might seem EERILY FAMILIAR but did not seem to frighten
Terezi in the slightest. That's right: blessed with the ability to type in colour and freed from
Fanfiction.net by its restriction on commentary fics, the author has gone MAD WITH POWER and
is making the tones a PLOT POINT. We in the recap department would like to apologize to anyone
reading via A03-generated downloads.

We also learned that Vriska still carries a torch for John but does not act on it because of the irritating
balancing act she’s been putting herself through in an effort to keep Tavros in her life as well.

Vriska next ran into Equius and Aradia. Equius had worked out about Aradia’s true relationship with
Dave and had arrived to gloat and flirt on the BLACK side of their VACILLATION, to Dave’s
obvious disgust. Feferi arrived in the middle of the conversation, and was goaded into revealing her secret ASHEN CRUSH on the couple that had built up from Sollux’s stories of a younger Aradia and, moreover in this draft, her and Equius’ mutual hostility. She made a point of approaching the new relationship with a mature professionalism she felt was lacking with some of the others. Soon after, Vriska ended up in an argument with Aradia, where she discovered to her shock that Aradia had – intentionally or accidentally – helped her be a better person by murdering her, and concluded that they had been moirails "all along." This craftily bypassed Rose’s FIRST TASK by fulfilling the OTHER and left Aradia confounded.

Vriska snatched up Eridan and demanded Rose fill her side of the bargain by becoming their auspistice, though she had to first confront a moulting-enraged Kanaya to do so. Rose ultimately agreed, and Kanaya went off to Karkat for comfort and placation, and they became MOIRAILS. The last chapter ended with Vriska giving Eridan the promise that he was going to get just about as much hating as he truly deserves (to his triumphant delight), and several cryptic hints about Vriska's plans, left yet unexplained.

And now for the traditional culling of the timeline. Only two this time:

- **Rose**: Rose's reaction to Kanaya's confession to murdering the other Trolls was supposed to stall Rose's "psychological curiosity" for a few Acts: this one and the next.
- Another reminder has me needing to make sure Rose is Level 76 by the time we reach EOA4. This was to coincide with her level at that point in Draft 1. It really is meaningless, but I didn't want to throw anyone that might have dropped the fic post-FRIst Draft and was just tuning back in. I know, niche appeal right here.
Bait and Snapping Bar

As we enter this act, I have to talk about two running plots that would have been inserted here and there, in some cases replacing original scenes. They have no dedicated home, and due to what is going to be the rather short nature of commentaries for this act, it's best if I cover them here.

The first is Rose and Kanaya's new relationship. We would often see them in their new "test matespritship", which is what it would truly be since Kanaya and Karkat's moirallegience would be public. Rose has no idea what this means. They spend time together (but because of the added meaning the kids have put on "going outside", they never leave the building) and there's a noticeable change in the air, but Rose can't put her finger on it... or what Kanaya is trying to do. This is something I can't quite explain here in the notes thanks to spoilers (indeed, as we get further and further from the present day, you'll find my aim in these notes becomes less sharp and more abstract), but once we catch up to the Original Draft's final chapter, you'll get to a scene where Rose and Kanaya have an extended discussion. From this discussion, you should be able to work Kanaya's motives in these new scenes in reverse.

The relationship otherwise follows the same ups and downs as the original draft, and I mean that literally in one aspect in particular: Rose and Kanaya's level of intimacy. With perhaps a tapering at the beginning and a change in attitude throughout, the level of intimacy remains more or less exactly the same. This confuses poor Rose even more, exasperated by the fact that she and Kanaya cannot seem to find the guts to talk about it.

Helping Rose through her frustrations is a new factor: Mirann, and in one case, her Human companion. Second drafters will need to understand what was going on in the original draft as I can't ward you off of all the Horrorterror scenes from this point on or you'll lose valuable context. In Draft 1, Rose, having been used by the Horrorterrors back in the session, finds them confronting her again in the void between transportalizers. One of them, with many voices, forced its will on her after the scene in Kanaya's bedroom, causing Rose to near keel over. She decided it was unwise to go back into the transportalizers and began to go through the maintenance tunnels of the lab instead.

In this draft, I decided I needed an entirely new approach and tossed out the old ideas almost wholesale. Now the "bad" influence of the Horrorterrors was to be confined into Ghost Rose (who hasn't shown up for too long a stretch of time, my own fault, I'll admit it) while the "good" and "neutral" influences were to be bundled into two new representatives: Mirann and her friend. Mirann becomes Rose's new window into Troll psychology, though her insight is several centuries out of date. She also talks about the magic of the Circle, and how they can use the void to create dreamscapes in Paradox Space, and so can those in their care (which includes Mirann and her friend and, it would seem, still includes Rose). It becomes clear that Mirann thinks of Rose like a junior huntress (she often talks about training young Trolls just a bit older than Rose) and sees it as her responsibility to teach her how to "fish" in this new, eldritch way they both have in common.

Her companion is more eager to bandy back and forth without the Terrors getting in the way of discussion. One day (either in this chapter or the next), as Rose learns to extend her stay more and more, she stops to play a game of chess with him, and learns his name: he is Aidan MacDermott, the voice of Skipper Plumbthroat from *The Squiddles!* and one of the cultists who inserted Gl'bgołyb's edits into the show in pre-production. (This is the reason he was given a new Voice Acting credit: so that Jade could talk about him in Chapter 8 without talking about Plumbthroat before the Intermission. Talking about his role as Mint, I reasoned, would make it seem unusual for Jade not to talk about the other Squiddle leads, but talking about a villain would work well in isolation.) As reward for service to his Goddess, he was brought into Paradox Space, where has outlasted the
destruction of Earth for what he believes to be about nine hundred years.

"She's dead, you know," Rose said, after a moment's pause to question whether or not it was a good idea to broach the subject at all.

"Hm?" MacDermott kept his eyes on his pieces. "Well, not every one of her that ever existed."

"You mean alternate timelines?" Rose asked.

"More or less. So long as one or more of them remember me, I suppose I'm not far off from where I started." Perhaps as emphasis to his point, he made a show of moving a pawn ahead two spaces.

"It doesn't bother you, then?" Rose asked, moving her bishop, "that the specific God you served is dead?"

"Not really." He pointed to his Queen. "Some people come across the idea of paradox and multiple timelines by clinging to veracity, as if there was sanity in veracity. Trying to find out which timeline is 'correct' and alpha. And in a manner of speaking, Paradox Space encourages that, but I like to think of it from another angle. Namely: ignoring the entire issue." He selected a rook. "To me," he said, "I started down this path when I discovered a great pantheon of the knowing and the twisted… and I picked the one distant, weakling tendril that was soft enough to raise a young girl to adulthood and stay by her as long as she was loyal in turn. Not the most powerful, but… far more powerful than I would ever want in an ally, don't you think?"

He touched the Rook to the Queen. "And as much as I miss the old girl, in a manner of speaking, I don't need her so much as I need the same thing again. Or something comparable. Now! You might think that mercenary! And it is!" He pointed to her with the Rook. "But of an infinite space, I'd be a downright foolish man to look at the infinite possibilities of the world and say that there's one perfection and that all the good everything else could give me, and that I could give in return, is somehow less 'good' because it's arbitrarily less real!"

He moved his Rook, and a thought occurred to him. "Now, this is where I wish I could promote a pawn. Turn it into a Queen itself." He waved a Queen into dream-existence in his hand. "But you'll have to let my metaphor rise above the vagrancies of the game."

The game continued. Capture, move, fork, exchange of Bishops. "Do you know what she wanted, with the Squiddles show?" Rose asked.

"Not particularly. I mean, I didn't even get the instructions for the particulars, just on how to get through to the producers. Convince an investor or two. She never sent me the detail work like she did the storyboards, screenwriters, and even they didn't know what she wanted. I've had a little… context, since I got here, but…"

He pointed behind himself, and a dream-outline of Mirann appeared behind him, smoky, ephemeral as his thoughts shifted. As his thoughts shifted away, she broke apart. "...But Troll context still doesn't make it all make sense, does it? Ah, well. I'm glad to have been kept out the loop, frankly." MacDermott met Rose's eyes. "I mean, I've seen how things went for you, so you know that when they have something to say to you, it doesn't exactly… put you in sorts."

Rose nodded.

"So tell me about your girl," asked MacDermott, after they had played for a while longer. "What's got you both in this confused tangle this morning when everything seemed so bright and cheery the last time you stopped us by?"
"It's complicated," Rose said.

MacDermott shook his head. "Well if you didn't want to talk, you're just going to force me to focus on the game! I don't think either of us want that, Rose, the pieces will get up and start shouting suggestions like—get down!” He was shouting at a dead Pawn they had discarded to the side of the board, which had come alive if only to enact death throes. It complied with his order readily enough, if with a moment's complaint. Since the Pawn shout have snapped back to inanimate in a moment of thought, Rose realized that MacDermott was humouring her.

Rose decided to cast a little light on her trouble with Kanaya. "It's just a communication issue," she explained. "I'll talk to her, she'll tell me what's going on, I'll tell her how I feel about it—"

"How do you feel about it?" he asked.

"Ugh, not you too," Rose complained as she removed on of his Knights. She held it up. "My paradox brother has been harping down that exact line of pseudo-therapy."

He laughed. "Alright, then. Let's try this another way. Let's talk about Time. I say that the branches of this conversation all tend to towards the same conclusion: I tell you to act at once, and to bring the trouble into the open, and squelch it. Preferably with kissing, but don't take your dictates from an old man." Rose laughed. "So we'll work backwards from there. Why haven't you acted, Rose?"

Rose pondered her move, both on the board and conversation. "I suppose… because I don't know which one of the infinite branches has what I want."

"Still? By the way, conversation's actually quite finite," MacDermott argued, "but that's another day."

Rose watched as he manoeuvred his last Rook. Ah, there we go. "Well, it's still not like chess," Rose said, taking the opportunity. "I don't quite have a single, all-encompassing end point to aim my life towards. I actually like all of the remaining outcomes, as they stand."

"Hrm…” MacDermott pondered her point, and kept his eye on her as she moved. He glanced down only to set his hand on a Pawn, and moved without really checking his space. He kept his eye on Rose as she made the only obvious follow-up. "Don't know what to tell you, Rose, darling.” He pointed to the board. "After all, I stink at chess." And he tipped over his King at the foot of Rose's Rook.

(An alternate introduction for MacDermott involved constructing a ship in a bottle, but it seemed less dynamic for Rose to be uninvolved. It did involve a line I liked, however: "You have to plan ahead carefully, because if you don't, sometimes you have to start all over the change the smallest little thing." The current draft has a similar line elsewhere, but I never liked it as much.)

Meanwhile, more or less every encounter that occurs involving the Horrorterror of the original draft would instead touch on Ghost Rose, but we'll talk about those as they come.

With those Act-long notes aside, we can proceed into the chapter itself: Original Chapter 17.

There's not much to say! The scene with Equius and Nepeta is a little weird because we've seen them in their bathing suits in this draft. Several of the adjoining lines probably should have been moved, but I had forgotten them. They work a little better here, actually, because everyone is moving into sexual maturity, but I still should have moved them. The rest of the chapter is pretty okay on the commentary level! A minor note drawn from the timeline document is that Imp hunts begin to fall
behind with the start of the Rat Trap, however – something I can't point out without you noticing here in the commentary, but that's the price we'll have to pay.

Other than that, this chapter works on its own. It was designed to set scenes and there was really nothing that needed to be cut or adjusted, though I would include a scene with Mirann and MacDermott along the way now. Fantastic! Too bad the next one is going to be such a mess, I was just starting to get comfortable!
Interesting introductory note: my timeline makes no amenity for this chapter. It was all stuck at the end of the last chapter, with some notes accidentally scattered into the next, both ignoring the fact that the chapter would still be about the size it is now. What a mess! Oh well, let's get to it.

One problem with my changes for the Horrorterror plot was that I wanted more than just one scene between Rose and the Eldritch Couple before Ghost Rose returns to the scene. To justify this scene, I would need a new one entirely. Thankfully, I had one on hand. Rose would leave her talk with them to go watch the Drone training.

"Stop being a big baby," Feferi catcalled to her boyfriend. Sollux glared back at her, and then, for good measure, threw in another glare for the rest of the crowd that had come to watch his training.

Kanaya's sentiment was similar to Feferi's, if more polite. "You don't even have to put emotion behind it," she reassured him. "We're just going over procedure so we understand the basics."

Putting forth all his effort, Sollux scrunched up his face and knocked on an invisible door in front of Karkat, the only volunteer. Karkat watched him, arms crossed, as he managed to squeeze out a greeting and demand "foryourfilledpail."

"Yeah, just leave forever," Karkat said, and mimed handing him a pail. Kanaya made things infinitely worse for both of them as she led the others in a round of applause. Nepeta whistled.

"Do it again!" Nepeta demanded.

"Ugh, why?" Sollux asked.

"Because you sucked!" Eridan said. "Boo!"

Nepeta and Feferi joined him. "Booo!"

Karkat, who had fled back to the crowd with what little dignity he retained, turned back with an idea.

"Hey," he said, eyebrow cocked. "maybe he'd be more confident if he had to approach an actual couple?"

For a brief, elating and terrifying moment, Rose thought he meant her, but a malicious glint in Karkat's eye made her reconsider. She looked over at Tavros, who had gone grey as a particularly dirty sheet. Eridan caught up moments later.

"…Kar, I trusted you," was all he could manage to say.

But Feferi and Nepeta's cheers were adamant, and Gamzee, encouraged by Karkat, was perhaps even worse. Kanaya and Sollux gave in in the end, and Sollux begrudgingly took his position.

He mimed opening a door. "Look, do you two have your damn bucket or what?" he asked them.

"Ah, well, I uh…" Tavros reached behind him to pull out an invisible "bucket", and passed it to his matesprit, who took it delicately over to Sollux.

"Fantastic," Sollux griped, and he snapped up the bucket. Clearing away from his swipe, Eridan bumped into Tavros and the two exchanged wavering, nervous smiles.
But Karkat was not done. "Keep going," he ordered.

Sollux growled at him and moved to the next person down the line: Rose. "Hey, do you have any —" he said, but then: "What the hell am I doing?" He pressed on by.

He next came to Feferi, but before either of them could say anything, Nepeta pushed forward and wrapped her arm around Feferi's neck. She smiled at Sollux with a big, Cheshire smile. Sollux glared at her, but it was Feferi who spoke: "…You knew what this was, Captor!"

"Don't I know it," he muttered. "Look, gimmie your thing already."

Nepeta reached out. "ac hands over her special bucket full o—" Sollux grabbed the bucket and walked away, so Nepeta turned up the volume: "swirling emerald-pink love juices!"

Feferi, laughing, had to pull away from Nepeta. "Oh my cod."

Sollux's encounter with Gamzee, however, was something else entirely. "GZ can you just give me your bucket so we can get this over with?" he asked.

And that was when Gamzee shouted: "SuRe tHiNg, MoThErFuCkEr!" and tossed one out of his sylladex.

Sollux took a split second to realize the incoming bucket was real. Once he realized it was also full, he jumped back even further. He was not alone: suffice to say there was no one nearby when it hit ground. Still, it bounced and tumbled and sprayed sopor slime in nearly every direction. Even Rose had to stare on in dead shock as the others tried to recover.

Nepeta, who was looking down at herself, did so first. "…333333wwwwwwww!" she screamed, almost with glee, and began to bounce in a circle as she shrieked, her tail trailing after her.

"33333333wwwwwwww!"

Kanaya tried to restore order, in spite of her own appearance. "Gamzee. If you could, uh, please. Retrieve your… sopor-storage device."

"My what?" he asked.

Karkat, who had been utterly stunned, recovered himself. "She means pick up your bucket you perverted walking clowngunk! No one wanted to be a part of your projectile orgy!"

Nepeta, hearing this, reacted oddly. She looked down at herself and said "Oh my god," and became lost in thought.

"I'll, uh…" Tavros approached the bucket and had to reach out twice before making contact and retrieving it.

About then, Nepeta appeared about Kanaya's neck with a thump. She hung there at first wide-eyed, like a cat in play, but this look melted into the look of a teenager with plans in mind.

She turned toward Rose. "Rose," she acknowledged, and also: "Feferi. We're sorry you had to find out like this. To walk in on it! But this is real! Our f33lings are real." She lovingly caressed Kanaya from shoulder to shoulder, collecting a glob of slime along the way. "Though sometimes random and bestial." She squelched the green wad between her fingers.

Kanaya caught on right about there. "Oh My God" She pulled away.
Nepeta tried her best to look sheepish and put her hands behind her back. "I guess what I'm saying is 'sorry about the mess!'"

Kanaya looked at her sopor-clipped hands and tried to wipe them off on her dress. "...And I'll never sleep again!" she observed

Drone training is another of those reoccurring plotlines, though given the events of this act, I'm not sure how often it would appear (thus why it didn't in the original). In an unfortunate bit, one of its most important parts of its plotline was accidentally left off the Timeline (I only see it mentioned at the climax of its own arc, in the final Act!) and things are so tight I'm not sure where to put it. I'll introduce all the subplots here, instead.

After a while, the others slowly begin to take the Drone training and Kanaya's breeding pit plans seriously, and soon Kanaya has a bit of a regular following at what was supposed to be just training for Sollux: Feferi, her co-lecturer; Karkat, who shows up out of a sense of moirallegic duty and leaves with obligations; Nepeta, who is the only Troll (Feferi tries to keep the Humans out of these affairs) who isn't afraid of the Drones ("Kindred spirits," Sollux mutters), though she is afraid of touching the buckets in any way, shape or form, which limits her role as cleaner and gopher; and Equius, who is superbly overworked between the Rat Trap and making gear for Sollux and the brooding caverns, and could obviously not be happier.

From here, we go to Original Chapter 18, but there are careful reading instructions. The first section is a bit of a mess, you can read that if you please (for context, know that when Dave first encountered the Ghost Rose in this draft, he encountered a ghost of his Bro in the original). But once we hit the break, we go knee deep into the old Horrorterror storyline. Unlike the mess of the first part, I do like this section, but it stars a character that's not truly in this draft and I don't want to throw any honest second drafters not familiar with that part of the story (if you are going to read it, I'll explain the trouble: it stars a manipulative Horrorterror having taken the shape of a Troll woman. This character later inspired Mirann, but isn't Mirann, if that makes any sense. Later, this person becomes a man, whose is no longer present in the new draft, though I'll still have to explain him to the poor, neglected first drafters later on.). Skip it or read it as you please, just be aware it's not quite canon. If you're going to jump, jump down instead to "Rose woke only a few moments later". Or, read along with my commentary, here.

Also, one more thing: stop at the line: "She kicked off her blankets and immediately fell back to sleep, undisturbed by dreams or voices: real, hissing or Horrifying." Pretend this a better chapter ender, as everything after that is being moved into the next chapter.

We start with another fight between Dave, Aradia and Jack, but this one is a doozy in that it's honestly just a confusing mess and I don't like it. Seeing Aradia being seized by the Net spell of Jack's from the future perspective, Dave and Aradia try to rescue her, only to discover that Jack is draining the Soulbot's memory banks for connections and opportunities. He begins to use the Net to try to seize Player powers from the elements he doesn't have. This turns out to be a major gap in Dave and Aradia's attempts to stop Jack, and Dave starts getting desperate. One of the issues with this section is the fact that Dave keeps referencing his actions from when he saw them do it in the past, and it's just outright confusing this time around.

Something odd happens, however, when Jack tries to go after Rose. Dave, who is watching Jack's thoughts through a glitch in the spell (which I likely wouldn't have carried over) feels repulsed just looking at her. This odd event goes deeper, however, in that it attracts onlookers. The grimdark, Ghost Rose from before appears in the Net as well, and Seizes Jack's line. In the new draft, she leads
Jack through a gap in Dave and Aradia's protection around the Underlings, which the new draft would been have noted as still being new. Most of it, in fact, would just be a ruse to convince Jack that the Underlings were fully blocked to him, and in reality wouldn't be very sturdy at all! Ghost Rose leads Jack to the Trolls' Denizens, and he seizes Aries' powers.

Being more powerful than any other entity Jack has linked with, Aries can actually speak through him, and we hear an Underling speak for the second time. It is not unlike the paen of the Lich in the earlier chapter: Aries rants on about Derse's ultimate victory, stagnation in all things and calls Aradia and the others a pack of cheaters. Aradia rises to that last bit, and refuses to use Time travel to create duplicates to stop Aries, though that only partially satisfies him (the first draft's bit about Time Travel no longer being a factor would have been dropped).

The four of them fight, Dave and Aradia winning in the end and, satisfied for doing so, fall asleep in the hallway. But unbeknownst to them, Ghost Rose's real objective has been accomplished: the False Derse that protects Dersite sleepers from the Horrorterrors was damaged in the fight.

This is where we go in-depth on the commentary because of the plot-swap.

Rose is confronted by Ghost Rose in a dream, but this is not revealed all at once. As a nod to the original draft's chaos in the HT plotline overall, she would be confronted by several dream-visions of her and the other players' Guardians, maybe even a talking lusus or two. The gist of these encounters is much the same as the original drafts: Rose is open to these illusions even though the dream is inconsistent around her, and that's obviously bad. Mirann appears among these illusions as a natural segue off of a vision of Rose's Mom (as another reference to the original draft, she would have served tea), and she talks about having to play the game to beat it.

But then things break apart, and Rose enters a dream bubble memory. This one is of her having transformed into her grimdark self, but Rose stands distinct from the memory, which stands on LoLaR where her conversation partner was prior. Whenever Rose herself speaks, the grimdark memory mouths the words. Rose also hears her own voice on the wind, the distorted puppet-voice Dave noted in his encounter with the Ghost Rose, who leads her to a contradictory conclusion to the Mirann-message about playing the game to beat it. Instead, this puppet-voice recommends escape by forcing the end of the game.

Rose, suspicious of the worst, consciously arms herself (unconsciously with the Thorns of Oglogoth, since the memory-shell is holding them), but unconsciously goes up to the memory. She reaches instinctively to its stomach, and realizes the reason she approached was because she remembered dying, and was going to try to tend to the wound that has just appeared there (and as far as her dream is concerned, has been there all along). During the exchange with the puppet voice, Rose feels suffocated, and even begins to feel the paint of that same wound as it appears. As the puppet-voice reaches its conclusion about forcing the end of the game, Rose looks up from the wound, and sees that the memory has awoken, its eyes have gone white, and the Ghost Rose has taken full control of its avatar. She supplies the closing order on how to escape the game:

"KILL JACK NOIR."

Rose lashes out defensively with a spell, both against the Ghost and the wound, only to discover that her tormentor, just as capable of creating Dream Bubbles as Mirann or MacDermott, has led her, sleepwalking, through the lab into the central computer room, and that her attack was aimed, instead, at Gamzee.

We pick up with the original draft from there (again, "Rose woke only a few moments later"), and not much has to change from there that isn't immediately obvious. Rose would probably shout back
at Karkat a bit about her not actually talking to the HTs in this draft, since she hadn't, and Rose probably wouldn't be as openly sentimental towards Terezi – this always bothered me about the original draft, but I couldn't figure out how else to explain Rose's thought process. Terezi and Dave's truce would be more interesting, in my eyes, since the situation between them has changed so drastically between drafts. Oh well. :(

Remember, stop at "She kicked off her blankets and immediately fell back to sleep, undisturbed by dreams or voices: real, hissing or Horrifying." This is where the chapter would have ended in the new draft, with a better chapter ending. More in the next set.
The Minstrel Doll

This is a strange chapter from my perspective. See, the chapter would ideally start with scenes from the original draft, but those scenes were such a mess. I mean a real bellyflop in terms of reaction. Even my notes say to drop the entire thing. So should I? I… guess? And yet, months after I made those notes, I now think there's something of value. So how to approach?

Here's how the scene played out in the original. Gamzee, sedated as he undergoes some rather-improvised treatment on his arm, finds himself in a dream bubble (the fact that Gamzee is a Prospit dreamer was just a straight-up mistake in the original draft. I think this version works with him just having a dream, which is why I didn't "fix" it to have a broken False Prospit as well as the False Derse). In the dream, he refiles his meeting with his Denizen, Capricorn, who is for some reason a set of conjoined twins that have been bifurcated down the middle to the waist, with a mess of gore in between them. One is weak and dying, at least until the fight starts when it is filled with energy despite its inability to move. The Denizen rants about the Trolls being cheaters once again, about Gamzee having no goals and no true personality, and also seems to "glitch" at odd but (ultimately predictable) times.

At this point, the Horrorterror from the original draft made an appearance (this whole sequence would have been cut in this draft). The dream continues, and multiple Aradiabots appear to help Gamzee beat Capricorn. A lot of what happens here is actually valuable, though it's such a mess due to its dream-like nature. So while I'd like to have gotten the visual of Capricorn, and some of his speech, into this chapter, it probably would have been nothing more than that (and I definitely wouldn't have missed the line "NONE OF YOU ARE FUCKING READY!!", which is particularly important).

What would have taken the chapter's place would be a bridge chapter, filling in what I feel was ultimately rushed space in the original draft. That is to say, this chapter would largely deal with characters' reactions to Rose's assault on Gamzee and, to a lesser sense, Rose's apparent mind control incident, eventually coming to the states they were at the end of the original chapter. Well, most of them. Here in the land of commentary, I'll tell you that there are a few would have been intensified, but we'd be in about the same place post-EOA. We'll get to the Draft in a bit, I have a few scenes that have to come before its scenes.

A few other scenes would be included. Via Jade, we'd see John's ectobiology/doctor work (which provides our title, as John compares Gamzee to a rag doll) and maybe even get a few lines from Gamzee himself, who has very mixed feeling about Rose right about now even though he's soon put back under sedation (to understand Gamzee's mixed feelings, it helps once again to go to Rose and Kanaya's near-act-ending conversation and working backwards, as I can't say more without spoilers. We'll be there soon enough). Tavros would be constantly by Gamzee's side: Eridan would be somewhat awkward as a result. He probably feels worried that Tavros cares more for Gamzee than him, and I picture him stiff and cautious with all his actions, and ultimately over-kind in short bursts as if trying to prove he still deserves to be there. Once Rose returns to the scene, he begins to cling to her instead, though he perks up considerably.

Another thing we'd get to see from Jade's perspective is Nepeta actually being scared of Rose, as she states in the original draft. She would disappear at first, talking to Equius, but when talking to Jade her emotions would well up again and she might even start crying. Through overwrought sobs, she would also repeatedly threaten Rose, which sets Jade on edge. Talking to her, Jade would probably work out that not only did Equius blame weak Human constitution for someone like Rose (who he'd otherwise respect as an equal) going over to "the enemy", but that Nepeta has become terrified of...
losing the people closest to her, which apparently includes Jade. Upset and not sure where to vent her frustration, Jade would go shout down Equius. While initially irritated at her (not because she disagrees with him, but because she's siding with Rose when Rose isn't one of Jade's quadrants and should be a subordinate in his eyes), Equius quickly backs down when he realizes just how angry she is... and far too fast for her anger. Jade was looking for a fight, and his retreat doesn't make things better at all. When Jade tells him to stop getting off to her orders, Karkat would remark that that just isn't likely to work.

We would probably also see Kanaya in this section, before she returns to Rose and the scenes from the original draft, but she would just be on the fringes, trying to be near Karkat and he near her in turn as they both try to cool down from their fight outside Rose's room. Karkat would try to cool down less through actual cooling down and more by venting his steam in other people's faces. We would also see Vriska in these scenes, obviously unsure of what to think about her new auspistice's actions.

Dave and Aradia would talk about the events outside in their own scene, and would correlate the events with their suspicious encounter with Ghost Rose the night before, prompting an investigation of the False Derse that would ultimately lead to repairs. Aradia would also be present to help clarify any partial shots we got of Capricorn in this draft. Apparently, the alpha one was there, but she was more an observer, and sort of weirded out by the beta self of hers that was flushed for Gamzee. Dave is just sort of creeped out about that.

From this point, we rejoin Rose's scenes. If you're reading along, go back to Original Chapter 18, and jump to "She kicked off her blankets" etc, if you aren't already there. Read on.

Rose's closing line, referencing the HT, would instead be about her no longer trusting the transportalizers. She would avoid them from then on, much like in the original draft, while scenes with Mirann would be interspersed with allusions to Ghost Rose making some of Rose's nights hell, until the False Derse is repaired (which takes longer than it did to make it, since much of that was alchemy). Even after the repairs, Rose insists on sleeping locked it. MacDermott would start having less appearances hereabouts, probably not be seen at all until we approach the EOA, so to build Rose and Mirann's relationship.
This chapter's a bit of a weird one for reading: it would have started with a transition not in the original draft (as I feel the one we're about to get is inadequate). Then, we'd get a scene taken from the Original Chapter 8: specifically, search for the following line:

"So, so," Tavros was saying, his hands gesturing like a conductor over their emptied plates. [...] 

From there, you can read until Rose goes to talk to Vriska, which you'll notice was borrowed for Chapter 14 at the start of the commentary. Instead of talking to Rose in this chapter, Vriska would grump about for a while before arranging a meeting with Eridan on Trollian.

A few minor additions would be in this chapter as well, right about here. Terezi would show up to sit next to Rose as she watches TV, and in response to a questioning look, would just ruffle Rose's hair. Things would seem to be okay for them, at least for the time being. We would also see Jade doing another impression of another Troll. Things seem to have gone vaguely back toward normal.

It's here that you can begin reading Original Chapter 20 pretty much to the end. The only major concern is the original portrayal of auspistice, namely that Eridan and Vriska are coming back from a date as they are also kismeses. In fact, now that the fic has moved from ashen setup to an ashen relationship in its early stages, its inaccurate approach really begins to take up more and more time and looks worse and worse as a result, like a giant red zit on the fic. A year after the fact, I am now really quite fed up with my past self about the whole mistake. It was one thing to have not noticed, but another, self-absorbed thing to have not noticed or listened in the year that followed. Even if you liked the first draft, it's a story about how the sky is red: the sky is not red, and I am an idiot.

Back to the commentary.

Remembering my timeline need to have Rose level to 76 before the EOA, she probably would after the fight with the basilisk. That close, huh Rose? Even when you win, you just don't win!

In an effort to better incorporate the Breeding Caverns/Drone Training storylines, we would see several ships from among Nepeta's "Breeding Buddies!" drawn along the walls ("…the name needs work."). Equius' project would also be along those lines, and there would be crap from both projects scattered about their mutual "Hive". On top of these, Nepeta would now be distracted during the search for chalk by finding her drawing tablet filled with backlogged messages from Kanaya, Feferi and Sollux. Sollux is still online, and so Nepeta decides to roleplay her way through their discussion, pretending to be an "innocent waif" to Sollux's drone and laughing to Jade about how he must be taking it. In response, he starts spamming her pictures of his new alchemized buckets. The fact that these are prototypes of the one Kanaya really intends to use for their first breeding season is a little too real for Nepeta, and she squeaks and steps gingerly away, almost running into Rose's discovery of her Nep/Jade quadrant smudges.

Rose and Jade drag one another off at the end, much as before.
I've got nothing to say! This chapter is fine! Ahahahaha we're almost caught up!

Original Chapter 21

In fact, there's so little here I feel like I'm being neglectful.

…*shifty eyes*

Latula bounced her ball up against the corridor wall even as Jake pushed by her to reach the transporteralizer. She hardly seemed to notice his passing, and that struck his concern. Jake English was not one to leave a lady in emotional distress! He tucked away in next to her, and she ignored that as well.

After a long pause, he tried a classic opening, sure to work on a young lady down in the proverbial dumps: "I—"

" Stuff it, bro. Your sis shot my boy's M, and I ain't gonna hear shit from you. Got it?" Latula bounced the ball again, hard. It deflected back into Jake's face instead of toward its thrower, bashing in against his glasses. She caught that one, too.

Jake scrambled to check his frames. Everything intact! Grannie English knew how to make a good pair of glasses for an adventurer, boy howdy! "All I was saying was that I'm sure Rox—"

"Wh4t d1d 1 jst s4y?"

But before Latula could remind him, they were both interrupted by a new arrival from the nearby room. Meulin pushed out, her eyes flooded with tears, and she pulled off what passed for medical scrubs in their environment: kitchen gloves and a smock. She sat beside Latula on the opposite end.

Latula's anger was immediately buried, and she wrapped an arm over Meulin's shoulders. "Ey girl," she greeted. "Let it out."

Meulin did, and it was some time before anyone tried to get any information out of her, not that Jake was going to speak unless spoken to, after the last threat. What did come out was not good. "We think… we don't think…” Meulin tried to catch her breath, but it was shaking. "Latula, he's not gonna be able to talk again!" she wailed. "Just because some… some…" She glanced up at Jake, and seemed to choose silence. Jake was glad she didn't get any further to accusing Roxy, but it wasn't any better to see Meulin break down into tears and wrap her arms around Latula's neck.

"C'mere, girl," Latula said at first, and patted her on the back. "…still got his head, right?” It was not quite a reassurance – in a way, it was still a question. Jake understood: he had seen the scene as well as anyone.

Thankfully, Meulin nodded. "Bu’… bu' we hadta take off his… j-ja… his j-jaw… And I couldn't!" Meulin's cries caught in a flurry of hiccups.

Even Latula couldn't hold back an interruption at that news, however. "The whole thing?” she asked. Meulin wiped her nose and nodded. "Damn. Girl, you don't have to go through that."

Meulin shook her head. "I'm not helping! Why can't I help?"
Latula pulled her back into a hug. "C'mon girl, it's got to be full to the brim in there. I know Tuna's not helping, I just can't get him out! No one needs an Heir of Doom in the operating room…" She stroked Meulin's hair to calm her. "Sides, your boy's got four docs and his crazy rap gods lookin' after him. …I think it's your turn now."

Meulin sniffed in laughter. "The Twisted Bros look after us all, Latula!" she quoted, but this only served to make her more upset. She curled up quietly rather than raise a fuss. "They 're gonna have to wrap him up in bandages for a few days," she said. "And he's gonna have it all covered up until Horuss and Dirk can work on something p-pretty. And…" But Jake never heard anything more.

After a while, Latula spoke up again. "…How's Mituna?"

Meulin nodded into Latula's shoulder. "I think he understands now." Latula just nodded to that as well, and kissed Meulin's head.

They sat like that, together, for some time, before the door burst open to the sound of shouting. Out poured the remaining pseudo-doctors: Dirk trailing silently after the Heroes of Life, who were locked in contest, and last came Horuss, who hovered in the doorway. Meenah cut the Humans off of the hallway, and Jane tried to push past her to get to the observers on the floor.

"Meulin!" Jane said after a few frustrated arguments. She pushed back. "Look. We've figured… Meenah says we're supposed to get approval from all of his quadrants."

"No," Meenah said, "I said we should just shuck him!" She pulled out her trident for emphasis.

"Oh, put that away!" Jane insisted. "It's unsanitary! Wash your hands! Look: if I'm hearing this right, full quadrant approval is what you'd normally do on Beforus…"

"I said I don't care!" Meenah repeated. "He doesn't care!" she said, pointing to Dirk. "Or least he's not saying a thing about it."

"It's okay, Jane," Meulin said from the ground. "I know this is best."

"Thank you," Jane sighed. Meenah rolled her eyes. "…Um… Latula?"

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me!" Meenah shouted. "Stop dragging t)(is out! Don't you think there's somewhere I'd rather be? Someone I'd rather be talking to? Someone I'd rather be pulling off of someone else before something )appens?"

"Fine, Meenah! Fine! You want to comfort the liar?" Jane asked. She pointed to the transportalizer. "Go! Go pull Rufioh and Aranea off of her while you're at it." Horuss winced at this, but for once did not make a fuss. "I don't know what's wrong with all of you, but if you're so determined to make out with a girl that spends her spare time running through the flowers with the Horrorterrors, that's your business! I can do this without you!"

Meenah lashed out with an arm. "For the last time, I didn't know!"

But this only set off further fighting. Jake sighed, so did Latula, and Dirk finally spoke up.

"Pyrope," he said. She looked up to meet his eyes, only to find the side of his head as he continued to watch the fight. "We still need all quadrants."

"Oh," she said in a grunt. "Didn't take it well? If those two set him off I'm gonna be pissed."

"Nah," Dirk said. "We haven't asked yet. We weren't gonna ask him on his own, it's just…"
"No, you're right," Latula said. "N—"

Meulin spoke up, not realizing she had interrupted. "Nobody should have to make a call like that on their own." Latula nodded, and only then Meulin find the strength to let her go.

Horuss stepped aside at the door. "Are you… sure you want to go in there?"

"I can take it," Latula said. "Hell, didn't we all see it worse?" Jake supposed that was true. Meulin followed.

"Hey, bro," Dirk said after they had gone. His eyes remained on the fight. "Maybe you should be the one to talk to Rox."

"Gee, Dirk, do you really think?" Jake rubbed at the back of his head. "I'd figure one of her partners would really be better equipped to—"

Dirk shook his head. "I'm not talking about comfort sex, man." Jake really didn't want to think about that. "I'm talking about this."

Jake couldn't help but agree as he watched Jane and Meenah tear into one another. He got up at once, and was going to leave when he stopped for a moment and leaned in toward Dirk. "Meenah? Or Jane?"

"Yes," Dirk replied.

Jake left even faster.

See, this is why scenes selected for the parody need to be carefully vetted ahead of time. You blow off one measly jaw and you blow the whole thing!
This is the first chapter that showcases the auspistice and virtually nothing else (though Gamzee's assault remains a primary factor in character motivation). You can pick it up here, Original Chapter 22.

The opening still needs to be trimmed a bit, but you can see what it's about: to spell out Vriska and the others as a threat just before Rose puts herself up against them. Even Tavros comes off looking stronger as a result.

Then Tone is given a focus scene, but this could also probably be trimmed a bit… oh well. You'll see I have nothing but minor concerns, because this chapter is also pretty much in good shape. Give Kanaya a line or two before the fight and we'll be shining. I just didn't have another Roxyverse chapter in me to fill space, I'll cop to that.

I like this chapter, I can't really say much more. Except this: I figured this would be a good place to showcase InvalidGriffin's fanart of the central threesome. Thanks again, iG!

We're in the final approach, but what follows is going to require some work. The next chapter went through major revisions when it was being written and will require serious work even now: even though there's only one chapter left in the original draft, I'm going to make it two chapters in this draft. So get excited for the first new chapters! Just… not quite yet!
The Gulf

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This one is Original Chapter 23, but only down to the break, which is about 80% of the way through the chapter, after the line "She disappeared into her bedroom."

A lot goes on in this chapter. Too much. It's best if I break it down, but first: a story. When I wrote this chapter, there were delays. There was a good reason for that. That's because I actually wrote the entire conversation in Kanaya's office, start to finish, three times with entirely different angles and content. You can't imagine how frustrating this was. The end result still wasn't what I wanted. Let's talk about the actual goals here and see if we can put together what would have been the ideal scenario.

To begin, let's remember the act structure. Act 1 is the pre-relationship. Act 2, Rose's reaction to the relationships before she understands them, and Act 3, Rose's reaction after she comes to better understand them. Act 4 is about the juvenile relationships.

But note that Act 3 is about better understanding the Trolls. Rose still does not fully understand them. In fact, her assumption that she does is her downfall. "You can never be a Troll, Rose, darling," was a line meant for Mirann in this Act. Not fully. As we approach the fic's pivotal scene, we approach its central theme: what is auspistice, and why is it worth writing about? And to understand that, Rose has to first fail to understand it. And she fails catastrophically. Indeed, the answer to that question serves to explain her failure, but for now we'll go with Kanaya's piecemeal explanation.

Rose's poor understanding of what the Trolls want from their black relationships has led to her unbalancing things between Vriska and Eridan, already tenuous due to their mutual relationship with Tavros. Rose's poor understanding of what the Trolls want from their other romances (what they call, but is not technically, pity, but at the same time is not the same list of wants that we want from our relationships) has led to her mistakes with Kanaya. Rose's poor understanding of both has led to her mistakes in cleaning things up after her attack on Gamzee, leading to the misunderstanding about her hating him. Any one of these things could lead to disaster if not tended to at once. The running theme in these mistakes is one of selfishness, and that's important to note for later. But it's emphasized most between Rose and Kanaya.

The original plan for Rose and Kanaya's relationship in the original draft was that they would not hook up, as I've said, but I mean they would not have even hooked up in a trial relationship. But in spite of this, they would become more and more intimate over time, not knowing where their relationship stood at any point. As an extension of Kanaya's "virgin thing" (as the joke goes in an early chapter) she would be unable to so much as decide whether she wanted intimacy or not. By this point in the story, her argument with Rose over Vriska and Eridan would have turned Kanaya's indecision about intimacy into vehement rejection. Rose would understand that part, to a degree, but would not understand Kanaya's unconscious decision to say nothing, and the two would begin the fight as-written.

The funny thing is: I tried to write this as planned, if adjusted for the fact that they were in a relationship. The first time I wrote the chapter, I simply failed. Next, I tried to write as planned but with them making up in the end instead of fighting about cultural misassumptions at all. I hated it. And then I came to the one that hit the Original Draft, where Kanaya's intimacy concerns are left
unattended… leaving her squeamish performance in previous chapters left uncomfortable and unaddressed! Once again, I fall into the merciful arms of No Longer Having To Actually Write This. You and I can all imagine better than I could ever produce myself.

From this mix of "virgin stuff" and Kanaya's stated goal of trying to meet Rose in the middle, you can see how she ended up in the "test matespritship" in this draft, once one realizes that it was largely a mistake on Kanaya and Rose's parts. Even Kanaya realizes that now, at this very moment. Her pushing things to comfort Rose after the possession only made things worse. But the way it complicates the scene… The biggest argument I put up in my notes was to break up this discussion into separate chapters… but that ruins the best part. Rose has to fail all of these things, and it hits harder first if she realizes all of them at once, and second if it comes from Kanaya. After all, the premise, as I said from the outset on the forums, is to show why auspistice is just as worthy of fanfic as the other three relationships. To get Rose to reach the conclusion on her own, she had to fail all of her romances evenly, and the most popular romance, matespritship, especially. And there's no deeper way to fail it than to be told to her face.

The culture gulf split wide under her feet, its impact on the plot truly felt, Rose once again leaves Kanaya's in tears, and this time, she walks straight into the waiting blade of the second driving plot.

Chapter End Notes

One last First Drafter's Club entry, for the last chapter of the original draft. Thanks for sticking with for so long!
Half-distraught, half-furious, Rose makes her way back into the access tunnels of the Laboratory, where she makes the decision that she desperately needs help. She changes her path, and goes, instead, to the transportalizer, using all she knows of magic to direct her to Mirann, and praying not to bump into the Ghost Rose. She can't think of anyone else to turn to in the middle of the night who will know enough about Trolls and yet would be unlikely to throw her mistake in her face.

The process is not immediately successful, and Rose fades in and out through empty void numerous times, the Middling Gods always watching her progress. Finally, she finds the Troll woman, and begins to rant about her situation. Mirann has trouble reining her in at first, but once she does she becomes intrigued by the idea of Rose in a kismesis with Gamzee, as she didn't imagine it was possible. Rose argues that she didn't as well, but when Mirann suggests she give it a shot, Rose gets angry. Mirann points out that Gamzee might just be what Rose needs: someone to vent at. Rose disagrees, and pulls out the Thorns of Oglogoth to remind all present that the last time she was angry so much as near Gamzee, she blew off his arm.

"If I do it again, I just might kill him!" Rose would shout.

But then Mirann would reply: "Well, maybe that's what you need instead."

Rose's snap of temper causes her to lose her grip on the void, and she ricochets back to reality. She paces about the Hub in her fury (a cautious reader will notice something strange that Rose mentions down the commentary) before trying again, wanting to shout down the Troll woman. She feels suddenly betrayed, and wants to understand, but under that, a niggling concern she can't quite put into words. But this time, something goes strange. She finds another empty transport, and when she reaches the other end, finds herself in the wrong place entirely.

"Why am I here?" Rose asked Mirann, who stood a step behind and to the right. Before them, Gamzee hung suspended in the healing solution, much as he had the day of the attack, but now without his arm. He was asleep. In that moment Rose's niggling concern bloomed to the forefront of her mind, and pieces began to fall into place.

"Don't be silly," Miranna chided. "You're not here, Rose, darling. If you were, I wouldn't be."

"Then why are you dreaming it?" Rose accused.

"I'm not the one dreaming it, Rose." After a pause, she added: "I'm not the one who drew her wands, either."

Rose looked down and found the Thorns of Oglogoth back in her hands. She tossed them aside in shock, and was forced to recover them when she remembered she had been charged with their safe-keeping. As she stumbled after the second, she heard another voice.

"This one's mine," said the speaker – said "Rose," the gutted, grimdark puppet, almost bored. Looking back, the real Rose saw the dreamscape was incomplete, and that Mirann and the Ghost Rose stood in the void much as either ever had in the past. Compared to the extant room, Mirann was on the left, the Ghost in the centre. The gap to the right remained ominous and foreshadowing. The Ghost Rose looked up at Gamzee. "Just trying to pass along the obvious."

"I can handle this," Mirann said.
"What?" the Ghost Rose said, surprised. "That's your plan? Just outright tell her you're heading my angle? I didn't think you were that backwards, Backwards."

"The difference between you and me is that you can't help but see her as an irritant while I have context." Mirann pointed her harpoon. There was something jarring about the dreamscape: Rose was certain the harpoon had not been in her hand before. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she realized this had happened before. Why the change? "And context tells me she stopped trusting me the moment you pulled her into this, if not five minutes ago."

"Dream distortions in the Hub," Rose acknowledged, her voice a croak. Mirann clicked her tongue at her own mistake. "And the Thorns," Rose added. "…Supposed to be buried under my inventory. Shouldn't have been able to pull them out to begin with. And I put them away in the Hub, but here they were again."

The Ghost Rose threw up her arms. "Then tell her to shoot the clown and get it over with, if you're done with your mental crap!" Ghost Rose turned away from Mirann out of disgust.

"Kill Gamzee?" Rose asked. "That's what you want? I thought you were trying to mess with me!"

"He's a menace!" Ghost Rose complained over her shoulder.

"I was going to say 'dead weight','" Mirann argued. "Rose, Gamzee Makara is not only emblematic of every problem in your session right now, but the cause of the problems in most of the others."

"If by 'problems' you mean 'straight up fucking murdering!'" Ghost Rose drove her hand into her own wound as illustration.

"Rose," Mirann said, trying to seize Rose's attention away from her furious companion. "In millions of timelines beside your own, Gamzee Makara is responsible for the deaths of at least two of your team mates. Lower that to 'one teammate' and you get a number far closer to 'every timeline.'"

"But not this one!" Rose countered.

"No, in this one he's just going to kill you all accidentally!" Mirann stomped down her harpoon, butt-first. It had been blade down before. Rose was certain. And the Ghost Rose. The right hand was bloody, but which had been put in the wound? "Think logically, Rose! Your guardians tried to cheat the game, and they were killed for it. Your friend Jade tried to cheat the game and created Jack Noir! The game doesn't like it when you introduce truly unexpected factors!"

"What's your point?" Rose asked. She glanced over at Ghost Rose. The right hand remained smeared, but sure enough, the blood spatter on her dress had changed.

"My point is this:" Mirann said. "'What is Gamzee Makara's Element?'"

Rose was thrown from her puzzle. "He's… a Bard."

"Bard of what?" Ghost Rose near-snarled.

"I…" Rose stammered.

"You don't know," Mirann said, matter-of-factly.

"He hasn't told me!" Rose said.

The Ghost Rose laughed. "He doesn't know either!"
"Neither does the game," Mirann continued. Her eyes were locked on Rose's, her bright, white eyes. "You're assigned an element based on personality, same as your class. The game assigns those elements and classes certain quests to help you improve as person. But Gamzee's personality is so scattershot that it couldn't pick. When it tried to give him a Denizen to match his element, the way their session was designed, it tried to spawn two at once. It glitched. Nearly crashed the whole session, and ultimately just bifurcated the two Denizens down the middle. Oh, sure, you're just trying to survive right now," she said, as Rose took a step back. "But what happens when you beat Jack? When you start to fight Jack, the game is going to imprint the universe with your personalities. Before the final boss fight. It's the game's way of memorializing anyone that dies in the process. But what's it going to find to imprint?"

Ghost Rose pointed to Rose, and then Gamzee. "A pack of fifteen cheaters and a walking virus."

Mirann confirmed the answer: "Cheaters."

And the dreamscape echoed. "cheaters," "CH34T3RS," "cHeAtErS", Denizen hiss in the shrinking void.

Mirann picked up that thread, rather quickly. "If you want to convince the game you deserve the Ultimate Reward despite your cheating, well, that's up to you. The Reward, the Universe... the game's whole output is based on your personalities at the end of the game. Personalities that were supposed to be adult and focused by the game's quests. Enjoy your weakling Universe, by all means." That hurt, but Mirann was hardly finished. "But that," she said, referring to Gamzee, "isn't going to irritate the game. That is going to corrupt it. You'll be lucky to spawn a Universe with stars in it, or you'll split it down the middle like his Denizen. If you ask me, it's more likely the game will segfault and kill you all when it tries to spawn the frog!"

Rose nodded. She did it less out of agreement than in an attempt to regain her focus, as the Denizens rang in her ears. "Cheaters", "cheaters", "Che8ter! You're a che8ter!" And Vriska laughed. Rose had to focus, to put her attention back on the strange and jerking changes around her.

"Cheater."

Rose's breathing stopped, her grip seized about the Thorns as dreamling hiss struck hard against her True memory. Beyond Gamzee's tubes, the black void began to take on the slick rock walls of a hidden, undersea grotto lit with trickling waterfalls of brilliant colour. But there, in fight or flight, Rose found her salvation.

"You did, didn't you? You did call me that. Well, you want me to grow up, you dead monster? Rose thought, and the thought eroded the second dreamscape. Her breathing returned, rhythmic and strong. Her grip did not let up.

"Noted," Rose said to Mirann. "And taken into consideration. But I can't help but notice that we're still in an alpha timeline. Everything that's happened so far was supposed to happen, even Gamzee not killing anyone."

"Maybe because you're supposed to kill him here," Mirann said.

"Maybe he's going to kill someone later," suggested the Ghost Rose.

"Or maybe this is our chance to do things right," Rose said, hard. "The game wants us to learn our lessons? Fine!" She pointed her wand at Mirann. "We'll get right on that. Right now."

And Rose started to pull away with her mind, and might very well have left, if Mirann had not done
"…Or maybe this isn't an alpha timeline," said the third voice. Aidan MacDermott, stooped but ever-confident, took his rightful place in the gap on Rose's right. "Because it's not." Behind him, and around, the sound of that crowded hall of the Learned returned. Once again, Rose found herself under the watchful eye of the thousands, and this time, they were all paying attention to nothing but her.

"We pieced it together, you see," MacDermott said. "Since I'm going to have to keep your interest to keep you from leaving, fine! We pieced it together. From the remains of dead timelines. It's a Frankenstein of a thousand beta universes, and it's not even the first one. And that means it's just as vulnerable to dissolution as any other beta timeline, maybe even moreso, so long as we aren't holding it together."

"You don't have that kind of power," Rose argued.

MacDermott smiled, but as he did, he drew a weapon from a sylladex. Sylladexes had been somewhat trendy back on Earth, but his choice of weapon left no question in Rose's mind that this had been chosen for utility. Crooked over his left shoulder, MacDermott held a scythe twisted like a living branch out of black shadow. His point, at least as far as it concerned their universe, was very clear.

But the Ghost Rose laughed, and proceeded her own way. "Oh, we've got that kind of power. And I've been fed up watching it for the past few eons fucking around with this infighting caucus of bullshit! You two wanted to know who was the clear and present danger!" she shouted, and pointed to Gamzee. "There he is! Find the real one and take him out, for fuck's sake! Or we're going to have to do it all again!"

MacDermott agreed. "Rose. I once told you that once you make a mistake, it can take all the effort in the world to make one, tiny correction. This is one such mistake. We won't pretend to be flawless. Tailoring a universe is far more complicated than pulling together a ship in a bottle. If you can win the game, the new Universe will be alpha all its own, but you can't win with that boy!"

Rose ignored her doppelganger's hysteries, and the old man's cautions. "You want me to kill Gamzee," Rose repeated, to Mirann and MacDermott. "And you," she said to the Ghost Rose, "want me to kill Jack Noir, on top of that."

The Ghost stamped her foot. "He's not exactly serving you breakfast!"

"Got it," Rose said. And she unleashed her mind from its moorings in the void.

As the bubble began to pull away, so did its occupants. Rose could no longer make out their faces, but the Ghost Rose shouted after her. "Hey! Hey! Where are you going?"

Rose soon found herself back in the Hub. The real Hub, she felt, as her hands clenched hard around nothing at all and she pinched herself twice. "…I'm going to tell my friends," she told the room.

She drew the Quills of Echidna first, and her hubtopband second. "Dave," she dictated at once. "I need to talk to you right now. I'm in the Hub. Don't take the transportalizers under any circumstance."

Dave time travels in from whenever he was, and the two have their talk. She tells him everything, and they quickly agree that her concern about the transportalizers is unfounded for the others… save
Feferi. Compiling their knowledge, Dave realizes that Rose's former friends have abused her very brief period in the void to put her to sleep with their faster-spoken spell-language (both factors established very early on, you may recall). It would only work on Rose and Feferi, as only they understand Eldritch, and they could be affected because they were out of range of the False Derse in the void (both facts that would have been in the past act, as clues).

Dave says they should get everyone together in the morning to share the news, but there's a concern: Rose will still have to stay awake until they come up with a way to keep the three away. But Rose has a better idea, at least as far as she's concerned.

Rose ran over the idea in her head. It was crazy, but... "I'm going to scare them off."

"Oh yeah, that's a great plan," Dave said. "While you're at it, I'll shut up Jack with cookies and milk."

"I'm serious," Rose said. "It's... complicated."

"You ain't leaving this room to go fight your monster friends with 'it's complicated,'" Dave pointed out, interposing himself between her and the transportalizers.

"Of course," Rose said. "...This isn't the only thing that's happened to me today, you know." She took a deep breath. "I've been screwing everything up. Up and down the walls. I need to make things up now. To Gamzee. Kanaya. Vriska and Eridan. And now this. I'm have things to fix, Dave. Those people in the Void... they're not revealing all this to me because they slipped up. Not entirely. They're telling me because they still want me to slip up, since I'm already on poor footing. I've got to head them off, not hide from my nightmares. Two of them are reasonable. The last one's a sociopath. I'll break them down each their own way, and take them apart."

"So you just called me here for a will reading?" Dave concluded.

"Yes," Rose said. "Give John all my wizard fiction."

"Score. Put it where it will be of most use," Dave said. Rose passed him by, head toward the Aries pad. "I was just wondering, is all," Dave said after she was behind him. "'Why me?' I mean, instead of Egbert or Harley. It's because I'm the only one who wouldn't stop you, isn't it?"

Rose smiled, nervous as she took her position. "I know you've got my back," she said.

Dave half-smiled over his shoulder, which more than Rose could have hoped for. "...I've got your back," he said.

Rose left him with that.

Yet, once she had left, she found herself in an empty void, and there were no accusers to taunt her. "Where are you?" she shouted in their language. She had expected Mirann, for all their connection, but it hardly mattered. She wanted to shout them down so badly that she almost expected one of them to show up to taunt her about that instead. "Don't you have something to say?"

"At your service," said a voice. MacDermott, behind her. "...Rose, darling."

Rose turned, but was immediately struck with a sense of wrong. MacDermott was there, but kept his scythe crooked in his arm, and had his right hand reached up to his face, which looked somehow stiff. The moment Rose realized it was a mask, she looked away and slammed her eyes shut.
She understood now, why Mirann and the Ghost Rose had been unable to hold their appearance together: masks, to hide their true identity. And she had a good guess what that was. Shutting her eyes was thus a phobic response, to a stimulus she’d have preferred not to relive. But this mask, metaphorical or otherwise, did not just conceal an identity from the eyes. In removing it, MacDermott, or whoever he was, unleashed a torrent on all of Rose’s senses. There were presences about her, dead one, lost ones, familiar ones and strange, about in all directions, which filled her nose with the stank of crowds and spoke in disparate voices with a resonance that shook Rose to the core. Her ears rang, her nose bled and her stomach roiled as the voices rose in screaming harmony.

"After all, Rose," MacDermott said above them. "I'm only here because you want me to be."

Rose was ejected into reality, where she stumbled back into the wall, reeling from metaphysical pain and a very physical bite on her tongue. There, she was immediately sick on the floor. For a moment, in her nausea, she understood. The infighting caucus. The masks. And a force among paradox space that was not indifferent to Humanity and Trolldom, the players, who to the Gods should have been no more than tiny germs in a grander scheme. She knew his name. Rose spat: bile with the iron tang of blood, and then, she noticed she was back in the empty Hub. The room she should have left behind.

The floor began to melt away beneath her vomit. "Dammit," Rose said as she fought her sick body for breath. The Hub melted away like a dream, and Rose stumbled back. "I know who you are!" she protested. The collapsing dream did not care. "Three masks on one mind!" she whispered, but knew it was fruitless. As the room fell away, Rose found herself back in the place she had called the Void, the Hall of the Learned, among the Middling Gods. But that was just another dream. Indeed, it was no simple Dream Bubble, but was, in a way, same mask MacDermott had just pulled aside. She now saw it plain, and saw her three companions in truth for the first time, in one body.

There had never been any Middling Gods. As Rose took them in now, the voices, the eyes and teeth, she saw only the tips and arms of only one, great, enveloping beast. Each grasping appendage cut with a thousand eyes, and from each eye, along the lid, came a thin, bird's tongue, that licked about the edges in full circle. If it were not cleaning, the tongue would speak in one of its infinite voices, breath come from the gap between eye and frame, the sound coming at Rose in a hissing stream of musk-scented air. And Rose knew which eye was Mirann, which one MacDermott, and heard her own voice from the pus-caught eye that faced her straight on.

And as she picked them out, Rose fell, as though the floor had fallen away below her as it had in the dream. She fell only shortly. There, she was held fast, in a tangle of fine, sticking hairs of sick-smelling gristle that criss-crossed her surroundings. And as Rose struggled for bearing, she found that to struggle was to tear her bonds and fall further down into a great, tall funnel with edges that rose about her: a deep brown bell-trap to a sickly-sweet pit far below, like a plant-trap; the mouth of the beast itself.

In her struggle, Rose had fallen face-up, and beyond, she saw new sights. Above, she saw their Incisphere from the outside, which shone as though it were her only source of light. The Horrotterror was positioned so far away from every other thing that was in Paradox Space that, for a time, Rose could see no other feature. She was obscured by the god and his great plant trap-mouth, and furthermore by the threads of casing-flesh that she had already torn above, but with some effort, she made out three other sources of dim light: Dream Bubbles. Three of them. Together with the Incipisphere, the god cradled four globes, like a beast huddled protectively over its precious eggs. Last of all, Rose could see Jack. He shone with power even from within the Incipisphere, a Universe away, and that only served to compound Rose's quick-mounting panic.

She twisted around, and dug the Quills of Echidna into the side of the bell-trap. Slowly, though the
entrail-lines clung to her clothes and skin, she began to climb, though she was not sure to what final purpose. She simply sought to escape. As she rose, the tongues of the God's arms began to speak at the top of her climb. They spoke English, Chinese, Hindi and languages lost: Ancient Egyptian and Sumerian gone, in the languages of Alternia before and Alternia before that again. A billion voices were raised up against Rose's climb, and warped and pressed upon her, trampling her against the edge and filling her mind with their full, incomprehensible tenor. The infinite minds she had misperceived and misunderstood spoke to her with the single, multitudinous purpose of a single mind of a great and coveting god.

And after a second like a minute in timeless space, and a minute, to a fragile mortal mind, like eternity, the transportalizer completed its simple work and spat Rose into Aradia's quarters, where her legs buckled and she fell, first to her knees, then in the same motion to the floor. Her wands clattered away to some dark corner. Rose shook there, clutching on and off on weapons that were not at hand, breathing the old, familiar scent of clean recycled air, and tasting rust-metal and boot from the floor where friends had trod before. And MacDermott stepped up to her head.

Rose spat on his boot. "You." She slowly found she had some grasp on her senses, and tried to rise. She spoke again, accusingly: "Nyarla—"

"Ah! Ah! Ah!" MacDermott interrupted, and stamped down his scythe to the ground for insurance. "Some would say that to know a thing's name is to know the thing itself." MacDermott lowered himself to the ground on his scythe. "…Do you really want to know a Horrorterror, Rose, darling?"

Rose barred her teeth at him, and finding she lacked the strength to stand, tried to pull herself up to his level by his scythe. Her heart jerked when her hands touched the staff, and she pulled away with a shout.

"Counter-elements," MacDermott explained. "Shadow to your Light. Don't let me lose you on the basics, Rose, you're smarter than that." Rose, having reeled up to her knees in pain, kept the position, though she found it hard to steady herself. MacDermott waited, politely, for her to meet his eyes. "…I am of the god you think I am, Rose. First King on Earth. Emissary to your people, like the Speaker was to your forerunners. Bit of a disparity between us, but… godless sessions tend to end poorly. And yours did, I think you can tell, even here in the beta. So we supplied one." And he touched a hand to his heart.

He then seemed to size Rose up. "Now. Where do you stand? You're pulling yourself together much better than your brother did, I'll tell you that." He then pointed to his eyes. "You know us in rough. You know we're a god of many minds, and many masks. You know my mask…" he touched his lips, "but do you know my mind?"

Rose pondered this for a moment, and shook her head. He smiled, as he ever did, and reached down with one hand. He brushed the floor, and as it did, the dream-metal corroded at his touch. In it, he drew a symbol, three-pronged, from a single point. He then emphasized the rightmost branch from Rose's perspective, and pointed to the left. "Hindsight," he said, in explanation. "Presence," the centre, and for his own: "Foresight. We've formed a triumvirate to solve a single, significant problem. If you don't know my mind," he asked, "do you know the others?"


"…Let me put it this way, then," said Foresight, and he leaned forward. Then, he reached out with his drawing hand and jabbed Rose's shoulder with two fingers, leaving a grindark patch on her skin. She stared at it, exhausted and useless, as it squirmed against the rest of her skin. "In our propaganda, when a Squiddle touches another, it leaves traces. A memory of their connection. Imagine the traces
left behind if the creature touched was strong and powerful beyond measure?"

"You're saying... you three personalities... are memories of something else?" Rose asked. "I'm not afraid of 'traces.'"

Foresight shook his head. "But that doesn't make them any less real."

Rose shook her head. "Don't waste my time. What's your angle?"

The man paused, then nodded over his shoulder. A dream-shell of Presence appeared, of the Ghost Rose, to repeat the line: "infighting caucus of bullshit." She vanished, and he explained: "I made a deal to agree to the Makara attack. Presence wanted him off her back at The Key Moment. Hindsight never liked him to begin with. I just wanted to talk to you."

"The Key Moment," Rose repeated, sarcastic.

He nodded. "Our 'Present.' I showed it to you just now in that vision. It's the moment we all want to kill you and your friends."

"Time travel," Rose muttered. "How polite of you to say. Then I take that 'Presence' is the dominant mind on that present, and to blame for your sudden shift to murder." Another, irritating smile. "Why do you want to talk to me?"

Foresight reached out a weathered hand to lift Rose's chin, and look her in the eyes. "I'd like you all to survive," he said, honestly enough.

"'Kill Jack Noir,'" Rose quoted. She understood. "You want us to imprint the new universe. You want it to be intact."

"Very good, Rose," he said. "Hindsight had you pegged."

Rose did not feel any better about that. "And then your psychotic friend guts us."

"She'd like to, yes."

Rose kept locked on him. "And your... 'Hindsight'? Mirann. What's her vote in this caucus?"

"Complicated," Foresight said with a laugh. "Funny you should bring that up right now."

"She doesn't frighten me," Rose said. "I came here to face her down, and I intend to."

A thin smile. "Yes she does. Frighten you. And you have every right to be frightened of her. Even if she was just an old man who has you by the throat—" he tickled her chin where he held it, "you'd have every right to feel frightened." That was what he said, but he left Rose's throat alone, even though his hand was closer to Rose than she liked.

Rose nodded, and found his grip on her chin tighten ever so slightly as it seemed she might move he head away. "...And what's... your vote?"

"I vote with Hindsight," he said. "Given my options, I trust her analysis better than the other. Besides, my job is to provide Foresight," he said, and he shifted his weight, ready to stand. "As far as our future is concerned, Rose? You are irrelevant."

He pinched his hand off of her chin, and in doing so, his mind kicked her from the void and back into the transportalizer's proper flow. This had a strange end result, in that Rose returned to reality standing, as she had entered. For the first time she was aware of her being hijacked into sleep in the
void, and it was one last moment of disorientation. For a moment, she did not even know which way was up, and stood in a crouch as she tried to reorient herself.

From there, we return, one last time, to the original draft. Return to Original Chapter 23, and go well beyond gap specifically, to the words "As her mind cleared." This section doesn't perfectly apply here, but by and large it will hold through to the end. The biggest problem is that the Original Draft is about Rose’s reaction to the initial attack from her Horrorterror, identified as "The Empress," and not a second attack. As a result, Rose’s tone isn't correct, as she should be following up on her earlier threats, not birthing them here. But oh well. Goodbye, Original Draft.

And with that, we pass, at last, into a new day at last. And there: the End of Act 4, and the final, central driving plotline.
Rose woke in a cold sweat. For a moment she was trapped there as well, like a weight pressed down on every party of her body. It was a terrifying sensation even as she remembered its name: "Sleep paralysis." Fairly common. Blamed on demons and sentient nightmares. Appropriate, but harmless.

When she regained control of her body, she almost wished she had not. Even lying still hurt. Sitting up hurt more. Rose took to her feet, which was the worst idea of all, until she turned on the light and all thoughts of pain were banished to the back of her mind. Her arms were covered with bruises. Her legs as well, and her stomach and back. She ran a thorough investigation, and came away relieved. She would not have expected the bruises, but on seeing them, she had expected worse.

Rose downed a healing gusher, which dealt with the bruises but not a lingering soreness. Rose felt like she had been running the entire night. She headed to the bathroom and set a bath. She had not slept long, if it could be called sleeping. Only an hour. It would be an hour before even the earliest risers were up and about. She spent most of that time in the bath, not thinking. When she got out, she put on her headtopband the moment her hair was dry. She needed to talk to a friend.

-- tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] --

TT: Good morning, John.
EB: morning rose!
EB: why are you up?
TT: Last night I attacked a Horrorterror.

Rose gave that a moment to sink in, and changed her sheets.

EB: holy shit, rose!
EB: what's going on?
EB: are you okay?
EB: i'm at karkat's but i'll be right over!
TT: No, stay.
EB: are you sure?
TT: Yes.
TT: I'm fine.

Rose filled him in on the goings on the evening prior, and of the threefold "Triumvirate" mind of the Horrorterror.

EB: i'll kill dave
TT: You go do that, I'm going to send him a tasteful card.
EB: "sorry for your loss" and inside "because john killed you"
TT: It was the only thing he truly valued.
TT: I'm not sure how much blame you can put at his feet, however.
TT: I suppose the back and forth jostling in the transportalizer might account for some of my damage this morning.
TT: But most of it was following my encounter with Dave.
TT: I had a visit from Hindsight after I went to bed.
EB: this is the one that was pretending to be an older troll lady?
TT: Yes, that's the one.
TT: Seems some part of her is still roleplaying that rough-and-tumble Troll justice.
EB: she attacked you?
TT: Not at all.
TT: The situation was a bit more complicated than that.
TT: But suffice to say we reached a mutual decision to end in combat.
EB: but
EB: why??
TT: Like I said.
TT: It was complicated.
EB: that's not very comforting rose.
EB: as your friend im going to have to advise you against random midnight throw-downs with strangers and/or demon troll women.
TT: Terezi once said to me, "If you don't know what they came from, how do you know that they went anywhere at all?"
TT: In a manner of speaking this little "throw-down" seems like the natural conclusion between the two of us, at least as far as our master-student relationship was concerned.
TT: Now if only I could say it was the conclusion between "us", this second time meaning Hindsight of the Triumvirate versus ourselves and our allies.
EB: are you okay at least?
TT: I'm better.
EB: better?
TT: Than before.
TT: Than in months.
TT: Have you seen Dave?
EB: dave?
TT: Yes. Blonde, about my height, conspicuous shades?
EB: sounds like a douchebag!
EB: why?
TT: He said something to me. It helped me through. I wanted to thank him.
EB: geeze
EB: fine!
EB: BE mysterious.
EB: what do i care?
TT: I'm going to have to speak to Feferi, though.
TT: I'm afraid she's going to have to join me on my daily tunnel crawls.
EB: yeah
EB: and we're gonna have to finish fixing the false derse like…
EB: TONIGHT
TT: I'd appreciate that.
TT: For some reason I value the ability to sleep. Just can't give the thing up.
TT: But I'm afraid this isn't just a business call, John. Or even just about the Horrorterror. Can I spare a moment of your e-time?
EB: of course!
EB: but are you for reals sure that you don't want to talk about the horrorterror?
TT: I am indeed.
EB: well…
EB: okay.
TT: I am going to talk to Gamzee today.

It took Rose a long time to say it. Even after fighting back against the Horrorterror, that was still another step away.

EB: oh wow!
EB: when?
TT: When I find the courage, I suppose.
TT: Which is why I'm here. I guess I just wanted to hear a friendly voice.
EB: talk about stress! rose, you just fought a crazy interdimensional squid, don't you think this is a little too much?
TT: Not really.
EB: i still think you should take a friendleader approved break from working and reconciling for the day!
EB: i'll talk to karkat.
EB: he's right here.
EB: sleeping, though.
TT: ...John, why ARE you at Karkat's, with him "right there", "asleep"?
TT: Should I fear the worst or the best?
EB: ugh, no, rose, you have the wrong idea entirely!
EB: i'm not just here with karkat, i'm also here with jade!
EB: i am the meat in a vantas-harley sandwich rose, it's me.
TT: that's the filthiest thing I've ever heard.
EB: i know it was pretty darn filthy
TT: I always thought Karkat would be the meat.
EB: what?
TT: Nothing.
EB: rose i am pretty distressed about you having preconceived notions about this ill-conceived joke that i just came up with!
TT: I apologize wholeheartedly.
TT: May I ask instead what entirely wholesome endeavour ended with the creation of this wholesome yet in its own ways entirely filthy Harley-Egbert-Vantas sandwichbombination?
EB: well rose the recipe for a harley-egbert-vantas sandwichbomination with cheese is a deeply guarded secret!
EB: it involves the ancient art of staying up late watching troll disney movies until they both fall asleep on top of me.
TT: That's it?
EB: i'm trapped!
TT: How awful.
EB: so...
EB: you're going to talk to gamzee?
TT: I'll stick around until he wakes up. If you can permit the angry slice of bread to give me the day off I would appreciate.
EB: can do!
EB: how are you feeling about it?
TT: Awful.
EB: i'm sure it won't go bad!
EB: gamzee seems like a pretty nice guy even if he is a little weird.
TT: Yes.
TT: But there's still a problem.
TT: Have you ever worried so much about something you had to do that when you got around to it, you realized you spent so much time being worried that you weren't ready for something you forgot?
EB: i think i know what you mean
EB: one time dad took me to a piano recital and i was so worried i forgot to practice one of my songs
TT: How did you do?
EB: well i'd really like to be reassuring rose but i was pretty awful!
EB: but we were all little kids though so we were all pretty awful
TT: That's fair.
TT: I'm sorry, all the same.
EB: nah, it's okay.
EB: what does this have to do with gamzee?
TT: Something I ran into last night.
TT: I was reminded that the Trolls pity instead of love.
EB: well technically.
EB: personally i think karkat's just full of hot air!
TT: By and large I agree.
TT: In fact, it seems silly to have thought otherwise.
TT: Didn't Kanaya know the word "love" when I used it to describe my friendships?
How long ago was that?
TT: She called it a strong emotion. Certainly she must be familiar with it in SOME context…
EB: whoa whoa rose wait
EB: you told her what?
TT: She asked what emotion I would use to describe my relationship with the three of you.
EB: and you told her love?
EB: wow, rose, i don't know what to say!
TT: I'm surprised myself, I had thought you reciprocated.
EB: i do!
EB: i love you too, rose
EB: hehe, that's so weird.
EB: i just thought, you know, bluh bluh, it was another john and jade being over-affectionate they'll probably bake a cake about it
EB: i didn't think you or dave really thought that way or anything
EB: boy, dave, can you imagine?
TT: I can.
TT: I can see him either rebuffing you entirely or wrapping you up in some contrived game of dates and sarcastic jabs while loudly scheduling "the homosexual."
EB: hahaha, wow, you're so right.
EB: i HAVE to do that.
EB: oh but karkat will be so pissed. i dunno, that does seem kind of mean in hindsight. he wouldn't get the joke!
TT: Invite him along.
EB: oh my god, rose, he'll kill us all.
EB: it'll be the best death ever!
EB: he'll cry big red crab tears it'll be so dramatic!
EB: i am squeezing his shoulder over here.
EB: for future-murdering me.
TT: That's nice.
EB: i thought so!
EB: don't mind me
EB: i'll just be over here planning a 4-way friendwedding.
TT: As expected.
EB: and the 4-way friendhoneymoon
EB: >:)
EB: > :)
EB: >:)
TT: Oh my.
TT: Is that where we all pretend Feferi's pools are the beach and settle in for a long, hot night of feelings jams and junk food?
EB: yeah! and we all have to enjoy/endure each other's hobbies.
EB: i've got three words for you, rose!
EB: red
EB: zone
EB: cuba
TT: Friendivorce!
EB: hehehehe
EB: but serious faces now!
TT: Indeed.
TT: Grr.
EB: grrrrr
TT: See, this is why my arguments during Eridan and Vriska's fight were ultimately flawed. I just let the problems snowball when I could have taken a breather.
EB: and rose brings the emotions crashing down in a single post!
EB: she remains our reigning champion.
EB: okay, i'm serious again rose, i do wanna know what's going on!
TT: What were we talking about?
EB: karkat being so full of hot air about pity that he's rising into the sky
TT: I know karkat is more full of hot air than a cartoon rabbit, but that doesn't make him entirely wrong.
EB: about pity?
TT: Not quite, but partially.
TT: It's just…
TT: I thought it was all…
TT: I LOV-E YOU!
TT: and
TT: I h8 you.
TT: and
TT: :33 < *i will look out fur you forever and evers!*
TT: and
TT: I Find Myself Less Than Favourably Disposed Towards The State Of Your Relationship But Even Less So Towards Your Mutual Ability To Correct It. But it's not that simple.
TT: You don't have to call it "pity," necessarily, but it's different all the same.
TT: Whatever Kanaya's been looking for in her relationship, I haven't provided it for her.
TT: Shouldn't I be?
TT: And what if I decide I want her to love me some day?
TT: And…
TT: I shouted at her.
EB: oh
EB: rose?
EB: where'd you go?
TT: John, I made my girlfriend hate me.
TT: I made her hate me and it's all my fault.
TT: And I don't know if I even understand her any more. I don't know what she wants. She's so different from me.
EB: well don't you, kind of WANT her to be different?
EB: she's a different person and you really care for her and that's how these things
TT: But what if I can't be what she needs me to be? I can't pity her. I can't.
EB: ugh, rose :(
TT: I just…
TT: I want her to be comfortable with me because she makes me feel comfortable.
EB: that's sweet!
TT: You would know a thing or two about being comfortable, seeing as how you have been upgraded from friendleader to pillow.
EB: so true. i know it's true! i can feel it in my legs!
EB: my poor, poor, numb, jade-severed legs. that will have to be amputated and given a funeral of their very own!
TT: I will attend in black of course.
EB: you shouldn't!
EB: my point is that it's great that you've got someone you want to care for but you've got to care for yourself too!
EB: or you end up having leg funerals!
EB: no one wants to have leg funerals, rose.
EB: they're incredibly stupid.
TT: But I don't want to leave Kanaya.
EB: but if you and Kanaya can't be what you want for one another, maybe you should.
TT: Are you saying I should break up with her?
EB: i'm saying she said you'd both work things out in the morning.
EB: talk to her and tell her what you need, and find out what she needs, and what you won't do, and what she won't do.
EB: and if you can, that's great!
EB: but if you can't, well, i know you wouldn't want her to stay where she doesn't want to be, and she wouldn't want you to stay where you don't want to be too!
TT: Do you really think it's that simple?
EB: of course! it's really simple. it's not EASY, is what it isn't.
EB: i think we can live with the trolls, and i think you and Kanaya can make up and have a first happy kiss and then be disgustingly cute until you settle and we'll all hate you.
EB: it's disgusting rose, why you gotta be like that.
EB: all smiling and kissing and gross cooties stuff.
TT: Says the man with his biological-but-not-sociological sister curled up on him.
EB: exactly! i'm infected with cooties and it is just as gross as i'm making it sound, i assure you.
EB: one day maybe you and Kanaya will be curled up on a couch and you can be all disgusting too!
TT: I'm sure.
EB: but rose
EB: if it doesn't work out, that's okay too.
EB: because you two will be okay.
EB: and it'll suck, i figure, but you both gave it a good shot, and to be honest i think a month is pretty good for thirteen or six or whatever
EB: and maybe you'll still be friends or maybe not but both are okay too!
EB: because you both made each other really happy and just because it didn't work out doesn't erase that.
EB: how many people can look back and say "oh yeah, I was thirteen and we talked it out and decided we weren't the best for one another so we kissed goodbye and walked away like the end of casablanca or something except i guess she flew away at the end of casablanca"
TT: Oh dear.
TT: I'm crying. I was already crying because of kanaya and you made a stupid movie reference and now I'm crying more.
TT: This is humiliating, I want you to know.
EB: aww, rose, i didn't mean to make you cry!
TT: It wasn't even one of your usual movies! I'd feel special but I'm moreso "overcome with relief."
EB: well i save the famous movies for when i really need to get an important point across!
TT: Well, point well made all the same.
EB: but what does you and kanaya pitying one another have to do with gamzee?
TT: Pardon. That was just my lead, and I got a little carried away.
EB: that's all right!
TT: Me and Kanaya are sort of the other side of the coin.
TT: This may seem silly to you, John, but despite my supposed role as auspistice, I sometimes forget that Vriska and Eridan hate one another.
EB: i think i know what you mean
EB: you said they're like your patients the other day
TT: Yes.
TT: I can't help but picture their relationship like a Human couple that bickers so often that everyone that knows them has just given up, except me, and even I've given up on their reconciling.
TT: But they do. They hate each other, or they're at some rough equivalent to the way a Human couple "cares" for one another before "love".
TT: So maybe Gamzee could hate me, at the "care" level.
TT: Gamzee and I have been friends, and while he's one of the Trolls that goes easily towards friendship, that doesn't prevent him from gauging me for a relationship.
TT: So now I wonder.
TT: All this time I've been afraid of just facing him.
TT: What if he hates me for it?
TT: I'd feel terrible.
EB: rose…
TT: And what if he HATES me for it?
TT: I wouldn't know what to say.
EB: rose i'm pretty sure you're overreacting!
EB: i mean i don't think gamzee could hate anybody!
EB: hE's WaY tOo MoThErFuCkInG cHiLl!
EB: wow that's really annoying to type
TT: I think you're divorcing the impulse from its source, John.
TT: I wouldn't entirely throw out the possibility of someone being, shall we say, a-caliginous.
TT: A member of the grey-black team.
TT: But I know Gamzee better than you, and unless he tells me otherwise, I believe he's perfectly capable of proper hatred. Whatever that is.
TT: Especially when it comes to their violence. I don't know when they expect it, or when they think it HAS to happen.
TT: You saw how Terezi shouted at Dave, she all but hit him!
TT: And Kanaya…
TT: I don't want to get into it.
EB: but don't you just have to say "no"?
TT: To avoid the relationship, yes. The feelings…?
TT: Caliginous feelings aren't like flushed, but I bet they linger just as intensely. The
disparity, however, is the issue. Unrequited flushed feelings turn one into a terrible poet. Unrequited caliginous feelings have turned Trolls
TT: …our Trolls, I mean…
TT: into murderers.
EB: oh.
EB: someone told you too?
TT: You know?
EB: well yeah. karkat's said a few things. think he was trying to scare me. vriska too. i think she was trying to…
EB: i dunno, actually!
TT: Did they scare you?
EB: well yeah!
EB: but no.
EB: i mean, they're both my friends! i didn't think they'd do it again! not to any of us!
EB: do you really think gamzee would try to hurt you for rejecting him?
TT: …As a certain acquaintance told me just the other night, it's possible I don't know Gamzee Makara very well at all.
TT: I feel this is a situation that requires careful attention.
TT: Hm.
TT: On the other hand, I wonder, just a little and divorced from any fears, what it would be like to say "yes".
EB: to gamzee?
EB: seriously?
TT: Why not?
TT: I've filled half of the quadrants. Gamzee is not unattractive.
TT: There might be something to be said about a mask of juggalo face paint and a free evening.
EB: oh boy.
EB: count me out.
EB: but would you?
TT: …No. I don't hate him.
TT: Kanaya and I had a talk last night about,
TT: well,
TT: sexual urges.
EB: whoa, whoa, whoa, rose!
EB: too much information!
TT: Says the only still-conscious one in a body pile of the physically exhausted,
TT: His biological sister's head in his lap.
EB: OOOOOOH
EB: THAT'S why karkat's the meat
TT: And so intelligent too. I had to say it three times, but he got it.
EB: rose,
EB: and i say this as someone that considers you one of his best friends!
EB: you're gross
TT: Guilty.
EB: okay, okay, serious faces it is time for serious friendship!
TT: Gear shift to serious town!
EB: o_o
TT: Terrifying.
EB: only if you find PROFESSIONALISM terrifying!
EB: but seriously what did you and kanaya talk about in your when-to-fetch-a-bucket-tutorial
TT: Ah… Well, to begin…
TT: We did not discuss…
TT: That.
EB: hehehehe
TT: Although I suppose that might not hurt to be discussed.
EB: no, i agree. o___o
TT: Stop that.
TT: The discussion was about how those sorts of urges can make you do things you
might have not otherwise done.
TT: For Kanaya, that was an ill.
TT: For me… well, I am in a near enough neighbourhood to default to her standard.
EB: hm, okay!
EB: i think i know what you mean.
EB: but what does this have to do with gamzee?
TT: Not much. I just wanted to use it as an illustrative point.
TT: Where I might have those sort of urges for Kanaya, for a girlfriend or a boyfriend I
mean, I don't know if I would for a hated equivalent.
TT: With the Trolls it's so hard to tell what we can and can't do the same as them.
TT: Nurture and Nature both play their roles.
TT: So do they really hate so strongly, and do they hate sexually, because those are
cultural factors or… not?
EB: I dunno, rose!
EB: so you're worried that gamzee will hate, and you're worried that he'll hate you in a
way you just can't reciprocate?
TT: Yes, I suppose that summarizes it.
TT: I'm sorry for talking your ear off, John. Last night gave me a taste for planning
things through. But once I'm at his door it becomes a much greater matter of thinking on
my feet.
EB: I'm sure you can do it, rose!
EB: do you want me to come and unlock your door?
TT: You can wait out the hour, I think, but yes, I'd appreciate. No sense in waking those
using you as a pillow when Gamzee is going to be just as asleep as the rest of the lab.
EB: actually it almost is time to get up!

Rose looked at the clock and was surprised by what it said. She had gotten somewhat lost in the
conversation.

TT: All right then. I will get dressed and wait for you there.
EB: Okay!
EB: Oh, Rose?
TT: Hm?
EB: you never told me who won your fight with the horroterror!
TT: Oh.
TT: That.
TT: That was also complicated.
EB: you can't be serious.
TT: I am.
EB: rose, why do you have to be so cryptic?
TT: John, why do you have to be so straightforward?
EB: bluh, bluh, huge diffs.
TT: Yes, well.
TT: By the way…
TT: Thank you for this, John.
EB: no problem!
EB: I know everyone usually comes to you or Kanaya so if you need someone to talk
to, I can totally be Dr. Egbert, Ectopsychologist.
EB: "Councillor to the deceased and predeceased!
EB: Discounts on alien relationship counselling!"
EB: but yeah, see you soon, rose.
EB: it's time for the 100 yard don't wake karkat dash
EB: followed by the freestyle cleaning up the GRUBSUCKING MESS before karkat
starts complaining about the GRUBSUCKING MESS
TT: Good luck with that.

Rose wondered at first if there was any chance at all that Gamzee would be up, but she dressed. As
she went, excitement that surprised her rushed through her veins. Getting ready felt strangely like
taking off an entirely different weight. She pulled on clothes in a hurry. She put on the black dress
Kanaya had designed for her during the game, with the pink sash, and decided to forget her makeup,
since John would be there any minute and she didn't want to give herself an excuse to stall. She had
just fetched her shoes when the buzzer rang.

She hit the button. "Hi John. Thanks for hur—"

"roz, wwe have to talk"

Eridan looked haggard and was obviously just waking up as much as she would have been on a
regular day, but his eyes were sharp. Though sea dweller eyes were not quite like their land cousins,
Rose could see the same unburied emotion just past his glasses. She was not in the mood for this.

"What?" Rose demanded. "Eridan, this had better be important. I'm busy."

Eridan did not meet her eyes, in shame. "She's got Tav."

Rose stopped. "She's what?"

"By the…" Eridan clutched to the collar of his shirt. "Shoutin' at him. Keeps threatenin' him with her
claws and shit. Hit me… uh…" He pointed to his face, first to one eye, wavered, and then to the
next. He did not have a mark, but in the game that meant nothing at all, and his disorientation spoke
for itself.

"Wait, back up, Eridan…" Rose raised up her hands. "No, wait. Has she hurt him? Is Tavros all
right?"

"Is he…" Eridan spat. "Is he all right? Are you even listening to me, Roz? Fuck!" He paced from
there to the wall and back.

"Eridan!" Rose snapped. "I'm concerned, and until you give me something more, I can't be any more
than concerned. I need to know what's going on."

He paused, and then paced again. "No, she hasn't fucking hurt him. Rad's been watching her like a
hawk. Sure, spit on our relationship, fuckin attack my matesprit you gogdammed spiderbitch but
don't for one second think about fuckin around with your fake-ass moirallegience!"

"Aradia's watching the room…" This was happening too fast. "Where?"

"The main lab, Roz, c'mon!" Eridan's disorientation was fading fast, and he barred his teeth at her.
Rose shook her head. "Eridan, I don't even know what happened!"

"Nothing happened! Argh! I mean… I don't know what happened!" He clutched his hands in fists. "I just came into the lab this morning and there the three of them were, Vris shoutin' at Tav and Rad hovering over to one side and I go 'Vris, what the fuck!' and she decks me!" He swung his arm. "So I start shouting and Tav shakes his head at me, so I go to talk to Rad and she says to get you."

"Shit…" Rose said, clutching her temples. "Do you have any ideas why—"

"No! Fuck, Roz, I don't know shit, we gotta go!"

Rose clenched her teeth. "…Yeah, okay. Let's go."

He nodded hard and turned, giving her room to kick open her tunnel exit. But at the sound of the metal cracking open, Eridan stopped. "What the hell are you doin?"

Rose stopped. That sounded like trouble. "What's it look like?" she said cautiously.

He came back down the hall, once again focused, and Rose did not like the look it gave him. "My matesprit is being strung up by that psychotic and you're trying to take your ten-minute scenic route?"

Rose set her lips. No, she did not like this at all. She could only imagine what was going through his head but that hardly gave him the right. "Do you have an alternative?"

"Yeah! Come with me!" He pointed back to the transportalizer. "We've gotta get on top of her now!"

"Eridan, calm down!" Rose stood her ground as he raged. "I spent all night fighting with that interuniversal monster. Far worse than usual this time. I am tired and I am vulnerable, and I am not going to visit him just so we can shave a few minutes."

"Roz, she's got him by the throat!"

Rose crossed her arms if only to underline her point. "And Aradia will keep him safe."

"Not if she just goes for the throat or… fuck, Roz, you didn't see his eyes!" Eridan began to pace again, and Rose realized that if she failed to calm him down, he might very well ruin things with Vriska, not only if she got there in time but in the time it took her to travel. She had to step in, literally as he had paced away yet again, almost down to Dave's door.

"Eridan, calm down!" she shouted after him, and to her surprise, he stopped, though only to wheel on her.

"No Roz! No! Fuckin' no!"

And he punched the wall. It was such a typical thing for her to see in the media that it took Rose a moment to remember that punching a metal wall should have broken all the bones in his hands. But it did not. Game durability and sheer Troll strength dented the wall and he began to pace again.

"Eridan, calm down!" she shouted after him, and to her surprise, he stopped, though only to wheel on her.

"No Roz! No! Fuckin' no!" Eridan stepped up to Rose, towering over her and gesturing wildly. "She has crossed the damn line! You don't touch their matesprit!" he said, like a rule. "You just don't!" And he punched the wall. It was such a typical thing for her to see in the media that it took Rose a moment to remember that punching a metal wall should have broken all the bones in his hands. But it did not. Game durability and sheer Troll strength dented the wall and he began to pace again.

"And he wants me to go after Vriska?" Rose could not even think of it. Imaginary sets of Vriska's claws tore at the edge of her imagination. "Eridan!" she said instead. "Calm down! Vriska has pushed past the line, I admit. But I use the transportalizer I will come out wands blazing and we don't want her dead!"

Eridan whirled about again, his scarf following about in a tail, and Rose saw a look on his face like
she had only imagined before. It was not the look she had seen on his face when he had been angry at her for ignoring his requests for an auspistice. It was not the look Vriska had given her when she shot her down in Tavros' room. It was a look of pure, murderous rage, the likes of which the Trolls had at best only teased. His face was hot with purple blood and his fists, the fists that had bent a solid metal wall, were trembling; his eyes were wide and bloodshot purple.

"you don't fuckin care" he shouted. "you don't fuckin care about me, or tav, and you don't give a shit about what vris does so long as it leaves you and your damn human friends crawl along your short, pathetic lives"

Rose hesitated. "I care."

But Eridan shook his head. "you don't. you don't fuckin care. i'vve nevver seen you so much as blink when vris pushes in on tav. i'vve seen the way your friend watches rad and eqi like he's being stabbed in the fuckin gut"

And it returned. With his adrenaline wired and his body set to chase and kill, the vocal undercurrent his pubescent body had mastered returned and snared his victim's mind with intent. Rose heard Eridan, as he edged into the last reserve of personal space she had, do the same from behind.

It's not real, Rose tried to tell her mind. There's nothing there. There's just a wall. But as she thought it, and reached out to touch the thing, she realized how very true that was. Eridan edged closer.

"you don't understand wwhat this is like! you don't know how this feels, you don't even care to try! and i am going to make her pay for this and evverything else, just you fuckin watch" He was rambling now, his words stumbling out faster and faster as he reached the conclusion buried deep within. His arms were raised, an inch from hers. It seemed he moved to trap her, his body in fore and his whisper-shadow behind. Consciously or otherwise, Eridan was leaning forward, and Rose could not shake the fear that he would lunge in with those shark-teeth, she the other girl the world told him he should hate.

And in that moment, that terrible moment where Eridan towered over her, blind and well poised to do some irreparable harm, Rose understood Trolls in a way she had never before, and would never again. But for a brief moment, she saw their anger, their blood-lust and four pieces clicked into place. "You don't even have anything to say for yourself, do you?" Eridan growled. But as Rose's fear made it impossible to respond, a tear formed at Rose's eye that had nothing to do with fear. Trapped in the hall, Rose did what she now knew she should have done long before.

First things first. Her hand went out, with all the strength the game had given her, and she slammed it into Eridan's neck and pushed him hard against the opposite wall. In her strange intuition of the game, Rose felt his hit points drop, and knew that this was no injury he would forgive. Her body told her to flee but her understanding held firm, and so did she.

"I said," she whispered, unconsciously mimicking his own angry threats, and the undercurrent he could never known. He was already starting to recover; there was no time to waste. "This has gone too far. And that we are going to stop her. Vriska has flown off the line and we are going to put her back." And at the sound of that promise, Eridan began to loosen up.

Rose replied to his gesture of good faith with one of force. She wrenched her hand up and then shoved him down on the ground. Once again she felt his health drop as the floor cracked under the force. This time he responded, if only by raising his arms. Rose cut him off, jabbing a finger just short of his face while holding him down with the other hand. "And you." Rose felt the sweat dripping off her in her panic but she held firmer than she would have dared. "We are not killing her. She is getting out of here intact and if you ever try to hurt her like this, or if you ever lose control or
if you ever! Threaten me! Again!" She emphasized each break with a harsh squeeze on his shoulder. "I will set her on you like a rabid dog, by God I will! Didn't I say I would handle things?"

Eridan sputtered in surprise. "W-what?" His rage was faltering but Rose could not dismiss that he might reach up and bite off her finger. "Why should I even—"

Rose dropped down to his level, shoved him as he tried to move and put her face right in his, where he had been before. "Because I'm your auspistice, you idiot!" Rose had to catch her breath, but Eridan, at last, did not seem ready to interrupt. "...And I am setting this right."

Eridan's resistance fell and he looked up at her, agape, in a way Rose had never seen on his face before. This time it resonated with her, like a phantom kiss. She had it. She reached into her inventory and handed him her last, lingering Light Healing candy from the early game, which he took without question. "Go!" She shouted, stepping away and waving to the transportalizer. "I'll be through the halls but I'll be right behind you!"

Eridan nodded, and then he nodded again before taking to his feet, dumbfounded looks back at her before everything came back and he scowled at the empty hall. For her part, Rose headed to her tunnel and stalled at the entrance, trying to catch her breath and clear her spinning head. She checked back with her charge, who had also taken a moment's pause, in his case to unhook his cape. With no little flair for the dramatic, Eridan tossed the thing behind him, filling the hallway. By the time it had fallen, he had disappeared, and Rose ran.

TT: John.
EB: rose, where'd you go?
EB: oh shit.
TT: Eridan's not exactly in the best of moods either. I had to go a little overboard to get him down but I needed some emergency authority.
EB: where's aradia?
TT: She's with Vriska. It's all I've got as a failsafe.
EB: oh geeze.
EB: okay, forget cleaning
TT: No!
TT: You don't understand. Goodness, how could you.
EB: rose?
TT: I'm talking out of contexts you don't even have.
TT: My conversation just now, for starters. Last night, with Hindsight, after I had fallen asleep into a Horrorterror's dream.
TT: No, there's no time for those.
TT: But the last one I can explain.
TT: Last night wasn't the first fight I've had with Kanaya.
EB: okay…
TT: She had just told me something awful, and I wasn't really listening…
TT: But the more I think about it, the more I realize, she didn't do what she was supposed to do. I think, in her immaturity, she panicked.
TT: And I don't claim to be any more mature, but I'm doing my best to understand, and I really feel she slipped out of line.
TT: Before we fought, she had talked about other ashen relationships in her life at the time of this particular incident. Real ones, false ones, ones that fell apart.
TT: Several times, when they fell apart, the members killed one another.
TT: And how she equated auspistice with matespritship in terms of desirability.
TT: No.
TT: No, she's always teased it as less popular, that's the point, isn't it.
EB: rose, you're babbling.
TT: Right, sorry.
TT: John, do you what's strangest about the Troll relationships compared to our relationships?
EB: i'm guessing you're not going to say "the hate sex"
TT: No, not exactly.
EB: the diamond and clubs, then.
EB: because they're not
EB: really romances?
TT: John!
EB: you know what i mean!
TT: Sadly I do, because in a manner of speaking you're correct.
EB: i am?
TT: They're not romances TO US.
TT: But they are to the Trolls. Not equally desirable, but equally…
TT: Hm.
TT: "Valid."
TT: No.
TT: "Important."
TT: Not "important" to the Trolls, necessarily, that's not what I mean.
TT: Important to the system.
TT: The difference between our relationships and the Trolls' is seen in how the quadrants are addressed as "The Quadrants."
TT: Eros, storge, philia, agape are all coupled under the descriptor of "love", but the quadrants are a system, and a system has rules and prescribed functions to ideal ends.
TT: Think back. Why did this relationship of mine start?
EB: you mean you and vriska and eridan?
TT: Yes.
TT: What's the central component of our entire history? The nucleus of our relationship?
EB: the fact that eridan and vriska are complete jerks to one another?
TT: No.
TT: Come on, John. Think back to the day this all started.
TT: That day back in the computer lab.
EB: well vriska just kind of turned on eridan didnt she?
EB: i think my answer's still true.
TT: No.
TT: She had a reason.
TT: However "Vriska-esque" that reason may have been.
EB: well, eridan did sort of interrupt her, and called her by her flarp name.
TT: Interrupted her when, John.
EB: when…
EB: she was talking to tavros!
EB: the central element is tavros!
TT: Exactly.
EB: whoa.
EB: the central element has kind of always been travros, hasn't it?
EB: in the lab. during the movie. in the pool. pretty much every day on the scaffold…
TT: Yes.
TT: You're starting to understand.
TT: I've been having trouble placing auspistice from the beginning.
TT: Where did it fit in? Was I just missing some biological impulse?
TT: Were Trolls get some sort of boost by coralling or being corralled by another Troll?
TT: I couldn't see a reason in nurture, so I turned to nature. Tried to understand, to feign in a role I couldn't fill.
TT: I figured that even if I couldn't feel the emotions myself, I could at least help Eridan and Vriska feel them and contain them maybe. Somehow!
EB: and you were doing a pretty good job if you ask me!
TT: I wish I could agree with you.
TT: But what if I was just wrong?
TT: After all, I was wrong about matespritship. Like I said. It might not be "pity," but it's…
TT: …It's different.
TT: The nature is common with ours but the nurture is not.
TT: Take the Drones.
TT: This fear, this menace hovering over their relationships! Demanding it! Ever present! We have nothing like it.
TT: Worth bundled into sex appeal and compatibility like we can only touch on!
TT: And I think of Terezi on the roof wondering if all the world is telling her she's not worth living, because she thinks she's not worth loving.
TT: It's all she's ever been told about not being worth loving. It's a culture we don't share.
EB: whoa, did she really say that?
TT: In so many words and more.
EB: that's really just sad! i mean, karkat likes her.
EB: well, sorta.
TT: Yes. "Sorta." The part we don't understand.
EB: well, that's kismesis.
TT: Hm. Consider this. A thought experiment, to avoid mincing words if nothing else. Let's pretend Karkat and Imperial Propaganda is 100% accurate when they say that Trolls pity.
TT: When it comes to their matespritships do you think the Trolls WANT to "pity", John, in this thought experiment?
EB: well i always thought it was kind of degrading but yeah, i guess?
TT: I wonder.
TT: If you were with someone right now, John, would you say your unconscious goal was to love them or to be loved?
TT: How selfless are you that you can just say the former and pretend the latter is a nonfactor?
EB: you mean the trolls might not want to pity their matesprits so much as
EB: be PITIED by them?
TT: Imagine it.
TT: Take kismesis now. You can see it even more plainly there.
EB: says you!
TT: But you can!
TT: Remember Karkat, lying for Terezi so they could be together again, playing along with her courtroom game.
TT: Her cheating to set it up.
TT: They're not trying to one-up each other for the sake of it. When Terezi set up her fake little trial, the only person she was trying to one-up was ME.
TT: But with Karkat it was all a series of concerns to make sure he was on level with her, in public.
TT: But they don't want someone to just keel over and die at their feet.
TT: They want to be seen as strong and impressive. They don't want to hate so much as to BE HATED.
EB: yeah, okay.
EB: that makes sense with karkat's angry rants sorta.
EB: especially when i'm never mad at him?
EB: it's like, they want somewhere to go where they can be ferocious and someone will love them for it.
TT: Now use it as context!
EB: context?
TT: For matespritship! Don't think about them in isolation.
TT: The interconnection is the key. "The Quadrants" aren't just a label. They're a system.
TT: They have kismeses AND they have matesprits.
TT: The Trolls want somewhere to go where they can be ferocious and someone will love them for it.
TT: But they also want somewhere to go where they DON'T have to be ferocious.
TT: Where they can be flawed, and someone will LOVE them for it!
TT: They want somewhere to go where someone would WANT THEM for the side of them that isn't angry.
EB: okay, yeah, that's one way to look at it!
EB: but it's two, isn't it? moirails too!
EB: two safe places, rose!
TT: Exactly, you're getting it!
TT: I've been sitting here taking them apart, trying to scrutinize them for "romantic points" when I forgot that we were here, in this asteroid, away from it all.
TT: But if I pluck them from their source they lose their impact.
TT: We could have moirails, back on home. Don't you think?
TT: Someone to calm you and hear you and hold your hand.
TT: But why is that a romance? Dave pointed out that Trolls still call their best friends "best friends," even if they're not proud to admit they exist.
TT: But calming and hand holding on Earth isn't the same as having that on a world where you're supposed to burst into these flying rages! Where your strength as a person is based on your ability to tear through everyone that thinks they're better than you!
TT: It's not the same in isolation. It only works as a romance in context. In the system.
EB: even better with the drones!
EB: whoa, that's weird to say.
TT: No, you're right, keep going!
EB: well, i mean, their value as a person is based on whether or not they can get someone to hate them, right?
EB: and find someone to pity you.
TT: Or whatever that really is.
EB: and in the middle of all that there's moirails to say not to do that this time!
EB: and matesprits to say its okay if you mess up with your kismesis :( 
EB: they feed each other. that's the system, isn't it?
TT: You've got it. The interconnections, the joining lines between the quadrants and the context of their world. Without the context to exasperate things, I hadn't realized just how the quadrants interplayed.
TT: Moirallegience just seemed sort of nice on its own. Someone to carry you through. I've got that in the three of you.
TT: But in the Quadrants, where you have to run hot in one and cold in another, a quadrant where you can be yourself…
TT: The contrast is almost staggering.
TT: To let that kind of weight off your shoulders… I can see the appeal. Doubly.
TT: "Never be sad again."
TT: It's almost a plea to neutrality in an insane world.
EB: but what about auspistice?
TT: What indeed…
TT: Tell me, John.
TT: If Eridan had a moirail. If I were his moirail, not his auspistice, do you think he would listen if I told him not to fight Vriska?
EB: i really dunno rose, you know him way better than i do.
TT: I think he would.
EB: well that's good!
EB: …right?
TT: Well, he would.
TT: And he would.
TT: And he would, and he would, and he would.
TT: Every time.
TT: Until one day he comes into the lab with his rifle. I wonder who would try to stop him?
TT: Tavros?
TT: Feferi?
EB: whoa you don't really think that would happen, do you?
TT: You didn't see him. His eyes, his body language. His words were a full step behind, but those as well.
TT: Because his matesprit was in danger? I don't doubt. Tavros cares for him, lifts him up, gives him a place to be the dribbling romantic he always was.
TT: But perhaps also because he was in "danger", from the societal press once manned by the Drones. That, I think, is our final straw into murderous behaviour. Tavros validates Eridan. To the others as well as to himself. If Eridan can't protect his matesprit, what use is he?
EB: but now you're in the picture too, huh?
EB: "why didn't roz protect him"
TT: Ugh.
TT: I'm starting to wonder if it was a mistake to ever view the quadrants separately.
TT: Or even the reverse.
TT: Does dating work in a world without friendship? Let's not mistake it. Dating's an evolution of formal courtship that came into its own in a world post-Woman's Sufferage, post flappers, a world where heterosexual couples making up the bog standard would have to gain some sort of friendship, a working relationship, before moving on to more.
EB: whatever you say, babblemouth
TT: With the standards tightening with every generation, not just because of social--
TT: Shut up, John.
TT: ...social standards but the simple growing expectation of friendship's presence in the system, leading to our expectations here today.
TT: Poor Kanaya.
EB: poor you!
EB: babblemouth :P
EB: kanaya's got one, you've got four!
TT: Well, the quadrants are more optional, but…
TT: Dammit. I'm running out of tunnel.
TT: John, do you think I deserve to be Eridan and Vriska's auspistice?
EB: deserve?
EB: what, because you screwed up?
TT: I'm considering this a level beyond "screwed up" at this point.
EB: do you still deserve to be with kanaya?
TT: If she'll have me.
TT: …
TT: Do you know what the worst part is about taking something out of the system to examine it?
EB: it doesn't make any sense any more?
TT: The system breaks without it.
TT: Tactical analysis:
TT: Eridan is with Tavros.
TT: Red.
TT: Vriska wants Tavros.
TT: Red.
EB: whoa, what?
TT: Vriska hates Eridan.
TT: Black.
TT: Eridan hates Vriska.
TT: Black.
TT: Aradia placates Vriska. Because she thinks it's funny, if nothing else.
TT: Pale.
TT: If I asked, she could hold her back.
TT: …And back.
TT: And back.
TT: My point is that by ignoring auspistice, we don't understand how any of the other quadrants work to begin with. TT: John.
TT: I'm about to do something monumentally stupid.
EB: how stupid?
TT: Limb funeral stupid.
EB: oh no!
EB: rose, don't do it! you and your limbs have so much to live for!
TT: Mmhm.
TT: John, I'm at the lab.

Rose stopped, having burst out of the last crawlspace and to the door of the lab. This was it.

EB: rose?
TT: Yes John?
EB: good luck.
EB: O
TT: Is that supposed to be what I think it is?
TT: One of Nepeta's blue circles?
EB: you've got it!
TT: Well then in that case:
TT: O!

-- tentacleTherapist ceased pestering ectoBiologist! --

Rose returned her headbandtop to her inventory and stared up the door, and tested the handle. It stuck, as it did from time to time. Rose braced her weight against the whole door, ready to push through. So much for subtlety, but at the same time, subtlety be damned. Well Rose, she thought. Here goes nothing.

Deep breaths.
And she jammed down the handle.

> [S] Rose: Claim your quarter

Once, the folks in the Fanfiction Thread were having a discussion about what they all did for a living in the real world. It was a fairly interesting discussion. One of our regulars was a biologist! A biologist, how awesome is that? I didn't say anything. After all, I was playing my cards close to the chest, and after all again, I was a programmer, and I was working on a walkthrough for my fanfic. Sadly, with the rest of my life playing out the way it did, I never got that far. But I came very, very close.

The plan came from a friend of mine. Having been irritated at me for not working on any game ideas because I couldn't draw, she insisted I learn, and suggested I draw Homestuck characters, since I wouldn't shut up about it and because the fanart thread was a good source of supportive criticism at the time. I continued to ignore her, until, knowing me too well, she hit on just the right spot. Create a shared engine, she suggested, that I could use to create interactive storytelling opportunities. A code base that would include features I could use with most of my ideas. Use some major scenes in *Hands* for the prototypes. I would get a creative outlet I could monetize after the prototyping was complete, and she would get her little victory in getting me to actually draw something. It was quite clever, and I took to it well. Soon, *Hands* became as much a thing I was simply trying to write as it was an excuse to pick up a valuable skill, and I was actually enjoying myself when I worked on them.

Some might consider my plan to have been overzealous, but I disagree: programming was both my work and my primary hobby, not writing. In the past, I've turned out involved flash products for companies in no more than two weeks. Besides, programming was what I was going to be doing anyway. I'd estimate most of the engine only took two months of work to produce, and by squeezing it in between art sessions, you'd barely notice it was there. Learning to draw (well, to sprite) was the real time consumer, but it was what I was *should* have been doing with my spare time, for the sake of my professional development, no matter how long it took. Writing a 150 000+ word fanfiction: *that* was the waste of time.

But I did get overzealous about the art in general. There's a reader out there – though I don't think you're reading this anymore, and I understand – who offered to help me out by providing some art for the fic. I'm sorry for brushing off your generous offer. I was selfishly hording the art responsibilities for the fic to myself, no matter how horrendous the end results were bound to be, and didn't want to spoil you, as a reader, as to why I couldn't accept. Things would have been much better off with your help, even without touching on the prototype. Keeping you out of the loop just for the sake of spoilers, that was a double dick move.

I was almost done the flash by the time I posted the last chapter of the Original Draft. Indeed, I set myself a schedule, and expected it to be done with a month of hard work. But in that month, I realized the mistakes I had been making with auspistice, and felt I had to restart the draft. Things fell apart in the programmer parts of my life in the year that followed. I'll spare you the details. As far as the walkthrough was concerned, I split what free time I had between programming and the art, hoping to get the prototype out so that it could be tested and I could move on to drawing something that was actually *mine*. I even refurbished the art, in hopes of speeding the process of newer sprites once I was done with the fangame steps. But that just slowed things down even more. I gradually came to call the art stages "Asshole Steps", because I really wasn't any good at them, and they took considerable amounts of time away from programming. Suffice to say, it wasn't a very happy process, and I have nothing to show for it. I am so, so proud of myself.
Well, that's not true. I have the GDDs and the Scripts. So I'll take some relevant bits from the GDDs, intersperse them and some commentary with the script, and that's what I'll share with you now.

First, a quick glossary:

- "Floating:" Most dialogue boxes appear at either the top or bottom of the screen, with one fading out when no longer in use. These boxes include a decorative border that indicates the speaker via their associated colour. Occasionally, "floating" boxes will be used instead, appearing near the speaker, if they have only a few words to say, aren't interrupting the main speakers, or for illustrative effect. These boxes clear with time, or in sync with the main.
- "Exclaims" / "Questions": An exclamation mark or question mark bounces into existence above the sprite's head to indicate surprise or confusion without interrupting the flow of dialogue. The terms are used as verbs.

-- Title Screen and Related --

The game opens with a title screen with multiple items in it, like credits and a mini-recap. I won't be including either here in the commentary, there's no sense, and since I'm only showing you the GDD and script, the only credits are for me, aren't they? Under the "Play" button, a list of "Bookmarks" would appear that would let the player jump to any given scene in the flash. These bookmarks would be labelled with commands (ex: "> Seer: Descend"), and I'll be using these same bookmarks to divide the script, below.

-- Initial Exploration --
Rose enters the main hub, and finds three people waiting near the door: Eridan, arms crossed in the bottom-right; Aradia, watching off screen right; and Kanaya, who is upper right and panicking. The player can talk to the women twice each, while Eridan serves mostly as a segue to the chat with Vriska.

**Music:** To inspire a connection to the other walkarounds, a retro track similar to Endless Climb in tone and tempo be ideal (if I had the actual Endless Climb, however, it would have been slower in tempo, as I wouldn't need a matching tempo to underline my intent and could instead set proper mood).

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**<E1: Kanaya, Conversation 1>**

**KANAYA:** Rose! Thank goodness. I was just about to go in there myself.

**ROSE:** [crosses arms] Well there's no need for that.

**KANAYA:** I disagree. Vriska has gone beyond all bounds.

**ROSE:** [shrugs to normal] What's she done?

**KANAYA:** I don't know, but she has Tavros practically by the throat. I didn't realize things were this bad between them! If she didn't have a moirail and an auspistice I would have already been in there. If someone would just get their hands on her...

**ROSE:** [crosses arms] Mm-hm.
KANAYA: What is it?

ROSE: ...Kan, be honest with me, is there anyone you’d like for a kismesis besides Vriska? Because at this point I think that hooking you up with someone else would be the auspisticial thing to do.

KANAYA: The word is not "auspiticial," Rose, and... [blush] no, I realize that this is just the moulting.

ROSE: Are you sure?

KANAYA: Yes. I Am Perfectly Capable Of Distinguishing Between My Actual Desires And Those Caused By My Temporarily Unbalanced Hormones ...but thank you.

ROSE: [shrugs to normal idle] No problem.

KANAYA: Are you going in there?

ROSE: Yes, I think I have to at this point.

KANAYA: Be safe, Rose. If she hurts you’ll I'll rip her out of Eridan’s arms myself.

ROSE: Now don’t you start getting mushy on me.

KANAYA: :)
ARADIA: Yes, of course.

ROSE: Is she as bad as I’ve heard?

ARADIA: Undoubtedly, though I’m afraid I missed most of the early specifics.

ROSE: Damn. I assume you have a good reason, but can I ask why you haven’t stepped in?

ARADIA: [eyes blink rapidly when using her tone] I’ve reasoned that while her behaviour is intense for us, for Vriska this is technically not far from standard. If I had to police her whenever she stepped out of line I’d never stop playing moirail.

ROSE: Hmph. How "Vriska": the word of the law instead of the spirit. I should have seen it coming, but I haven't been the best auspistice lately.

ARADIA: You made a valiant effort to control her with a high-levelled moirail. But it was never going to be foolproof, especially with Vriska. Surely you knew that?

ROSE: Yes, but I’m starting to get the impression she might be treating me as the weak link. Mechanically true, and maybe more... but I don't have to appreciate it.

ARADIA: This is still your field, I think. She hasn’t hit a soul but Eridan, and not hard enough to warrant my intervention.

ROSE: Intentionally, I bet. That’s what I was afraid of. Why are you waiting around, then?

ARADIA: Well, you weren’t here. Besides... It’s Vriska.

ROSE: [sigh] *sigh*

.<E4: Aradia, Conversation 2>

ARADIA: Rose, I have to go back out on patrol soon.

ROSE: I understand.

ARADIA: So you understand that if you decide to interfere, I’ll be out of the building and will not be able to help you.

ROSE: Unfortunately. No offense, Aradia, but I think Vriska was trying to hoodwink us all when she went for you as moirail.

ARADIA: Of course she was. What I wonder is why?

ROSE: Probably to get me off her back.

ARADIA: Only to give you even more authority and trust as her auspistice?

ROSE: That does seem faulty.

ARADIA: But not out of character. The Vriska you know is a schemer, but the Vriska I knew as a child was rash and impulsive. [blinks rapidly] Now, think about the vriska you know and I think
You'll find she's still the same under the surface.

**ROSE:** You think she's making complex plans for impulsive reasons?

**ARADIA:** Call it a moirail's instinct.

[Rose shakes her head]

**ROSE:** On a scale of 1 to 10, how bad are things?

**ARADIA:** ...

**ROSE:** [pause. Facepalm] "Eight."

**ARADIA:** Quite. [box] Good luck, Rose.

---

**<E5: Eridan, Conversation 1>**

**ERIDAN:** Well, are we going in there or what? Everyone else is fucking staring from the other side of the room.

**ROSE:** Why, worried about putting on a bad show?

**ERIDAN:** Uh, yes? If Vris drops me on my ass just for talking to her, who’s ever gonna take me seriously again?

**ROSE:** Thanks for your concern, by the way.

**ERIDAN:** Don’t worry, Roz, I’ve got your back.

**ROSE:** You had better, she outranks me by almost twenty-five levels.

**ERIDAN:** I've got your fuckin back!! shit

**ROSE:** Fine, I’m sorry.

**ERIDAN:** You ready to go?

[Y/N prompt to next scene]

---

**<E5: Eridan, Conversation 2>**

**ERIDAN:** You ready to go?

[Y/N prompt to next scene]
ROSE: VRISKA!

[Fade in. Vriska has Tavros by the collar, though can't lift him any higher. She is facing away from Rose and Eridan, who have just arrived on the left, Rose standing just ahead of Eridan. Terezi completes the picture, leaning against the desk in the background between the two groups.]

ROSE: [finishing arm swipe]

[beat]

TAVROS: H-hi guys.

ERIDAN: Vris don't you ignore us! And put Tav the hell down!

ROSE: Vriska, c'mon, talk to me, what's the deal?

VRISKA: [talking over her shoulder, here and otherwise] "What's the deal?" ...Well, what the hell does it look like?

ROSE: Well, after talking to a few people, I'm going to take a shot in the dark here and say that you've gone completely off the metaphorical rock into crazy-town. Professionally speaking.

VRISKA: 8h8h8h8h8h8h8h8h8h! Rose, you're so b8d at this. That's why I brought you in, 8fter all.

ROSE: ...

[New options set to dialogue reel: C1.]

ROSE: Vriska, pardon my language but: what the hell?

VRISKA: Tavros and I are having a nice chat!

TAVROS: [floating box] It's not really a very ni--
ERIDAN: Oh, like we really believe anything you--


ERIDAN: [shakes fist] Arrrrggghhh...

VRISKA: Sounds like somebody still needs to mind their own damn business, doesn't it Tavros?

TAVROS: [floating]...

ROSE: Vriska!

ERIDAN: She ain't listening, Roz!

ROSE: I know, I know! Give me a second!

[New options set to reel: C2, C3, C4.]

---

<C2 – Rose: Negotiate the freedom of the Bull-Boy>

ROSE: Vriska, let Tavros go.

VRISKA: Aw, don't be like that, Tavros doesn't have to go if he doesn't want to!

ROSE: Tavros?

TAVROS: Rose, I appreciate you giving me the option, but I don't, uh, really know how much of a say I have in this.

ERIDAN: Vriska, I swear, if you touch one hair on his head--

ROSE: Eridan, quiet for now! Vriska: look at me!

VRISKA: Do you hear something, Tavros?

TAVROS: I hear, uh, a warning tone, in, uh, your voice, so I think I'm going to say... "No."

VRISKA: Thaaaaaaaat a boy.

---

<C3 – Rose: Shout profanities and dance like a monkey>

GAME: This might not be the best time for running gags. We'll call that plan Z.

[Item removed from reel.]

---

<C4 – Rose: Interrogate trial friend.>

ROSE: Terezi?
TEREZI: Hey Rose!

ROSE: Box seats?

TEREZI: You bet! Nepeta called me up for some good old fashioned roleplay, so I was heading over to pick up her teacups when BAM! [stamps her cane] Injustice.

VRISKA: [frowns] ... 

ROSE: You didn't think to... I don't know, intervene?

TEREZI: Nah. This is your show, I wanna see the magic happen!

[Vriska scowls. C5 is added to reel in place of C4.]

<C5 – Rose: Outline the specifics of this gross illegality.>

ROSE: So you were there when this started, Terezi?

TEREZI: At the very scene of the crime, in fact!

ROSE: Well, between the justifiably raving auspisticee and the hostage-taking one, I'm having a little trouble working out what's going on. Could you fill me in, prosecutrix?

TEREZI: I would be delighted, counsellor! Of all the misdeeds I've smelled, this is by far the most nefarious! And stinky. Vriska.

[If Vriska was not already scowling, she will scowl now.]

VRISKA: Really, you're going with "sti--

TEREZI: [stamps cane, interrupting her box from typing] Yes!

ROSE: Back on topic please. What did she do that's so illegal?

VRISKA: ARGH! Nothing!

[She wheels, Tavros falls to the ground. Alternately, she simply shoves him off-screen.]

VRISKA: I'm not doing anything wrong! What do you care?

TEREZI: Taking a hostage?
VRISKA: Tavros is here because he wants to be, aren't you Tavros?

[She does not actually look back at him, so Tavros, if still present, scoots off-screen.]

TEREZI: Your show now, counsellor!

[The reel is cleared. New options set to reel: C6, C6b, C6c.]

<C6 – Rose: Get the skivvy.>

This item is accompanied by two different options with identical results: "Rose: Get the down-low" and "Rose: Get the scuttlebutt"

ROSE: Vriska, you're living in the last flickering shadow of my doubt. Last chance to talk.

VRISKA: Ooh, terrifying. Is this the best you can do, Eridan? Really?

ERIDAN: At least I'm playing by the goddamn rules.

VRISKA: Rules? Pull the other one, Ampora, I'm a pirate. I've never played by the rules, and I'm not about to start!

ERIDAN: Even pirates have honour, Vris, this is over the--

ROSE: Not now! I'm done with both of you talking around me. Eridan: shut up. Vriska: I said talk, what is going on?

VRISKA: Whoa, Lalonde, what, did he drag you out of the sopor or what? Well too bad for you, because nothing's happened.

ROSE: Right, which is why everyone's watching you like a train wreck.

[Vriska turns her head, checking the rest of the room.]

VRISKA: Who cares what they think! All I did was ask a little question!

ROSE: What, Vriska? What "little question"?

VRISKA: [crosses her arms, clearly waiting on a reaction] I just asked Tavros outside, is all.

ROSE: [exclaims, but then calms. Hand on chin?] Hmm...

ERIDAN: Wh-- Roz!

ROSE: I said quiet, Eridan.

ERIDAN: But she just said she asked Tavros to... to... be flushed with her!

ROSE: So what, Vriska? What did he say?

ERIDAN: [furious] He said no, is wha—
ROSE: Or did he not answer at all?

[Eridan exclaims. Vriska serious.]

VRISKA: Actually, no.

ROSE: Vriska, please just talk to me.

[Vriska's scowl lingers for a moment, but then she grins.]

VRISKA: No. Because it's over. It doesn't matter what he said. My plan blew up in my face. Are you happy? Well I say "So what?" Who cares what Tavros wants? I'm free of all the bullshit I had to put up with to get here!

ROSE: Yes, this is more or less what I was expecting.

ERIDAN: [floater] ... 

[The reel is cleared. New options set to reel: C7, C8.]

<C7 - Rose: Explore the "Bullshit" angle>

ROSE: What's so bullshit, then? You're obviously in the mood to gloat.

VRISKA: Like you can't imagine. I'm finally through the game, Lalonde, and good riddance!

[Terezi and Eridan exclaim.]

ROSE: Through... what game, Vriska?

VRISKA: Oh yeah. Don't you get it? It's pr8ty clever if I do say so myself. I got all upset at Eridan and Tavros smooching in front of the movie and who should come along with a great plan than John?

ROSE: John gave you a scheme?

VRISKA: Well, he's not much of a schemer no matter what he tells you about his pranks, but he's a good idea guy! He told me that whenever he felt upset he'd always talk to you, because you'd make it better!

ROSE: ...John said that?
VRISKA: Then it all fell into place! You *could* make everything better! All I needed to do was break Toreadork up with his new stupid boytoy and he would be all mine again!

ROSE: [exclaims] ...And then you came to me to ask for an auspistice in the middle of the hall... not because you had fought with Eridan... but because Tavros had decided not to hang out with you at the pool any more. You weren't interested in Eridan to begin with. [Vriska shrugs.]

ERIDAN: What... [new box, which shakes] What?

VRISKA: I'm surprised no one caught on! I must be better than I thought!

ROSE: ...

ERIDAN: Roz, don't you--

ROSE: Eridan, mommy is thinking.

[If C7 and 8 are both completed, progress immediately to C9.]

"<C8 – Rose: Explore the break with Tavros>"

ROSE: Since when don't you care what Tavros thinks?

VRISKA: Since he clammed up like the little coward he's always been! Why did I even bother? Argh, what was I even attracted to?

ROSE: No, that's not right. Why would you stand around shouting for an answer you don't care about?

VRISKA: Dominance?

ROSE: I don't buy it. ...What did he do to make you so upset?

ERIDAN: [exclaims, grins] You missed it, Roz! He didn't stay quiet. He told her off!

ROSE: He what?

ERIDAN: [grinning] He must have! Real confident, too. Fuck yeah, Tav! [shakes fists] He told her to piss off, go away, and she just turned on him!

VRISKA: ...

[If C7 and 8 are both completed, progress immediately to C9.]

"<C9 – Transition>"

ROSE: So it was all a game for you?

VRISKA: Exactly. You and Eridan were really fun, too! Noooooooow leave.
ROSE: But why the dramatic finish? [Vriska questions] You say you never honestly wanted an auspistice, but you had me utterly fooled. Why not sabotage the relationship and then come to me for a calm breakup?

ERIDAN: Roz, don't give her ideas!

VRISKA: Too late for that, don't you think? Look, it's not like this was the plan, Lalonde. You're just walking in on some shitty worst improv. I admit it, but sometimes a girl has to think on her feet!

ROSE: Goodness knows.

VRISKA: So let's cut this short: leave, Rose! I'm not here to answer all your damn questions, my business is with Tavros, and a certain fish-faced little grub over there! I won't tell you again. If I've got to leave here without Tavros, I'm not going to leave until I put a certain someone in traction.

ERIDAN: Bring it on, Mindfang, I'll tear you limb from limb for thi--

ROSE: ERIDAN! [box shakes]

ERIDAN: Oh what does it matter, Roz? She was just using us!

ROSE: Quiet.

ERIDAN: [Exclaims. Pause. Crosses arms.]

ROSE: Let's start over. [arm shakes] Vriska: if I've done you wrong, I'm sorry, but you should have come to me, not run off and... Argh! What makes you think this is a reasonable solution to anything? ...You just can't scheme in a straight line, can you? It's all mobius double reacharounds with you?

VRISKA: Infinity's just a sideways 8, Rose!

ROSE: [arm shakes] Of course. How silly of me.

[The reel is cleared. New options set to reel: C10, C11, C12.]

<C10 – Eridan: Appeal with the words of the Angels.>

ERIDAN: Vris, you scumsucking piece of musclebeast shit scraped off my fucking boot, I will tear you in half and eat whatever comes out raw, I swear to—

VRISKA: [laughs] Oh sweet Troll Blackbeard. Rose, seriously, give us some privacy, I have to sort that out.

ROSE: Eridan, tomorrow we start speech lessons.

ERIDAN: Busy here, Roz!

[Dead end. Return to reel]

<C11 – Rose: Friendship speech FTW.>
ROSE: Vriska... this may surprise you, but there are actually people on this lab that care about you.

VRISKA: [crosses arms] Name three. No hate.

ROSE: Tavros does. At least he did before you attacked him. John does. He really thinks you're reformed, this is going to break his heart. ...And I do.

VRISKA: [finger wag] Bzzzzzzzt! Sorry Rose, I said "no hate"!

ROSE: I don't...

VRISKA: [finger wag] Tsk, tsk, tsk. Where are you coming from, Lalonde? You'll just make a girl all confused and flustered!

[Dead end. Return to reel]

<C12 - Rose: Confront with past failures.>

ROSE: You think you're so clever, don't you, Vriska? But I hope you realize that I'm not actually surprised that you tricked me into being your auspistice. I mean: yes, you got me, but it's not surprising. You never appreciated anything you had unless you had your claws in it from the start. Kanaya pitied you and you ignored every word out of her mouth.

VRISKA: [eyeroll/hairtoss] Pft. She only ever pitied me red. You don't think I worked that out? Your girlfriend's a liar, Rose. Misleading me, not watching my back, trying to... How do you think I felt? You don't know moirails. You don't understand. You can't understand!

ROSE: I think, if it were anyone else, I'd believe them.

VRISKA: ...

ROSE: And how much better are you? You keep watching John like a--

VRISKA: [swipes up hand, snarls] HEY! John knows how I feel. Not everyone here wants to be Karkat. [replaced hand in pocket] Excuse me for being honest with your damn "friend."

ROSE: Honest, nothing. Look at you. You were holding Tavros still in terror just to talk to him! That's "honest"?

VRISKA: [frowning, grip shaking] Sh... shut up!

ROSE: If you cared about him you'd have waited or talked but you don't—
VRISKA: [pointing at Rose] I C8RE! I'm just trying to hold on to something. You think I wanted to get into a fight with him? John and Karkat have us building that giant platform and it's so stupid! Don't you see how this is going to end? Why can't I have the one thing that makes sense in my life?

ROSE: This isn't about what I want, Vriska.

VRISKA: No. You just want to sit in the back pulling the strings is what you want.

ROSE: [scowls] It is about Tavros.

VRISKA: Pft. I don't need Tavros' pity. I just thought I could have someone, but I think it's perfectly clear that there's no one on this rock that pities me. Fine. Just Vriska, stuck in the black! I c8n live in the 8lack, R8se Lal8nde! I'll live in h8s! Just f8r the hell of it!

ROSE: [exclamation]

ERIDAN: [exclamation] Did she just...

VRISKA: [smug] Oh, I think you heard me.

[The reel is cleared. New options set to reel: C13, C14.]

<C13 - Rose: Demand clarification.>

ROSE: Vriska, there's a difference between taunting me and actually threatening a kismesis with Tavros. Please, take this seriously.

VRISKA: I am! I'm saying we're done, Human. [points] You and Fishstank both. [hand out, talking] Didn't you just say that I should come and have a little tea party with you if I wanted out, [shrugs, hands out] well... [replaces hand as Eridan speaks]

ERIDAN: Bullshit! roz, she's just fuckin with me cmon

VRISKA: [chuckles] Oh yeah, it's all about you as usual, Eridan. I didn't even want to be real-auspisticed with you so there's no way I could be black for Tavros!

ERIDAN: Oh for fuck's sake, Vris. Don't try to act like you don't give a shit about me because we both know you--

VRISKA: [serious] Do I?

ERIDAN: [flinch] ...

VRISKA: Think about it. The plan was just to get Tavros to break up with you. I've screwed up, but do you really think I screwed up so bad that I actually fell for you on the way? For what, your charm?

[Vriska turns away, and brushes her hair behind her ear.]

ROSE: Eridan, don't listen to her. Now she's definitely trying to get to you. Think clearly: does it even matter?
VRISKA: Oh yeah, Rose, *turns back, still serious* pat his back and burp him next. That's what you humans do for little grubs, right?

ROSE:...

[beat]

VRISKA: *burst out laughing* Oh my god, you two are hilaaaaaaaarious when you're rejected! *stands up, chuckles again*

ERIDAN: Vris...

VRISKA: But you know what? If Tavros hates me...? *she crosses her arms* I'll take that, and there's nothing you two can do about it. Rose knows her lines, doesn't she, Rose?. I know what I want. Can't help it if he doesn't know what's good for him. He had his chance to be flushed. If he wants to go black, I'll take him straight down.

*[If conversation C14 is also completed, add C15 to the reel.]*

<C14 - Rose: Be the voice of reason.>

ROSE: Vriska, you know Tavros is moulting. I think you're grasping at straws about this outburst of his and you know it.

VRISKA: Yeah, why would I do that? I'm just listening to the guy I've been seeing and he says he hates me. That's how it works.

ROSE: If Tavros hated you he would have told you a long time ago, Vriska.

VRISKA: Tavros? Have you met him? *Terezi laughs* I don't think he's even admitted to hating Jack.

ROSE: Dammit, Vriska, why don't you stop interrupting everyone and actually talk to him?

VRISKA: Who's interrupting? Who just stormed in here shouting her head off about how my life's been a massive failure? I'm trying to pull my life together here, Rose. I don't need you.

*[If conversation C13 is also completed, add C15 to the reel.]*

<C15 – Rose: Draw interesting conclusions>

ROSE: ...

ERIDAN: Roz?

ROSE: ...Funny how this has all turned around on you, Vriska.

VRISKA: Eh?

ROSE: I mean, you started out trying to aggravate Eridan to get to Tavros... *Rose copies Vriska's
8ut Eridan, Vriska and Terezi all flinch/exclaim 8ut now your plan's gone and 8lown up in your f8ce, hasn't it?

**VRISKA:** Was that supposed to be me? That was awful. What's your point, Lalonde?

**ROSE:** You think I'm not listening to you, but I am, Vriska. ...You're not trying to be Tavros' kismesis any more than you were trying to be Eridan's fellow auspisticee. You're "improvising." You're acting out just so you feel this is going your way! It's not working, is it, Vriska?

**VRISKA:** Are you going to stop talking gibberish or are you going to spell out whatever the fuck this is, Rose?

**ROSE:** You want it spelled out? All right. This overacted display of threats and snips! You're not trying to get Tavros' attention, are you, Vriska?

*Decision point: C16 and C17*

We'll shuffle things around just to show you C17, which is a dead end.

.<c17 - Rose: Let's not be hasty...>

*initial state: Vris arms crossed*

**ROSE:** Vriska, this doesn't have to go off the metaphorical handle, don't you see that?

**VRISKA:** Of course it doesn't. [raises hand, points] You and Eridork just need to [turns her hand up to her standard arm-extended pose] turn around and walk away.

**ROSE:** We're not—

**VRISKA:** Talk is che8p! [she settles both hands back in her pockets] Cheap as you, Rose. Easy to get into line and useless when you get there. As pred8cted!

**ROSE:** I am no--

**VRISKA:** [laughter] Pffft...

**ROSE:** [grits her teeth]

*The reel returns to C13, C14, C15.*

.<c16 - Rose: Claim your quarter>

**ROSE:** ...Eridan.

**ERIDAN:** Yeah?

**ROSE:** This is going to be abrupt, but I need to know something right now.
ERIDAN: ...Okay.

ROSE: Do you hate her?

ERIDAN: Roz, you know I do, what kind of question is—

ROSE: I mean seriously Eridan.

ERIDAN: [flinch] Roz, what are you—

ROSE: I know... it'd probably be perigrees before you could really be in a serious hate relationship. But the only way I can auspistice this is with you at my back. So I need to know. Tavros has gone home, it's just you, Vriska and honest emotions: Do you hate this girl?

ERIDAN: ...Roz...

ROSE: ...

ERIDAN: ...Yes.

ROSE: ...All right. [she assumes the first frame of her Draw anim] Time to prove it.

[Rose draws out her needlewands from her sylladex.]

ERIDAN: [flinch]

TEREZI: [questions, facing screen]


ROSE: ...

VRISKA: [chuckle, stops abruptly] ...Oh my god, she's actually serious.

ROSE: You storm in here, you attack the person I'm supposed to keep you from attacking, you attack and threaten your friend, in front of me, and you threaten to do it again, and you're asking if I'm serious?

ERIDAN: Roz...

VRISKA: Unbelievable. It's like she walked right out of an Ashen movie. And how're you gonna do it, Rose?

ROSE: I don't know. But you asked me to keep you in line. If you're going to hurt Eridan or Tavros... I'll find a way.

VRISKA: I'm Level 99! You're what, 75?

ROSE: Six.

VRISKA: Oh, well then! That changes everything! Now I'm going to have to hit you twi--

ERIDAN: [arms as well, Vriska exclaims] How's the high hundreds sound instead, Vris?
[laughs] Aw, I get it now! You have a puppy!

Fuck you, Vris, and that's all I've got to say.

I'll admit, I don't have very good odds against 175. That's easy gaming math. But I wonder if your barkfiend will still do tricks after I crack your under-levelled Human skull, Rose? Because I doubt it.

... 

C'mon, Eridan. What's the real deal here? Don't think Tavros can defend his own virtue?

if tav's sayin he hates you i think hes doin just fine on his owwn vvris. you can clean his fuckin boots with your tongue when youre done wwith mine you backstabbing bitch i thought he wwas your friend

Oh, nice attitude, fair performance. I m8 actually believe it! While on the other hand, Rose...

I'm your auspistice, Vriska. Remember?

You don't get it, do you?

Yes I do. You haven't called me off. You've lost Tavros and now you're clinging to everyone left and right. You had every opportunity to tell me off before today, Vrisksa. Anyone would have believed it. The Human failed to be an auspistice. Anyone. Even me. But you didn't. Instead, you chose to hurt the only two people that actually care for you.

I didn't...

--hurt Tavros? You didn't hurt Tavros? What do you call this? ...You don't even realize what you've done! Do you?

You're so determined to keep in control of the conversation that you're trying to burn every bridge and go out in flames, you idiot! And I might not be your auspistice. But I am his. And if you're not going to listen to me as your partner, you're going to through me as his!

Oh yeah, of course. [eyeroll, shrug] Rose, c'mon. You wouldn't know an ashen feeling if it slapped you in the face. You only agreed because you're trying to get with Fussyfangs! Face it, Lalonde, you are a d8ad pawn! [Rose snarls at the chess reference so soon after her conversation with Foresight] You're played out, you do not belong here, and I'm tired of you! Get off the board and give me room to finish these punk off!

NO! [box shakes] You want to just sit there and gloat? To hold on to control? Not any more, Vrisksa. You think I'd only do this because of Kanaya? You pissed on Eridan's matespritship and when this started he wanted you dead. [Vrisksa exclaims.] But you didn’t realize that either, did you? Well guess what? I'm not going to let him kill you. I am not going to let you treat him like dirt. And I am not going to let you tear apart your own life, Vriska. You might have brought me in here to throw Eridan off your scent but--

I brought you in here because you were a thorn in my side, and I thought you'd be smart
enough to back off when you saw who was really in charge!

ROSE: You... you self-absorbed... egomaniac! Are you really so self-centered... I mean, are you really so... divorced from empathy that you can't tell that this matters to me?

[Vriska stands stunned for only a moment, as do the others.]

VRISKA: ...Pfx-! [she restrains herself for a moment, but then:] Ffahahaha... HAHAHA [clutches her sides, shaking. Box shakes.] HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

[Vriska, having heaved over with laughter, holds up a hand, waving as if to say "I can't breathe! I can't!" before stopping for breath and sighing.

Roughs of the transition in question - and the last sprites I drew for the project.

After a pause, Vriska smiles contentedly, stands and adjusts her hair. Once this is done, she grins.

Music shift. The aim here was to use MegaloVaniaC and has been since it was an early WIP.

Vriska chuckles, then winds up her left arm and tosses the Flourite Octet from her sylladex into the air. Just before she catches them, she raises her leg to shift her weight. At the guitar at 0:04 into MegaloVaniaC, several things happen at once. First, Vriska catches the dice and moves into a combat stance. Second, the game strikes a white line across the screen like a lightning bolt. From this line, the word "STRIFE!" appears like electricity.]

VRISKA: [floating box] Oh, I'm gonna enjoy this a little too much.

-- Tutorial and Combat --

Music: MegaloVaniaC continues.

The Strife! portion of the Flash is the portion that's more fully intact (you didn't think I was honestly spending all those months on an itsy-bitsy walkaround, did you? By the way, Rose has no proper talk sprites: I had to manip that finger pointing one above out of one of Vriska's hands). Three difficulty levels would have been available: Reader ("I'm just here for the story what's going on?"), Standard and Hard ("Wait, so is Vriska a god in this universe, or not?"). Combat wasn't going to be everyone's cup of tea and I felt it best to accept that outright. By and large, the combat system had
been specially created for the *Hands* scenario, as I had a very specific narrative purpose in mind and needed to get it across. This honestly took no time at all. It may not be finished, but oh my goodness do I love my easily expanded engine you have no idea! Since I have the opportunity to reuse the combat ideas in personal projects however, I'm just going to just give you the rough details. You'll have to forgive me.

The plan was to release the flash in two stages. The first would only contain Reader and Standard difficulty. Standard difficulty would unlock a new scene at the end of the Strife!. Hard difficulty would be unlocked with a new version released a few weeks later. Beating it would unlock the Standard scene, of course, but also another scene *and* another Strife!, which wouldn't have taken long to add at all (I added Eridan to the game in something like ten minutes. Did I mention I love my engine?). For those worried about missing scenes, I was going to post a link to any YouTube walkthroughs I might have gotten, and give some of the early winners the credit!

Terezi would conduct the Tutorial, if you were wondering why she was there. None of the Tutorial dialogue was that funny, and with the tutorial being optional none of it was important, so we'll skip it.

-- Combat — ("-> Rose: Claim your quarter")

Combat in the engine is a form of turn based RPG with timed hits. I won't get into the specifics to avoid confusing any non-gamers in the audience that for some reason still read all of Homestuck. The primary narrative aim of combat was to establish that Rose has no chance of surviving without cooperation with Eridan, and vice versa. There are two mechanics that drive this most obviously. First of all, there are no revival spells: if any ally loses HP, it's Game Over (technically, they enter a Danger State for one turn, but if a Life player isn't present, the game skips straight to Game Over).

I don't have many in-game battle screenshot to share, unfortunately. This is thanks to the tests of the timed hits bar, prototype pictured bottom. Needing overt motions to distinguish one part of the timed hit from another, Rose looks more like she's dancing than attacking, and while the timed hits have worked for months, I just never bothered to put them back.

...Bend your arms, you WIP pain in my ass!
To capitalize on this mechanic: Vriska's dice always do group damage. Worse, as hinted at in the dialogue prior, Vriska is going to try to take out Rose to see what her "puppy" will do: even when using Thief techniques, she will only target Rose (which simplified my AI work immensely). Unless in Reader difficulty, which is practically a freebie, Rose physically cannot beat Vriska before her HP is exhausted. But Eridan might be able to, and working together with Rose, the prospect becomes quite possible. But Hard difficulty would need more. For this, the game allows characters with an established connection to work together in a Chain, which was a way of "passing off" an attack through the party so long as the members cooperate. The particulars of the connection actually depend on the type of relationship (Matespritship/Dating, Moirallegience, Kismesis, Auspistice and Friendship) and the strength of that relationship. I won't get into the details of how chains work, but I will say that they were to be used to access fraymotifs, not that Rose has a Light/Hope fraymotif to use at the moment (and all the easier on me as a dev!).

You've actually seen Chains in action before. Two appear in Chapter 3: John passes off to Rose, who passes off to Jade. Later, Karkat, after using his Blood powers, Chains to Terezi, to Nepeta, to Equius, triggering a fraymotif. Another appears in Chapter 6, when Eridan, Vriska and Tavros use their Fraymotif, and Karkat and Sollux are trying to use theirs but just can't land hits against the Centaur (my reasoning being that the Centaur simply kicks the player out of their attack as soon as you come up against its front, making it impossible to get to the Chain). Dave and Aradia's second fight with Jack, from Original Chapter 11 / Chapter 13 uses an outdated Chain system, treating Dave and Aradia as best of friends with their doubles, but since it's out of date it's also kind of wrong. Same with Chapter 20 / Original Chapter 18, though it's less visible there. The system's changed a lot since it was envisioned around New Years 2011. Whatever's going on, by chaining their attacks, Rose and Eridan would be able to beat Vriska easily in Standard difficulty, and it would probably make Reader fall apart in half the time, which would actually have been kind of funny.

But strategy would be required to beat her in Hard. The reason Eridan can't win without Rose's help is thanks to Vriska's ability to Steal Luck, which she would do with regularity until reaching a cap based on difficulty, and Hard (representing the canon) would be allllllll the Luck. Eridan's salvation comes in Rose's Seer abilities, which are defensive. Keep up the strategy, and you'll have your win.

A few additional dialogs would occur during the Strife!

---

<C1: Vriska at 50% Health>

**ERIDAN:** How's it goin', Roz?

**ROSE:** I'm all right. I'm getting back into it.

**VRISKA:** Hahaha! You two are getting tired and I'm just getting started!

**ROSE:** Of course you are. Always winning another game.

**VRISKA:** [crosses arms] Like you're not playing.

**ERIDAN:** [exclaims] ...heh.

**VRISKA:** What?

**ERIDAN:** Take another look, Roz. Vris ain't trying!
VRISKA: What are you talking about?

ERIDAN: [grins] If I was just another game to you, you'd have used your powers to put Roz to sleep already.

VRISKA: [exclams, Rose exclams] ...I... I...

ROSE: What do you know. I think an ashen feeling just slapped me in the face!

VRISKA: Ugh, shut up! [box shakes]

<C3: Light -> Pinnacle>

In Hard mode, Vriska's last-ditch defence will be to use her Ultimate. This spell causes a great pillar of Light to rise from beneath Vriska and come crashing down on the players' party. After its use, the following exchange takes place:

ROSE: [panting] Does this really matter to you that much, Vriska?

VRISKA: [panting] It's my life. Of course it does!

ROSE: That's fair. Are you trying to get us out of it... or are you trying to make sure we should be in it?

VRISKA: ...

<C4: Loss>

VRISKA: What did I say, Rose? ...You're just a pawn.

Class and Element sprites for the GUI to use on character stat screens. Seer, Light, Prince, temporary Hope icon used before the original was revealed, Thief.

<C5: Pre-Victory>

At very low health, the following exchange would occur.

ROSE: You're done, Vriska!

VRISKA: [panting] Like... fucking... hell!

ERIDAN: Hahaha. Honestly thought I'd be your little errand boy for the rest of the relationship,
didn't you? Can't wait to see how you like it.

**ROSE:** Eridan. C'mon.

**ERIDAN:** Roz!

**ROSE:** I'm serious, Eridan, if you try to take over I will take you down just as fast.

**VRISKA:** UGH shut up! I'm not your barkfriend!

**ROSE:** You're right. I'm sorry. I'm not trying to take over your life, Vriska. You asked me to *help*, and for some reason, you Trolls think cracking each other over the head is helping. If you want me gone after this? I will go *gladly*. But for now, drop the *dice*!

**VRISKA:** [catches breath, then snarls] Arggghhh! [box shakes]

---

**<C6: Victory>**

**VRISKA:** [collapses to her knees] ... [new box] Hate you... [new box] ...both.

[Her gel meter slides off, snaps in half on contact with the ground and spins into dissolution. Vriska collapses]

[Rose and Eridan victory poses. Rose levels, and both gain the indicator "c3<+" over their heads. Fade to black.]

---

**<E1: Main Ending>**

[After a pause, Vriska appears slumped against the desk in a "spotlight" in the black. Rose is somewhat visible in frame, checking on her. Vriska's eyes are barely open, but she slaps up her nearest hand to grab Rose's. The spotlight widens somewhat as Vriska comes to her senses, and Kanaya may be visible on screen left. Rose frees her hand and drops a healing gusher into Vriska's, which is caught in close-up freeze-frame to avoid animation.]

**ROSE:** ...You'll be fine. [*she turns to leave, but then adds:*] We'll talk in the morning.

**VRISKA:** [looking at her lap] About what?

**ROSE:** Everything?

**VRISKA:** Why? [pause] You did your job.

**ROSE:** ...This can't happen again, Vriska. I'm not com—
Rose is overcome by a sudden cough, which both clears shakes her text box.

ROSE: ...I'm not comfortable with it.

VRISKA: [looks away] ...Yeah.

[Rose starts once again to leave, but Vriska looks back after a moment, smiles, and shuts her eyes for rest. The spotlight fades.]

<E2: Bonus Scene> ("> Vriska: Wake")

The reward for beating the game in Standard or Hard.

[Fade in to show Vriska where we left her, her face tucked in against her legs. Tavros is sitting next to her, and he shakes her by the shoulder.]

VRISKA: [looks up, immediately looks away.] Oh. It's you.

TAVROS: [lowers his hand] H-hi Vriska.

VRISKA: Where'd everybody go? Off to go celebrate beating the Spiderbitch?

TAVROS: Well, uh, Eridan maybe. Said he was going to go have a party.

VRISKA: Heh. Tha... that's my guy. [slumps] I guess.

TAVROS: But Rose stuck around for a while.

VRISKA: Yeah. Not like I didn't hear her. [looks at Tavros] She's... actually kinda... [looks back] I mean, excuse me if I wasn't in the mood for a lecture!

TAVROS: Oh... y-yeah.

[pause]

VRISKA: So now you know.

TAVROS: Huh? About your big plan?

VRISKA: No, stupid! About... how I feel.

TAVROS: Oh... well, yeah, I guess. uHHH... you were kind of at my throat so I guess I didn't really take it in at first,

VRISKA: That's fair. [Pause] So, what? You're not going to say anything? Those two say it all for you? Bam, pow?

TAVROS: Well, uh, that's not fair, Vriska. [Vriska looks up] I mean, I care about you. I didn't want it to happen like this.

VRISKA: Yeah. You just don't care enough to... [new box] to...
TAVROS: [Tavros touches her shoulder again] I'm sorry, Vriska. It, uh... it hurts that I can't be for you like that, but that doesn't mean--

VRISKA: [Vriska reaches up with her far hand to take his] Shut up. I get it.

[pause]

TAVROS: Now what? I mean...

VRISKA: Yeah. We can't... stay.

TAVROS: ... We can still write together, right?

VRISKA: I don't, uh, know if that's, best.

VRISKA: ...Okay.

[pause]

VRISKA: [looks up] At least... everything's going to be okay with you now, right? Gamzee's gonna get better. No stupid friend sabotaging your matespritship. I'm sure Eridan's looking to celebrate.

TAVROS: I guess.

VRISKA: [looks up]

TAVROS: Well... [he looks away] I mean, he was so happy to take you out... he didn't even come to check on me, did he?

[Long pause. Tavros slumps over to hug Vriska, causing her to throw up her nearest hand in surprise. She calms and, after a pause, she starts to set her hand down, hesitates, gets a wary look, and finally sets her hand on his back. Finding that this has not set either of them on fire, she closes her eyes. Fade out.]

-- Author's Notes --

The Bloody Club symbol in my icon has been referencing this chapter since it was first drawn way back in October or November of 2010.

I find this chapter loses a good deal from Rose's use of Tone occurring all at once instead of being typed out by the game prompt. Ugh.

Hey look the Sprite Dump is up now.

The original opening scene of this flash - written November 2010 or so - wasn't actually in the lab but in the hallway. Rose was going to run into Gamzee (no arm loss in this early version) who had moved his entire horn pile into the hall to get out of the way of the fight. That might tip you off to this scene being pre-Tavros<>Gamzee, too (established in Chapter 6!). Back to the point: Gamzee, lying upside-down on the pile, would have an inverted conversation with Rose and effectively run a tutorial by tossing horns at her, pretty much just because he's Gamzee. I tossed the idea long ago in
favour of disguising the Strife as an Exploration flash, but I suppose the deleted scene with Gamzee might very well have led to how I treat his and Rose’s relationship today. Huh.

Anyone noticing a similarity between this confrontation and the one that started the story has been paying attention or at least has a good memory! Perhaps better than mine: it wasn’t until I was writing out the asset list that I remembered that Vriska could not actually lift Tavros’ legs from the ground.

Timing test "dancing" in progress. TURN you dunkass, she's behInD you.

Vriska, as my original sprite, was originally drawn to fit a 100 pixel height but by the time I decided on a head shape I didn't think was horrible and terrifying (when drawn by me), the proportions were shot and she clocked in closer to 70. Since I didn't want to go overboard and make the characters as truly SD, I had to go for broke and decided to draw with the zoom system in mind. I know, I don't use it in this flash, but it's there, and I wasn't going to touch it as a result. Because of the small size, Vriska actually lacked her two most prominent eye features for most of her production: vision eightfold and glasses, and I ultimately ditched half of the glasses (yeah, only half of them are there, look again) because they were interfering with her expression! I have never seen Vriska look so cheerful as she did with those glasses, no matter what I did. She looked angry up close! But not at 100%. The best solution I had was to shrink her glasses and slice them in half, or else they were easily mistaken for shading. But I kept the vision eightfold... and the multi-pupil is there even when Vriska faces to the right. This is funny, because I made the engine to support asymmetric sprites, but I ultimately just didn't want to make the sprites themselves. Oh well.

Rose's outfit was always the black dress as I had figured, in my naïveté, that it would be easier to work with thanks to a lack of component parts. After Vriska, I finally got to her in mid-early July 2011, when my drawing speed really picked up, considering I did her and Eridan in under three months that were honestly spent more on programming.

When I started on Rose I could not find blonde-haired sprites with any detail work for the life of me. Since then I've found dozens without even looking, and I later remembered that some of my ranking favourite games have blonde protagonists. In related news, I have the memory of a gerbil.

From the very beginning, it was integral to me to create a combat system that would force Rose and Eridan to work in concert... while not letting you control Eridan directly, since I wasn't sure if I'd have time to code that (I actually still haven't, to this day, as a result). Some early plans for the team-
up involved Rose directing Eridan to snipe Vriska's good dice, but it just didn't match up with the rest of the combat system.

I don't have much to say about drawing Eridan. He was fairly cooperative, except his shoulders, which look so awful I'd consider him almost a failure. You'll notice he's not in this post. From one moment to the next his shoulders were either too broad or too thin. Now Eridan is supposed to be broad-er thanks to his moult but I toned it down, not wanting to throw anyone's impressions. Still, he could have use more work.

Kanaya, being mid-moult, wouldn't have shown most of the signs of the process. She doesn't have claws yet (she keeps biting her nails, though, which is meant to be indicative). She would have had a mouling welt peaking out from under her right sleeve, though.

Aradia only would have had two sprites: lights on, lights off. She's, uh, very focused, and I really didn't care to bother. By the way, Aradia's hair would have been red-tinged, showing that the Troll hair colours are just artistic license in this flash, since I can't imagine Equius actually hunting down maroon hair for her.

Things that were going to happen when you hit the Trickster Code before I decided it would be stepping on Gankro's toes: 1. Liv Tyler the bunny would come down and defeat Vriska in a single hit. 2. the Squiddles from The Dargon Arc would appear and hug Vriska, which would of course do massive damage. 3. Everyone would transform into Nepetabomination versions of themselves and nothing else would change. That last one was my favourite, even if I wouldn't have ultimately done it.

I tried to get you a shot of Eridan in action, but had split melee and missile attacks into separate branches around August or so to better work with a few camera tricks used during combat. Haven't touched missile since. Long story short, Eridan and Rose teleported off, and the game crashed. No Eridan! Don't shoot the code! Dammit, come back here.
If you want to read about my art experiences, I had previously started a side-blog to chronologe my attempt to create low-colour-count sprites out of Hussie's art, but the posts took forever to write and each post attracted less and less attention, so I never really followed up. I think the readers would have appreciated more posts about the gameplay, but like I say in the posts, without art there was really nothing to show that wouldn't have involved a lot of hideous test boxes.

http://adarkserenetime.tumblr.com/tagged/zodiac-engine/chrono

You'll notice the post about Vriska talks about me removing her jacket for colour reasons. This is true. Indeed, it's so true, that I had it removed from her several chapters prior so that the art would match.

The name, "A Dark, Serene Time" is an anagram for "Skaian Redeemer", plus the letter "T". Look, I stink at word puzzles, all right, I had to improvise! I considered dropping the hint "I am Lord Voldemort" near the end of the thing's run, but no one would have gotten that.
As said previously, [S] Rose: Claim your quarter was going to be released in two parts. The second would include Hard difficulty, and if you beat it, you'd unlock a second, "secret" Strife!. This sort of thing – attaching story bits to optional bosses – comes from the *Kingdom Hearts* tradition, and from that tradition comes another important aspect: the player is going to die. A lot. The difference between me and SquareEnix is that my bosses would be less obviously unfair and more obtusely unorthodox. No one spells that out better than the first one.

We tune in where we left off at the end of Chapter 26, and come to Rose's alluded-at dream conversation with Hindsight. I did not actually intend to draw Hindsight, however. This whole "expansion pack" was going to be an exercise in visual frugality to get a gauge of just how long it took me to do the programming side of things. This isn't exactly ideal, however, as it leaves Hindsight out of a pattern that applies to the other Masks. But one has to settle.

For those curious, there is a Skip button in this game to skip cutscenes. I'm not a monster. Hell, I'm not sure how some devs still make it through testing their own games without Skip buttons. Masochism?

One thing I don't think I described in enough detail last time was the text boxes, which actually perform a few stunts in this sequence. They roughly resemble the one from Alterniabound, with a single-coloured border just inside the box (so Rose's are pink, Eridan's would have been purple, etc). They can display coloured text and formatting no trouble, there are the floaters I mentioned before, and they are fully scriptable, so they could pull off backflips when I wanted them too, like some of the simple ones in this chapter.

.<S0 – Intro>

**Music:** Silence.

*[Blackness. Hindsight will soon speak: her text boxes appear as Floaters, often containing just fragments of the sentence before jumping to another box. Her border colour is white. These all appear on the Left side of the screen, behind Rose, who faces Right. Rose's boxes at the bottom of the screen will often clear to give them more room to play. Hindsight will also twice use a proper top-screen text box so it will not be as surprising when she summons a Dream character, who always uses the top box.]*

**HINDSIGHT:** Welcome back, Rose, darling.

**ROSE:** *[beat. Rose shifts position uncomfortably] Mirann. I had hoped, but this is still earlier than I expected.*

*[Fade in. Rose is centre screen, arms crossed.]*

**ROSE:** I take you were listening to my little talk with Foresight?

**HINDSIGHT:** I take it you think you're very clever.
**ROSE:** Just prepared.

**HINDSIGHT:** Odd preparation. I had a chance to listen in on your conversation with your brother. Lucky he was able to make time for you today. He has enough business of his own to tend to.

**ROSE:** ... [drops her arms] Dave? This is your angle of attack?

**HINDSIGHT:** My provence is the past, Rose, darling. I just point out what I've already see. You're all adults now, you set your own schedules, and things change.

**ROSE:** [angry. Swipes] And that doesn't mean he has to default to me!

**HINDSIGHT:** No, of course not. [full box] It's not like you [The box's typing is interrupted by a dim flash, in which an observant reader can see the three-pronged sign.]

[The background of the Computer Lab appears, blurred, and Hindsight's box has been replaced with one containing the same text, but without a border. The box continues typing as though nothing had happened. Rose exclaims.]

????: [It's not like you] I've given him any reason to bother.

[The camera pans to the right into its new standard position, and the fuzzing on the background clears up. However, there is still nothing there to Rose's right. Music shift, preferably to something menacing and dark (in spite of how generic that sounds, I've been unable to find any that suit my liking!)]

**ROSE:** Who's there?

????: What, need to get your eyes checked?

**ROSE:** [shakes head] I really can't see you.

????: Hmph. Well aren't you a catch.

**ROSE:** [angry] I'm sorry, did I offend you somehow?

????: Naw. I'm just here to get a good look at the twerp that's gonna get everyone else killed.

**ROSE:** Who's going to get everyone...

[three-pronged sign flashes]

**ROSE:** [shakes head to clear] I am NOT going to get anyone killed.

????: Really? Because the way I see it, you're an underlevelled, lazy do-nothing that's about to run off to get herself gutted by Jack fucking Noir! And I ain't about to stand here and let anyone get it in the side on your account.

**ROSE:** [lashes out] What are you talking abo—

????: When was the last time you worked out?

**ROSE:** Wh—
???: Not these little patrols of yours, I mean put in some effort of your own. When was the last time you tried to work out all the kinks in your spell arm to do some real work with those wands?

[A glint of light where ??? should be standing, about half-way up Rose's height. Noise of metal against metal.]

???: Now my guy Dave keeps in shape. He's been out there saving your ass for two goddamn months, and all you've done is sit around playing hipster-dollhouse. Dressing up in gray face paint and Styrofoam horns.

**HINDSIGHT:** [Rose looks over her shoulder at the sound of Hindsight's voice this time] And you can never truly be a Troll, Rose darling. That's not a cruelty. That's just fact.

**ROSE:** [taken aback] ...I'm not trying to pretend to be a Troll. I'm just trying to live my life--

???: Straight into the quick stop at the end! How long do you have left? Before you finish your mousetrap, and screw everyone else over when he guts you three seconds in?

**ROSE:** I—

???: And then who's going to miss you?

**ROSE:** Stop interrupting me!

???: "Oh, Lalonde, what'd we do without her? Who'll dick around in our relationships now? [Rose frowns, becomes progressively more upset] Who'll stick her foot in where it doesn't belong? Who's gonna pretend to be a Troll now?"

**ROSE:** ...

???: What're they gonna say about everyone that died because of you, Dollhouse?

**ROSE:** [now angry] Quiet!

???: I'll make this fuckin' simple, kid, is what I'll do. You're a waste of air. You're a waste in general, and I don't want you near my fucking kid! When you're up there, and Jack cuts you down, I want him to look you in the eye and go "Damn I'm glad I dropped that broad."

**ROSE:** I said--

???: It's the only favour you could do him!

**ROSE:** I am not going to let anyone die!

???: What, you're going to take on Jack Noir? Dollhouse, I took on Jack Noir, and look how that turned out.

[We get a close up on the right. He appears slowly from transparency, a cloudy outline like most formative Dream entities. He is shirtless and muscular, with a tattoo of the Heart symbol on his chest, and the Time symbol on his upper left arm (the side facing us on his sprite). A close-up may confirm the Time symbol. The only solid part of his body besides the tattoos are his eyes: white. He is holding his headphone to one side of his head as he flips through an MP3 player. His box's outline becomes orange.]
ROSE: ...What? ...You...

G. BRO: Heh. This is so stupid.

[Rose's box is suddenly replaced by a dialog box under the computer's control. The selected box goes up and down through what appears to be a selection of music: Ghost Bro's MP3 player. "Nannaquin", "Simple Sight (Theme of the Necromancer)", "Rage Awakened".]

G. BRO: "Ghost music." *snort* Fiiine. Hey, Dollhouse. Let's line this up, you and me. Gimmie a sec.

[He selects "Simple Sight", and the Music changes to match. Dialogue control is given over to the game to sync with the music.]

G. BRO: [0:00] That'll do. [looks up and holds up his right hand to the sky] Hey! You gonna leave me hangin'?

[Three-pronged sign. The Triumvirate speaks, their floating boxes cascading from top left to bottom right. Presence's box is bordered a dark pink, and Foresight's in Grey.]

HINDSIGHT: By

PRESENCE: no

FORESIGHT: means.

[0:10: In a flash of light, Cal appears in Bro's hand. Bro's sprite is now fully visible, though his eyes remain white. Ideally, we'll get a still of them together.]

G. BRO: That's better. [box] [0:15] Hey, Dollhouse: my little bro used to keep up with me every goddamn day. If you can't keep up with me, you can't take on Jack Noir. If you still give it a shot, their blood's on your hands.

ROSE: [0:22], wincing I-I don't want to hurt you, Mr. Strider.

G. BRO: [0:27. In a blur of motion, he rearranges Cal's arms into a taunt.] Keep up or shut up, Dollhouse? Cal and I didn't raise this kid for you to drop him in a ditch. You stay the hell away from him! [box] You've got no right to be there.

ROSE: [0:38] I've got--! [scowls. 0:40] ..."Keep up."

[zoom on Ghost Bro, who draws his sword and disappears in a blur of motion. As he does this, the three-pronged symbol flashes over him, and the motion blur of his sword or possibly his escape cuts perfectly along the leftmost, Hindsight branch.]

G. BRO: Bad answer!

[0:44 Zoom out. Banner – "SECRET STRIFE" – appears. Ghost Bro begins to dance L'il Cal in the air as your opponent.]
There’s a reason I think this expansion would be easy to draw, and it’s easily explained too: Bro is simply not there, and Cal, much like my drawing ability, looks like Madness made of spaghetti noodles, so we should get along fine. Where Rose and Vriska had sprite totals topping 50 without any effort (much of which I did draw thank-you-very-much) Bro’s sprite total is… 16, and 5 of them don’t count. Talk/idle: 4-5 sprites. Ghost talk/idle: just an outline of the normal talk. Reaching up to the sky: 2 sprites. Check MP3 player, 2 sprites. Ready to draw sword: one sprite. Wounded: 1 sprite. Defeated: 1 sprite, thanks to a convenient fade to black. On top of that, there’s the blur of motion: one lazily created vector that’s constantly rotated and redrawn.

Sure, Cal required some sprites, but he’s so jerky and is occasionally snatched into new positions at top speed by Bro, so in the end his animation didn’t have to be smooth, and he’s so noodly that the sprites don’t have to follow any rules of anatomy. I just had to get the face right, which by the way would probably face the player some of the time instead of Rose. What little effort was going to be put into Cal was to have Bro make him copy poses and attacks from Ryu from Street Fighter.

Ghost Bro’s attacks are unorthodox to extremes. He constantly attacks you with Cal, but Cal can’t actually hurt you, except maybe by a single point when he does things like Ryu’s Dragon Punch. I even finished a distinct wounded animation for Rose where she looks more annoyed than hurt, just for this purpose. Some attacks might Distact the player (that is a legitimate status effect that it honestly in the code at this very moment. It makes it harder to land timed hits) but that’s as bad as it gets… from the puppet.

No, the real threat is the crowding Cal’s rapid attacks introduce to the timed hit meter, making that entire piece of GUI a near-useless mess. The player instead has to keep an eye on Bro himself… as much as that's possible. If the motion blur suddenly slows, if Cal begins to drop as Bro stops supporting him, and more often than not if Cal uses a haduken (but not always, just to throw you off), Bro is about to attack Rose with his sword. Not only do these attacks actually work, but they’re absolutely devastating if you don’t block them. Pick them out and block them from amidst the mess of Cal’s attacks, and you’ll be on your way to a win.

(To make things worse, Bro's attacks will probably kill you in just a few hits, say more than five. But five won't kill you: it will instead leave you with a half dozen or so HP, and you can heal. Unless Cal's been uppercutting you over and over throught an extended fight…)

One last issue: to simulate the trouble in hitting Ghost Bro, only fairly competent timed hits will land, whereas the rest of the game is honestly generous in that regard. This is just a matter of average skill, so it’s not really contributing much to the challenge. If you can beat Vriska on Hard, you can at least hit Bro even when Distacted. Whether you can beat him, well…

—Combat — ("> vs. Ghost Bro")

<S1 – Bro at 70% health.>

[Rose is panting for breath. During this segment, a blur of motion begins very, very, very briefly appearing on the edge of the screen in flash steps.]

G. BRO: Are you already out of breath? Fuck!

ROSE: Why... Why are you doing this? It's not your job to look after Dave any more. He's fine! He's looking out for himself, and if he--
G. BRO: Oh yeah, you're all fucking grown up now, aren't ya? Like when you told the game "Naw, game, we're ready to set up a new universe. We just ignored all your clues, we've got it all set up to bypass all your challenges instead of facing them like fucking Pan here!"

During his speech, Denizen text once again begins to echo "Cheater." Cetus' text is not among them this time, but Hephaestus' is.

ROSE: ..."Cheaters." I know. [new box] ...things are different, now.

G. BRO: Like hell.

ROSE: They are! We're all working together, with the Trolls, we have a plan--

G. BRO: I don't give a damn about your plan! I'm just looking out for my bro. What happens if you win, Lalonde? What if you don't get him killed?

ROSE: Then we move on.

G. BRO: To what? To some piece of shit rock your girlfriend's gonna make in a sick frog? You can't rebuild the world, cheater. [the Denizen texts stop just prior to Bro's use of the word, as though he were the last on to speak.] Don't you realize what a mess you're in? Don't you realize how much of it was your fault?

ROSE: ...I do.

G. BRO: Your girlfriend doesn't trust you to respect her boundaries. Your friends don't trust you because you blew one of their arms off, and you don't have the stones to stand up to the only two people you're actually supposed to!

[pause]

G. BRO: No one's gonna have your back when you fight Jack. Did you notice?

ROSE: I know! I noticed! I've screwed up, are you happy? ...I don't know what I'm doing, yet.

G. BRO: Well consider this a point in the right direction!

[Three-pronged sign. They rearm, combat resumes.]

At 60% health, Bro suddenly stops fucking around, and starts using a series of unique combos named after Bro and Dirk-related Homestuck songs (Knife's Edge (it's him on Strife!'s cover); Orange Hat; Sweet Dreams, Timaeus. The original plan only used Knife's Edge with a randomized attack pattern, but the new rush of Dirk songs inspired me to instead use a handful of set patterns with distinct names, which would be more fair to the player). These combos are slower than the usual Cal-rush, but focus more heavily on Bladekind instead of Puppetkind, so the player has to be on their feet.

Now, when characters use Skills and Techniques in these games, their Class or Element sign typically appears behind them, ala Mario RPG (or, for that matter, Homestuck, where they do so during fraymotifs. You have no idea how delighted I was to see that). Similarly, when chaining, the relationship symbol appears behind them. Bro's sign when using his Skills, however, seems to be the Family symbol from the Roxyverse.
<S2: Plays after Rose survives Knife's Edge, the first combo.>

ROSE: ENOUGH! [shakes] You know? You're right. I did my best, and I can't keep up with you. Jack will fly circles around me.

G. BRO: Pathetic.

ROSE: But it doesn't matter. Because you're also wrong. There are people with me that will have my back, and I will keep them safe.

G. BRO: You're that deluded, bro?

ROSE: I'll prove it.

G. BRO: Prove it?

ROSE: I'm prepared. Because you made a mistake, Mirann. [The three-pronged symbol appears, but this time to the sound of a crack. Music fades and slowly rises into a new tune, similar to on Beadown or Contention] This is a dream bubble, and that means someone knows where I am.

[If possible, though I wasn't certain, the game may suddenly enter attack state. The player gets an opportunity for a free hit against Ghost Bro here if they can land even an average timed hit. Dave returns from his attack to appears next to Rose.]

DAVE: Thought you hadn't noticed me.

ROSE: Not a chance.

G. BRO: Haha! Hey, nobody ever said I raised a smart kid, did I?

DAVE: Man, shut the fuck up. I've been listening to you for the past five minutes and I am bored out of my skull.

ROSE: What, were you just going to leave me here?

DAVE: You had him. [Rose smiles] Besides, this is all some Faustian buttfuck about standing up for yourself, isn't it?

ROSE: Not quite, but close.

DAVE: You got a plan that doesn't involve me saving your ass and ruining your mental game?

[Music restores, or possibly continues if the bridge song was enough of a "Battle Song."]

ROSE: Easy. You're not going to save me. You're going to cover me.

DAVE: No. Problem. [he steps into Combat Ready position]

Dave's sprites were a bit more of an issue to me than Bro's, but I think I had them worked out. Initially, I didn't feel very foolish including them at all. The original plan was to sprite him first so I
could gain experience on something no one would see in the first flash, and simply come back to
touch him up once I had more experience. That might have probably worked with my current
experience, but when I had 0, the result was just plain failure. Okay, time for a new plan.

This plan was to once again reduce Dave's sprites to an absolute minimum. Less than even Eridan.
Step 1: Minimize talk sprites. Dave's talk and idle sprites are probably the same with mouth flap. 4,
let's say. Combat ready sprite: 2 or 3, simple breathing. Like Eridan, Dave would be out of your
control. Unlike Eridan, who had to cast spells and weather group attacks, Dave would never cast
spells (I figured programming time travel mechanics at this early point would give me a headache)
and, given Ghost Bro's motives, is never the subject of attack. 0 sprites.

Last, his attacks… or should I say, "attack"? To make a comparison between him and Bro, I wanted
Dave to be ultra-fast, and also probably make ironic game references in his attack style. To this end,
and given the Kingdom Hearts inspiration for this whole Strife, I had him copy Sora's Sonic Blade
technique. This isn't just random selection, Dave does a similar rush attack in Dave: Accelerate, and
Andrew accomplished it with only one sprite. The only difference between Sora and Beta Dave is
that Sora dashes back and forth with impunity. I imagine a fully trained Dave could do that no
problem, and would want to to show off in front of "his" Bro. Attack sprites: 1, maybe 2, used over
and over.

<S3: Pre-Victory>

G. BRO: [Cal appears slumped and exhausted as Ghost Bro settles to a rest. Ghost Bro might even be out of
breath himself.] Dave... what're you doin', man? Me and Cal are just looking out for you.

DAVE: Rose, that's not really my Bro, right?

ROSE: I don't know. I don't know if he is a fake, or a dream, or maybe even... [sighs] But does it
even matter?

G. BRO: Of course it... course it fucking...

DAVE: It doesn't. Look, Bro, I don't want to admit it... but we don't need your fucking approval.
Even if you are my bro. We've got people of our own to look after now.

[Rose exclaims, hangs her head.]

DAVE: Me an' Aradia look out for 'em every day. Wish you could've met her, Bro. You've missed a
lot, I'm sorry.

G. BRO: ...

ROSE: You're right. Fancy that. You know, Mr. Strider, [She looks up] I wouldn't have admitted it,
but once I would have done anything for your approval. You, or John's dad, or Jade's grandpa. But I
never needed it. [box] Just theirs!

[Rose rearms, and the Striders in concert.]

<S4: Loss>
G. BRO: Just a liability, you know? You see it too, now.

S5: Win>

[The three-pronged sign appears as Bro is damaged and is split along the middle of the Hindsight line. It remains cracked for the remainder of the fic. The game slows as he falls, his sprite posed as though to fall on his left side.]

G. BRO: [The Family symbol pulses behind him] That's better. Right on, Sis.

[Screen fully black. While my hand-drawn art is generally insufficient, I would have probably been forced to do a piece here, showing part of Bro's torso on the ground. It depicts his right arm, draped over his body: this arm has been concealed by perspective and Cal this entire fight. A cut would zoom onto the bicep, where we can make out the Light symbol opposite Dave's Time.

Return to sprites. Rose is alone in the black again, flabbergasted, and is once again centred. Pause.]

HINDSIGHT: Just us now, Rose darli--

ROSE: What was the point of this?

HINDSIGHT: Hm?

ROSE: You heard me. Foresight wants me to fight Jack Noir, even if it kills me. Why are you trying to scare me away from him?

PRESENCE: Oh, Backwards likes jumping people through hoops, don't you Backwards?

ROSE: You! [Rose might turn to face the speakers this time, but it depended on my available sprites.]

HINDSIGHT: I admit it, it's in my nature.

PRESENCE: Hey, I don't mind. Anything that gives me another shot at running this lot through.

ROSE: Another one of your parliamentary agreements?

PRESENCE: Except this one has more bloodshed! And the last one involved blowing off a guy's arm! [beat] I know, it's fantastic!

ROSE: [turns right] And what's your angle on this?

[There is no reply from Foresight.]

ROSE: ... [turns left] So did I pass?

HINDSIGHT: Nothing correct and incorrect about these choices Rose. That day will come. [box] In the meantime, you'd better wake up.

[Rose begins to slowly collapse, sprites probably stolen from her death animation. The screen slowly fades to black.]
**HINDSIGHT:** After all, you've got all these new roles to fill, new approval to earn, new responsibilities to keep...

[Fade to black. After a pause accompanied by a soft ticking noise, the three-pronged symbol returns. The prominent, leftmost branch of the symbol is most visible, but slowly fades to two-thirds strength as Presence rises to one-third. Foresight remains dim.]

**HINDSIGHT & PRESENCE:** It's going to be a long few months.

[The symbol fades out. After a brief moment, the player is given an additional reward for clearly the flash: a new Needlewand that looks like a combination between the Quills of Echidna and one of Dave's many swords, which would boost Rose's attack significantly if equipped.]

**GAME:** You got Caledistitch! Equip it in either Strife!

[The game returns to the main menu.]

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> END OF ACT 4

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Chapter End Notes

Simple Sight is from Castle Crashers; Rage Awakened from Kingdom Hearts 2: Final Mix+ (with a notable remix in Birth By Sleep).
Follow-Through

It's here that we finally cross into entirely new territory, and with it, I have to come up with a new format: a means of explaining future events without taking too long, or missing any important details. Sadly, one of the major steps in this process is clamping down on my own natural instinct, which is to say I have to take these long-simmering concepts I've been waiting to share, and I have to, under most to nearly all circumstances, not write them. In more than a few ways I'm not going to enjoy this.

The chapter begins not long after Claim Your Quarter, with Gamzee waking up to find Rose half-asleep at his bedside (tubside?). After some perfunctory and awkward smalltalk about how he's feeling and why the floor is covered in mousetraps (hinting that, while it didn't come up due to lack of reader interest, Turnabout Cupcake probably did occur), Rose gets down to business. Gamzee admits that he actually did think Rose was waxing caliginous (it would be a bit of a faulty payoff if he didn't), and she tells him no, straight-up. To her relief he's willing to accept that, but a tension hangs in the air between them. Rose talks about how she's been trying to "make things better," which might sting for most readers. The intent was to post this chapter not long after or perhaps concurrently with the CYQ secret strife, so much of the audience would not yet have seen it, and so this chapter would have bled straight off of Tavros and Vriska breaking up as friends after Rose's well-intended intervention.

With both sides bottling feelings, Gamzee encourages her to talk things through. Rose reminds him that she's just going to go into the depth of each little decision, and he shrugs. And so, Rose starts into it, bringing back the comparison of "let's just be friends" with Terezi and Dave, noting how this situation is less overt in a sense and yet also more on the nose – she is asking him to stop feeling feelings for her that he's going to be uncomfortable to stop, and is hoping that they were infant enough feelings enough to do so.

"Not that I've got any right to complain," Rose says. Lazily playing with Gamzee's sopor, she draws the Quadrants on the side of his recouperacoon, and talks about juvenile relationships versus mature. "You know, until last night I never thought of one of the biggest differences between Humans and Trolls. You never had anyone to look after you... well, physically yes, you had your lusus, but emotionally, they were largely non-communicative."

"Well, we were schoolfed, you know?" he says, to which Rose replies:

"What does that mean, anyways?"

"Man, I dunno. Ask someone who motherfuckin' did it!" Gamzee shrugs. "'Sides, toughened us up, didn't it?"

"Into emotionally stunted, hyperviolent children." Rose had finished her drawing about now. "...But you did have people to look after you. I just didn't notice it because, well, we've all been children about it." Rose then draws a circle alongside the grid. "When a Human grew up, their parents would have to put up with a lot of changes. They sort of had to give up their child and let them go on their own, as an adult. The only connections they'll have from that point on are the ones they form on their own, and as a result, those individual relationships change, from the joking and the sexual to, in the right environment, something stronger. But you don't have parents, or friends that... well not 'replace' them, the relationship is very different. But still. 'Too dangerous.'"

Gamzee squirms in his seat – an objective in this chapter is to make his stance on Friendship wobbly and inconsistent, saying stuff like "Man, that doesn't seem like a great idea" one second to "Oh yeah,
Karkat's my best bud ever," the next. But let's carry on with Rose for now.

"But that didn't mean you didn't pick your own families. Of a sort. It's not so tidy. It's largely interrelated, and to try to emphasize a central member would be mistaken. It's more like a web interlacing society. But it worked. It could work again, for all I can imagine."

Rose taps the centre of the Quadrant cross. "This is all a system, and it's a violent system created by violent people to the ultimate end of being... and I'm as surprised as any of the rest of you... less violent. Regretting, preventing, venting, maintaining. Kanaya once told me something," Rose says, looking to Gamzee, "about Nepeta. She said not to think of her as violent because she needed a moirail, but to think of her as violently neutral because she had been changed by her relationship – truly changed – as much as I would from any of mine." She taps the Circle, but feels inadequate in doing so. This is not the relationship she wants to address. She gathers more sopor, but when she goes to draw more, she finds her mind blank of the symbol she had been aiming for, and instead begins to draw the Light sun, the Time gear, and the two-part Heart.

"I ain't never seen that one," Gamzee notes.

"That's because you've never torn a turtle's tower apart by its innards," Rose said with a chuckle.

"Try me."

Rose pauses, redaubs her finger in sopor, and continues drawing. "Tell me," she asks instead. "Did you ever see any of Sburbs symbols in the world before you entered? They seem to have gotten out here and there, and I sort of wonder what one inquisitive person might... might know. You don't need to tell me any cult secrets, just, yes or no."

Gamzee confesses that he doesn't actually know many cult secrets at all, claiming to have backed off of the organization early on in life in this universe, and claiming to be an "independent theologianlillator." He claims it was all kind of silly to begin with, because there was never any evidence that the Messiahs ever performed any miracles or, indeed, were on (H-verse) Alternia to begin with.

"I know how you feel," Rose says, and she draws the three-pronged symbol while explaining how she too is fed up with gods as it is. "It's time for me to focus on the real world again. Stop being a child. After all," she says, "our guardians are gone. We've got to stand... stand up." She taps the matespiritship heart, the auspistice club, and the friendship circle: "especially where we've already been asked. Especially if we've been sitting down all this time."

"'Tain't nothing wrong with a little fun and games, Rosie," Gamzee cautions.

"Okay," Rose admits, "I mean: yes, you're right. I'm not going to chase anyone down for being juvenile, or arbitrarily punishing them for having a young relationship. I'd just rather some more 'Leijons and Zahhaks' or..." She catches his hand on the end of the recoupercoon and draws the Taurus symbol on it, he chuckles. "More 'Makaras and Nitrams' than our 'Pyropes and Vantases.'"

Of course, just then Karkat clears his throat at the door. This ends Rose and Gamzee's conversation, but it's worth saying that their relationship gets more complicated from there on out. They're mostly together because Rose is still friends with Terezi, but there are also moments where they seem to be closer. This continues to build up to Chapter 32, when they interact as part of the central plot once more.

Rose asks if Karkat's here to see Gamzee, and he shakes his head, and makes his way into the room clutching at the air or his head on the verge of the rant of a century. He finally sits down opposite
Rose and says: "…YOU—!" He then descends to sputtering.

Rose raises an eyebrow. "I take it our mutual relation caught a you in the hallway."

"SHE HAD A FEW CHOICE WORDS, YES!"

"If this is about the fight in the lab—" Rose starts.

"HOW COULD I NOT WANT TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT THAT?"

"Vriska thinks I was entirely in the right," Rose said, her voice slipping into overwrought innocence.

"Vriska thought every other step in this clusterfuck was a good idea, too, didn't she?" Karkat complains, but then chants: "That's not why I'm here, that's not why I'm here…"

When Rose asks him what the deal is, he starts to sputter again, but this time notices the sopor drawings and jabs his finger at the three-pronged symbol.

"Oh," she says, her spirits falling. "You got Dave's message?"

"Dave's message? The lab is erupting with laser fire and Light magic in front of a dozen onlookers, and Terezi keeps texting me about how I’H4V3 TO G3T D0WN H3R3 K4RK4T TH1S 1S TH3 B3ST TH1S 3V3R' and Egbert keeps trying to tell me everything is fine somehow, and you want to know if I got Strider's message?"

After a moment of victorious quiet for Karkat, Gamzee says: "…So did you get Dave's mes—"

"Yes I got Strider's motherfucking message!" Karkat says, forgetting himself. He then grabs Rose and leads her back to the lab, where he says he just led Feferi to keep her from using the transportalizers.

Rose arrives to find Feferi talking calmly to Aradia about what happened with Vriska, even joking with her. Equius is also there, repairing Tavros' legs where they seized up while sitting with Vriska (Vriska herself having left). He listens carefully to Aradia and Feferi's conversation. Both he and Feferi agree with Aradia's call about Vriska and are very supportive. John is also present, seemingly waiting for Karkat and Rose to arrive, but he does not so much get to say hello before Feferi spots Rose and her calm mood turns to fury. Out of a love of order, leftover good will toward Eridan and their self-proclaimed "austipstice buddies" club, Feferi holds back from screaming. Still, she makes it clear that she can't believe Rose let things get this bad between Vriska and Eridan. During her rant, the insinuation that a Human can't possibly auspistice a Troll couple comes up twice, subtly, but summaries are where subtlety goes to die so you'll just have to take my word for it that you might not have even noticed for a few chapters before it gets worse.

Karkat retakes order and demands Rose explain everything she know about their situation, all but shoving Tavros and Equius out the door. Rose, and also Aradia given her encounters with Ghost Rose, explain all they know. Feferi, still somewhat obstinate, claims not to know anything about any "Mirann" or the three-pronged sign, but latches to the mention that Mirann had white eyes (and thus apparently white blood). She explains about the legend of a "Lily Empress" in brief, and how it was just a fairy tale. Still, her brief summary raises the possibility that the tale described an ancient Horrorterrors cult ("Worshipping them instead of creepy clown rappers?" John asks.) Feferi insists the Horrorterrors did not want to be worshiped but to work together with the Trolls, as exemplified in her lusus, but Aradia, who also knows the fairy tale and some details about that period of history, points out that there's no reason to believe that the Horrorterrors work as a unified body or even agree with one another.
The subject shifts to Presence, and John throws out a few tidbits from the end of their session, which Rose is shocked to find she doesn't remember after a certain point. The rough outline he gives suggests that after Dave died trying to fight with Grimdark Rose on the Battlefield, Jack was scared off by Jade's arrival (the Bec part of him still not wanting to fight her). Jade revived Dave. John, having never been fatally injured to begin with (but not a God Tier in this verse) is revived by some good old fashioned healing potion, and the two confront Rose about her grimdark state. She agrees to go talk to Cetus to clear it, and remembers going underground to speak to her Denizen, but the rest is a blank. The others simply remember Skaia itself going dark. When Rose came to them, cleansed and upright though her memory of this part is still fuzzy, they fled to LoFaF. This was part of a plan they organized with the Trolls, as a Universe Switching Teleporter could be found there - Sollux would later note that none existed in the Troll's universe except in Exile pods, like in canon. He wonders why the difference. Unfortunately, the four kids were cut off by Hephaestus, who was himself apparently Grimdark. They were able to defeat the Denizen together, though not without him once again given them the now-frequent admonishment: "cheaters".

On the subject of Foresight, no one has much to say, though Rose repeats my author's note that it's strange he would play the voice actor in a message from the other Horrorterrors if the other HTs don't seem to support him. She once again questions the purpose of The Dargon Arc as a message. Karkat calls the meeting adjourned, and warns the others to keep an eye out for the Triumvirate's symbols, going to his usual outlanded extremes to call the symbols "evil." Rose agrees, but objects to his phrasing, claiming the Three-Pronged Sign is not actually one of their symbols.

"They're using it, yes, and by all means keep an eye out, but it doesn't represent them like you're saying. It just represents an organized mind." She touched on the symbol [on a tablet computer between them.] "Hindsight, presence of mind, foresight. All spanning off from an individual: the dot, in this symbol. 'I slept in last night,' 'So I will set my alarm now.' 'And thus I will wake up on time tomorrow.' Self-awareness, planning. Sentience, if you wanted to be lofty, certainly nothing we'd want to demonize. I wouldn't be surprised if they borrowed this symbol, maybe co-opted it from Sburb."

Feferi agrees, noting "And it's probably on hundreds of cult things that have nothing to do with us, too." This little agreement helps soften their relationship a bit until they're talking again, and Feferi notes to her that the hindsight-presence-foresight dynamic reminds her of her own regal planning, mentioned a while back, and that feels happy that Rose 'gets it' after all. The two will get along a while longer.

But their minor happiness is an abnormality, especially with Karkat in consideration, as he will continue to investigate the Triumvirate for the rest of the Act and beyond, part of which would involve explaining what happened in the Secret Strife in the open for those who missed it.

The chapter would end with an ambiguous lead-off to an unseen conversation, as Rose comes to Kanaya and thanks her for waiting through the meeting with Gamzee and above, in spite of Karkat's interruption. Kanaya replies, "You made a persuasive argument." And we fade that to black.
"Your name is Rose Lalonde, and for the first time in your life, you are sexually frustrated."

Our chapter title, ladies and gentlemen!

Rose's narration goes on to explain that she and Kanaya are starting over, much like Aradia and Sollux (the two make an appearance in the chapter, probably here, happy and relatively neutral). Rose is undecided if this is a good move for their relationship, but notes that being sexually frustrated has not prevented her from also being fairly happy, "ecstatic," the narration says, "compared to the past month or so." She and Kanaya are trying now to "meet in the middle" between Troll relationships and Human. They initially tried to be open with one another about each discrepancy, but, finding that too stressful and trying, have been relaxing the reigns for the past while. This segues to a conversation with Terezi, which characterizes our chapter as a whole: segue, segue, segue. Our chapter title, ladies and gentlemen.

Much like Chapter 19, this chapter is designed to set the scene for the Act and also to clear a time skip. Throughout this chapter, we get loose mentions of Rose's auspistice rather than giving them a highlight scene, culminating with a comparison scene on the Rat Trap, where Rose corrals them much easier than she did in 19. To our surprise and theirs, the relationship seems to be intact and by not giving them a highlight scene, the whole thing seems to be maturing to something that can actually function in society, as talked about in the previous chapter. Rose mentions in narration how she is keeping a close eye on both of them, but is acting hands-off so long as they don't forget about her. She compares herself to Feferi here: while Aradia does not mind attention, especially when in her robot personality, and Equius demands it, Vriska and Eridan would both very much like not to be pushed, especially after so recent and harsh a push on Vriska. Thus, Rose gives them as much leeway as the situation demands.

The conversation with Terezi talks about Rose's concern that Karkat and Terezi's relationship has progressed from "weird alien potential to just plain spitefulness." Terezi defends things but can't exactly help being spiteful in the process, though Rose admits that that's "the only possible Freudian response". Terezi fondly regards this remark as "still so totally weird."

This gives us our jump to Dave, whom Rose is talking to about non-chronological opponents, as she fears the Triumvirate might pull that kind of stunt on her, though Dave figures they're too used to working alone. They work on the Rat Trap together and talk about Rose's ability to speak in tone as Dave sidesteps her attempts to get him to talk about Terezi. Instead, she talks to him about Aradia, and Dave admits that things are going great… except for Aradia's auspistice, because Equius skeeves him out and Feferi keeps giving him "instructions."

"I don't think even Zahhak likes her."

"He's not supposed to like her," Rose pointed out.

"You know what I mean. He was talking to Leijon about going full caliginous with Aradia."

"Mhm. And how did that make you feel?"

Dave squirms. "Stop doing that!"

Rose smiles.

"And don't look so smug."
She returns to Dave. "Well, if you want my professional opinion—"

"Oh, always. I am King Shit of needing your professional opinion, professionally speaking. I'll put it down right here with pad and quill pen ready to transcribe your gleanings for the record-book. Nitram will be my notary, we'll both be signing with blood."

"Which profession are you exemplifying here, anyway?"

"What part of that didn't sound like psychology to you?"

Rose pauses and decides to veer things back on topic. "…Equius just left one dysfunctional relationship with Aradia. If he leaves this one so early with no good reason, that makes it dysfunctional and I think we can all agree he'd be nose-diving into a third."

"Exactly," Dave mutters.

From here, we cut to another scene: Kanaya, talking to John about the set of ectoclones they plan to make to populate their new world. She's trying to broach a delicate subject: Troll/Human hybrids among the clones, as it's clear John has mastered ectobiology enough to do this, or even more nuanced work. To diffuse the tension (and also because it's a legitimate thing of importance for later), this is also where I introduce John's new prop: an arm in a jar. To absolutely everyone's discontent, John spends much of his time in this Act fiddling with this new toy. The arm is something that he cooked up for Gamzee, though Gamzee has opted for Equius to make him a cybernetic limb, as he wants as little to do with the disembodied limb as everyone else. John has since kept the arm around to learn more about ectobiology, in hopes of better success in the future, which doesn't make anyone feel any better about it constantly being around. Kanaya's awkwardness around the limb actually helps her out in this scene, as it helps her talk in front of Vriska despite their earlier fight and Vriska's subsequent taunts to Rose, as Vriska is also too boggled by the arm to put up so much as a frown in Kanaya's direction. Their relationship neutrals out from there.

How on earth did we get there from the Dave scene, you ask? Well, sadly, it's based on a part of the John scene that might not actually have been included. See, I wanted John to be interacting not necessarily with Vriska (that probably would have happened in later chapters), but with Sollux and Feferi. The major purpose of getting John to talk to them was so I could contrast John and Feferi's leadership styles and to give Feferi a way of expressing her view that the Trolls and Humans will not be living together on the new world in a way that sounds reasonable. This was, nevertheless, probably not a very good idea. The most obvious reasons is because John isn't a POV, so it would be hard to give any friendship with Feferi and Sollux any screen time.

Without them, I also lose my transition to the next scene: Equius bemoaning his being attached to a Seadweller and a rustblood, and congratulating Nepeta on working so well with Jadeblooded Kanaya during Drone practice, and on "making sure the Mustardblood is kept in his place below you both. Continue doing so."

It seems Sollux's training is finally advancing, with those involved finally able to handle buckets without being grossed out, though it helps that they've by-and-large lost their audience. Equius' comment about putting the Mustardblood in his place has to do with Nepeta chiding Sollux during his lessons where Kanaya cannot kick her matronly habits. Jade plays middlewoman. Jade and Kanaya, it seems, are becoming friends, as they often have to work together on the Rat Trap and so spend almost as much time together as Kanaya does with Rose, or Jade and Nepeta. This leads to our next transition, where Rose remarks on this to Nepeta as they work on the Rat Trap. Nepeta thinks it's kind of funny that Rose thinks of Kanaya as a threat to her and Jade's relationship, and leaves, giggling.
This, however, leads to our central scene, with Jade as POV. Equius overhears Nepeta's transitional giggling, and asks into it. Nepeta fills him in about it being silly that Rose would think of Kanaya as a threat to her and Jade's relationship. He agrees with this, but does not initially seem to otherwise react. But when Jade returns to their platform, and she and Nepeta start joking about something, Equius begins to get argumentative, and finally demands Jade leave and send Kanaya to do her former task. When she argues, things rapidly get worse, and by Equius' language, it's clear he no longer approves of her and Nepeta's relationship, claiming Jade is "leading [Nepeta] on." As things get out of hand, Karkat soon comes to intervene, and Terezi with him, but they too are soon taking opposite sides, Terezi siding with Equius, though perhaps not as adamantly as Equius' own position.

The fight is finally broken up by Feferi, paralleling Rose stopping Vriska from going after Tavros, if much more efficiently done. Feferi even stops Dave from interceding on Jade's behalf when he arrives on-scene (perhaps chewing at the bit to get another shot at Terezi). But her intercession is also less polite than Rose's on Tavros' behalf: as Feferi takes Jade aside, she thanks her for not getting as hot headed as her friend, but tells her to clean things up with Nepeta or things will only get worse. This only confuses Jade more.

But while Jade appreciated not being called hot-headed to some degree, she still has a beef with Terezi, on Dave's behalf. ("Friends stick up for friends!" she insists.) She finds Terezi now working with Gamzee instead of Karkat, and tells her off, saying that she knows Terezi is friends with Rose but she sees how she treats her "friends" when she's done with them (Nepeta, Dave) and won't stand for that to happen to Rose. She also tells her she thinks Terezi's only with Karkat out of fear and that Terezi doesn't know what it means to really like someone, and tells her to "grow up!" Finally, she implies that if Terezi hurts Rose, she'll pay for it, not just from Jade but from Rose alone. Terezi laughs, saying Jade's right, but she thinks Rose is more likely to hurt herself on one of her own actual relationships. "I mean, did you see her in the lab? Moron!" When Jade glares, Terezi would counter: "Oh, don't give me that. We talk. She knows what I think."

Seeing her counterattack has slid right off of Terezi, Jade goes to talk to Dave to ask what he would have said, but he admits he was just going to "wing it." Jade tells him to grow up, as well. He takes that as a bit of a punch to the gut, but isn't without a reply himself. He asks her what she plans to do about Nepeta, if she's so grown up now, but Jade insists she and Nepeta are fine. "Besides:" she says, "what am I supposed to do, just shoot her down outta nowhere?" Dave shakes his head and cautions: "Harley. Don't be me." She leaves in huff and emotional confusion.
A Trollfreudian Nightmare

The bulk of this chapter concerns Karkat's research into the Triumvirate, as well as a brief recap of the Secret Strife for those that didn't see it. One of the largest branches of this discussion is his interview with Feferi (quite possibly written as a transcript) in which they discuss Horrorterror influence on Troll society, trying to put a peg on Hindsight, and Feferi's previous mention of a "Lily Empress". It was also possible that the Lily Empress' fairy tale would be told in fairy tale style, along with a brief history of Lovecraftian Earth.

From the Troll side of the tale, we would learn that the Lily Empress was a Troll leader and cultist once up on time (Aradia thinks prehistoric, given that it now seems she really existed). It's said that she led her tribe from a great fortress. Some poking and prodding in the Fleet Database suggests this fortress was the Blue Frog Temple deep under the earth, a fact lost to time thanks to the myths' accurate insistence that she was a seadweller and history forgetting that coastlines tend to move. This tale would also confirm, as best possible, that Doc Scratch does not exist in the H-verse (Aradia, who was seen conversing with Scratch in the First Draft, would probably say nothing, but would fidget appropriately for first drafters to catch on). It would also seed a few explanations for how Troll history continued to similar ends without his influence. That, however, is largely a topic for another time. Feferi goes on to explain that the Lily Empress' cult was supposedly wiped out by the Subjugglators, who she always denounced as false prophets. A few throwaway lines from Karkat would confirm (alongside Gamzee's lines earlier) that in spite of Scratch not being here, the subjugglator belief system seems to be the same, something the reader might mistakenly ascribe to Lord English being cross-universe, or to just plain mix-ups on my part, but we here in the Commentary of Things That Will Never Be know better, even if you don't specifically know why.

Lastly, the conversation would be used as a vehicle to remind the reader about the aristocracy in the H-verse, with the Empress, her matesprit, moirail, kismesis and publicity-purposes-only auspistice (nobody gets to boss around the Empress, are you serious?), introduced back in Chapter 14, which was far too early. This is much closer and more appropriate.

Karkat's interviews, using Jade as stenographer (to enforce my four points of view) would likely take place against a number of backdrops, allowing other things to go on behind the main discussion. There are three such interviews: Feferi and Aradia, Gamzee for Subjugglator information, and Sollux with the fleet database. Fef and Aradia would be split if necessary.

During the first such background scene, we would see Equius and Aradia interacting without Feferi's direct supervision. Things intensify (Aradia this time, her live personality slowly coming to the fore in this now-also-functional relationship), but Feferi leaves them be until they cross an invisible threshold and she calms them at once with a snap of her fingers. The scene is otherwise focused, especially if we have to go full-on fairy tale, leaving us little time for background goofing off.

In the scene with Gamzee, in which he is up and about and happy to be so, we also see some interactions between Eridan, Vriska and Tavros. And by "interactions" I mean Eridan and Vriska interacting as Tavros and Vriska plaintively try to ignore one another. Eridan fails to notice either of their malaise, affectionate as he is to both of them in their own ways. Rose arrives during the scene, catches on to the tension and begins exchanging insults with Eridan, leaving obvious spider- and eight-themed openings for Vriska to latch to so she can take over. Vriska eventually does, though it takes a moment to stop laughing at Rose's weird phrase-use.

The most notable of these background scenes, however, is set during a Drone Club meeting behind
Karkat's interview with Sollux. During the scene, Sollux realizes Karkat does not want to be near the buckets, so draws it out as long as possible, deadpanning all his information from the database to annoy Karkat more (in another scene, we "see" Nepeta sneaking up on the interview and smacking the spade bucket in Sollux's hand, scaring the crap out of everyone but Jade. Feferi, in the distance, falls down laughing at her boyfriend and leader cowering together). As this is happening, we will also see Karkat is deliberately changing the subject from Mirann, sometimes poorly, whenever Kanaya is within hearing distance. When Jade asks what the hell is up with Karkat's behaviour around his moirail, he explains he's not letting Kanaya know he considers the Triumvirate a threat at all.

“I don’t get it, Karkat, don’t you think Kanaya would want to help Rose?”

“Listen, Harley, let me demonstrate this complicated concept to you using the closest thing I can find to, as we say, predigested grubfood.”

"Pablum?"

"Gross. No, like, with hand puppets. This," he waves one, "is the girl I don’t want to see turn into a jade volcano of other people’s blood and bone, and this," the other, and he splayed its fingers, "is the trans-reality mollusc sucking out her girlfriend’s frontal lobe.”

Jade cocked her head. “.......so.....”

Karkat reaches up with both puppets and boxes her ears. "I swear you're your brother's ectocclone some days."

Jade then reaches out, taps him on the chest and teleports him into somewhere inopportune given the setting, say, Gamzee's recouperacon. "You deserved that," she says.

Karkat, preferably distant: "I did not!"

"Hey best friend."

"Gamzee why is your floor covered in ratlingtraps?"

"H3Y BOYFR1END"

"...HARLEY!"

This bit of slapstick isn't a very punchy note to end the chapter on, but be aware that the actual chapter would have heftier nuggets of knowledge like "Doc Scratch never existed here" and "Wait, maybe the Triumvirate really did create this timeline and here are some implications of that," so you'll have to excuse my commentary's organization more than any insufficiencies of the plot. Let's move on!
This is an awkward chapter in that even in the original plot outline, circa Original Draft Chapter 1. To the point: I never felt this chapter had enough substance to carry its own weight. But there's a critical character motivation moment in it, and it gives us an auspistice-focused chapter, so I've always kept it around. Let's see what I can do here in the commentary to jazz it up.

The chapter begins with Rose overhearing Feferi trying to talk to Dave. Fef seems to have gone there to ask him how he feels about Aradia and Equius, since she realizes that Humans are strictly monogamous (even beyond what the Trolls consider monogamous) and is worried this will bother him. Dave immediately deflects the subject, several times passively before turning things around on Feferi and asking her what the deal is in pressuring Jade about Nepeta.

(Rose will realize that Dave actually agrees with Feferi about Jade and Nepeta and is really stretching to call Feferi "pressuring" compared to his own reaction in Chapter 30. She concludes that he actually is perturbed by Aradia's relationship with Equius, to the point that he's getting defensive. During this bout of narrative psychoanalysis, the narrative itself takes on tone, much like how the narrative did with Vriska in her so-far-only chapter. Rose would immediately interrupt this coloured thought, and would talk about how she shouldn't do that:"

"It would just confuse any sort of casual onlooker. You've [Rose, that is] always been of the mind that you should keep an open mind on who might be reading your mind, in case there was someone, say (just a random example here) a betentacled god the size of Eurasia, who planned to penetrate your mind and whoa, okay subconscious, you'll admit you deserved that, let's just cancel the whole discussion shall we?"

Unfortunately, this fight between Dave and Feferi only calls Karkat and Terezi back into the debate. Indeed they seem eager to get into it, as though they've been having talks on the subject since the blow-up at the Rat Trap. Unfortunately, the debate gets less than organized fast, nearly violent, with Karkat still on the Humans' side and Terezi, while perhaps not on Feferi's side, not on the Humans', either. Yet, in the end, it's Terezi Rose pulls away from the fight, even though she's getting disgusted with what she's saying. Terezi starts to insist it's "all in good, blackrom fun," but is interrupted by a sudden arrival at the transportalizer.

You see, this chapter is intended as a joke-take on The Black and White Turnabout, and as such begins with a scene unrelated to the rest of the chapter: where B&W Turnabout's was light-hearted followed by pseudo-serious, this one is dead serious, followed by the light-hearted. In this case, the arrival at the transportalizer is an actively vibrating, giftwrapped present for Vriska, held in both – yes both – of Gamzee's hands.

Bear with me.

Gamzee's new robot arm is ready! A huge, bulky, gas-guzzling thing in contrast to Vriska's, it's nevertheless all he never knew he wanted, and is completely over-the-top, like carrying a piece of Equius with you, wherever you go. Of course, it's also constantly breaking, but Equius takes pride in this: "Constantly breaking, not constantly broken, like the Rustblood's legs. This will never fully break. It will simply malfunction without fail." The central of these malfunctions seems to be that it constantly breaks out in bizarre sound effects, from clanking mechanical to outright Tex Avery (I swear I wrote this before Trickster Jane infected the top bar). Everyone agrees this is much better than John's arm in a jar. These scenes are spread throughout the chapter – Gamzee becomes important again near the end and I don't want that to seem out-of-place.
Gamzee's arm's first task is this gift to Vriska from a mysterious benefactor. This is our opening for this chapter's mystery, which is entirely stupid, and its solution, while not immediately apparent, is still completely obvious. The gift is the first in a series of pranks against Vriska and Eridan, and they soon team up (with Rose as their reluctant Watson, yet again) to find out who is responsible. As an inside joke, the prankster is clearly a Troll: where John's pranks accidentally included Troll sex toys, these pranks innocently involve dildos, vibrators and exploding condoms filled with helium and bizarre oozes.

Throughout the chapter, Vriska and Eridan's teamwork is evident, and Rose stuck around with them much longer than she would have simply out of intrigue at just how well they're working together. This ends, long after Rose has worked out who's responsible, when they find the condoms in Vriska' hive. As Rose wipes off a splatter of some mysterious fluid the colour of dried mucus, she says "I'm out" and leaves the actual prank-ees to solve things themselves. Kanaya, seeing this mess, refuses to even clean the clothes. "That's what I was afraid of," Rose says. Rose soon returns in clean clothes and begins watching the pair from afar, whistful. Terezi arrives to sit next to her and repeats that it's all in "good, blackrom fun," which Rose can't fully deny at this point this time.

"You didn't think it was all slap-slap-kiss-kiss, did you?" Terezi asks.

"It's more like slap-slap… -warm-fuzzy-feeling-not-unlike-pride," Rose admits. Terezi laughs, and after a few more paragraphs of Vriska and Eridan, Ace Detectives, she slap's Rose's arm and thanks her for pulling her off of Karkat, admitting that it was honestly getting bad. To that, Rose replies: "Any time, you psychopath." Terezi chuckles.

Eridan and Vriska's investigation continues from there, seen from multiple perspectives (including Vriska's after Rose leaves, always a rare treat). The investigation covers one other extended scene of note when we are in Jade's perspective. In it, Nepeta comes crawling into the room after a conversation with Equius, looking dejected. Equius arrives after and ignores her, going instead to his computer and later with a question for Sollux. Nepeta initially goes towards Jade, but instead turns away and talks to Terezi. The chat is perfunctory but their relationship is clearly in far better state than Vriska and Tavros' at present, showing the possibility for recovery. Nepeta also hits on Karkat while she's there (in fact, that seems to be the reason she went near Terezi at all). This flirting is overt given their lack-of history, raising Equius' attention away from his conversation with Sollux, and he breaks it up, much to Karkat's relief.

Jade, our point of view, is listening to Nepeta too much to focus on Equius, but with Nepeta diverted, she listens in as Nepeta sits at Jade's lap in a pout. Equius' conversation with Sollux seems to be about Drone business, which he pretends (poorly) to admire. What does catch Jade's ear is when he warns Sollux to put equal, but even more careful, measure into his activities "beyond the bucket. Well, so to speak. Which is to say, initially. …Prior to the bucket. If you, ah… if you follow me."

Sollux is put out. "Zahhak, are you…"

Panic. "No, certainly not!"

"…are you telling me to make it with FF?" Sollux asks, astonished.

"What? I mean, well, perhaps?" Equius says.

"dude"

"…And why should I not be concerned with my auspistice's happiness and well-being?"
"Because… dude!"

"I shall take your 'dudes' and ask you to shove it, lowb100d."

Nepeta chimes in here. "Uh boy," she groans, and slinks back away from Jade.

When Nepeta returns to Jade she looks very tired, and slumps down with her head in Jade's lap without so much as a glance in Equius' direction, turned instead toward Karkat, brooding. She seems preoccupied, and Jade reaches over to rub her head. After a moment of that, Nepeta looks up, and meets Jade's eyes with a mix of seriousness, exhaustion and emotion (a mix Jade associates with Equius), and Jade pulls her hand away. Still, conversation continues. "Jade," she asks, "Do you… I mean…" (she stalls, the hand having now been pulled away), "…even if you don't, we could pretend, but…"

"What? Even if I don't what?" Jade asks.

"If I was more a-attractive, do you think I'd have…" her train of thought has clearly been thrown by Jade's aversive reaction. She indicates vaguely toward Karkat. "…better luck?"

Jade immediately realizes that Equius has been badgering Nepeta again about her relationships, thus the flirting with Karkat. She does not know what to say, and is put off even more when she realizes Rose and Terezi have overheard the whole thing. Jade twice reaches to pat Nepeta's head again, once brushing her hair behind her ear, and finally manages "I think you're pretty," though she's upset at herself for hesitating.

Nepeta smiles, but says nothing, and the investigation scene continues. We leave Jade's point of view considerably later, when Nepeta gets up to go to a meeting with Aradia that she refuses to explain to anyone, even Equius (though it helped that Equius did not hear the part that went "with Aradia," as I don't think he'd have let up asking if he had).

Finally, all our point of view switching and intrigue comes to its climax, as our intrepid lead duo uncover the culprit, about five pages after the reader does. It's Tavros (gasp! shock!), who arranges the scene, perhaps entirely by accident, to look like a Blofeldian villain reveal, complete with swivel chair, plushie in lap and moirail as his hired muscle. Its clear he thinks the whole thing is hilarious, and it's also clear from his awkward inability to lie that he thought it would help him and Vriska at least talk again like Terezi and Nepeta can (he is about to say something about Eridan, as well, but arm popped or swirls or made some other kind of distracting noise from its Alexandrian archive of onomatopoeia, and throws him). Even better, his friends are also happy.

Unfortunately, while Vriska does throw Tavros a quick bone of acknowledgement, the general celebration is for them solving the mystery, and Tavros is left behind. I'm unsure how obvious I'd have made this. Do I highlight him looking upset, or do I just sit back and see if my readers are more observant than Vriska and Eridan at how neglectful they've become?

The final scene would return us to Rose, who comes in on Tavros and Gamzee, bearing horrible food. It would seem that, after we left them last, Terezi and Rose decided to celebrate Gamzee's recovery with a small party reminiscent of their night in the kitchen. Karkat is (forcibly) dragged along by his kismesis, and Tavros is quickly swept up in the proceedings. Gamzee is moved to emotion, triggering his tone in extremes, and it often levels off into the entirely lowercase tone we saw earlier, in Act 4.

Finally, as they eat cake (awful cake), he thanks his friends and moirail for the gathering. "I didn't know I got so many awesome bros here in this place, you know? It's like you said, Rosie. We've got our own damn setup going, growin' up connections and shit." Or something to that effect, the general idea is that he starts quoting what Rose had been saying in Chapter 29, and her comparison of maturing Troll relationships to Human relationships. He phases out in the way he often does, as he
eats another forkful of cake, and as though unaware of the others, adds: "fuck if jack's out there, i've got my whole motherfucking family in here"

The significance of this – and for that matter, the fact that he was listening to her previous conversation in such detail – deeply impacts Rose. She looks around to see that none of the other Trolls gave a wit, except possibly Karkat, who deliberately avoids looking at her, or for that matter, Gamzee. Knowing the comment was meant off-hand and not even necessarily directed at her, Rose nevertheless feels the need to reply, and, as she's seated next to Gamzee on the floor, she rests her head on his shoulder.

Though it would not be mentioned for several chapters, Presence's Secret Strife would take place that very night.
The chapter opens with Jade working with Kanaya on breeding cavern work while Sollux coordinates with Equius on his "drone costume," which could quickly be described as an adult Troll's uniform with rubber or plastic spikes to denote status. Aradia is also there, and though she and Equius have a few pleasant disagreements, she seems mostly there to hang out with Sollux and tease him about the costume between long gaps of neutrality.

At the same time, Jade and Kanaya are getting along swimmingly, they may even talk about hanging out later (Jade appears to be continuing her bio-brother's tradition of hoisting terrible entertainment on Trollfriends, in that Jade is trying to get Kanaya to watch awful TV shows). They also hold a whispered conversation about Troll/Human hybrids in the clone set when the subject arises naturally as part of conversation. Jade is surprised to learn that Kanaya is against the idea, and asks if Kanaya really wouldn't want to have kids with Rose one day (if they get back together, Jade hastily corrects). Kanaya asks if that's really relevant, as she's not sure if the ecto equipment will be allowed out of the game and into the new universe: the first batch of hybrids may be the only batch, a third species that might not even be able to breed with its parents. But even allowing for the best possible situation, Kanaya's answer is still no. Like the average Troll, perhaps, Kanaya has no reason to want a connection to any offspring. Jade worries that Rose might, and Kanaya acknowledges that that is a possibility.

Kanaya is obviously put out, but Jade perhaps worse, as she's starting to see an ugly picture develop across their group of 16. She prods her friend about some of the other biases that have been cropping up lately on Feferi, Equius and Terezi's lips, and Kanaya seems to fall in line with them, though Jade is too cowardly to address each subject explicitly. It's possible, she justifies, that Kanaya doesn't agree on some of the details, but does that really make things better?

The discussion finally turns Jade's attention to another issue: Nepeta, while present at the Drone Club meeting, is not participating in either discussion. She is off on a bench, lost in thought, flicking the handle of the bucket seated next to her from time to time. Kanaya notices Jade's forlorn observation and asks her what's going on.

"I'm awful," Jade says. "What do I say to her? What would you say? What would you say, if a guy asked you?"

"…If a guy asked me… what?" Kanaya asks.

"I don't know!" Jade says, pulling at her hair. "She hasn't actually asked me anything! That makes it even more frustrating!"

Jade ultimately decides to take some of her own medicine: like Kanaya before her, she will Tell Nepeta How She Feels This Very Day God Dammit, come hell or high water. When Kanaya points out that Karkat's called a mandatory meeting in less than an hour, Jade snubs him indirectly. Kanaya is almost inclined to agree with her, since Karkat has been so hush-hush on the subject that she's not sure what it's even about or if it's even important, though she guesses it has something to do with restarting the Imp Flushes, as it's been weeks now (hopefully implied in a previous chapter).

Soon enough, Equius leaves, and Kanaya and Aradia go for the meeting. Jade gets ready to go, but then lingers, waiting for Sollux or Nepeta to leave so she can talk to Nepeta on her own. And she lingers, and then lingers again, until she's lingering so far out the door that Nepeta seems to have mistaken her as having left. Nepeta goes, instead, to talk to Sollux, girds her teeth, stands up straight and says: "I wanna be an Imperial Drone."
Jade is so confused that it takes her a moment to adjust to the situation. She presses her ear up against the door and starts swearing "Dammit, Rose," at her lack of eavesdropping superpowers. Luckily, she seems to have just missed nothing of import, just Sollux mocking Nepeta's request. Nepeta stands tall, but that soon becomes a topic of discussion: Nepeta is not very tall, and Sollux thinks that's just another argument against her being an effective Drone. She counters that Sollux is almost as short as her, and they're soon bickering back and forth about who's the tallest. Nepeta finally recovers focus and insists that Sollux can't do all the work himself for a breeding cavern the size Kanaya and Jade were describing earlier in the chapter (like Roxy, Nepeta's Rogue eavesdropping skills are just fine). Moreover, she doesn't have the slightest confidence in his actual ability as a Drone, echoing jibes she's been making for chapters but Jade, Rose and the narrative have never been taken seriously.

Sollux can't take them seriously now, either, and he calls her on it. "So when did Zahhak climb up your nook and die?" He counters that she is doing this only on orders from Equius, or that she is doing it to scare his relationship badgering away (something Sollux has heard about from Feferi), as Equius is clearly still afraid of the buckets, as recently as being unwilling to edit them into the costume mock-up. He then brings up Nepeta's inability to talk to Jade.

"That's not fair," she says.

"Why?"

"…b-because it's not fair!"

Nepeta is obviously upset, so Sollux continues his arguments, saying that she wouldn't be able to stand up to any arrogant clientele, and how she'd just be roleplaying a Drone instead of begin legitimately frightening. Nepeta counters that roleplaying gives her the edge. "You're just strutting around acting tough. Well I can strut around acting like a Drone, huh?"

"oh, plea2e."

Things escalate until Nepeta has Sollux roleplaying with her, both intending to use this to prove their points. She is playing a Drone and he a donor she has to frighten, for whatever reason (the debate between Kanaya, Feferi, Equius and others about how the Drones should operate is a minor detail of no summary-related import, but suffice to say that sometimes Sollux has been practicing a job with no clear job requirements and not even a suggestion of what is and is not good or even moral breeding behaviour, so they often just resort to treating the Drones as ambiguously frightening). This roleplay escalates until Nepeta has by the collar while she growls that he's going to give her a full bucket or, her voice getting lower and lower and closer to Equius' with each demand, she's going to "take you aside and make you piss in it."

To Jade's surprise, Sollux isn't scared by this change in tone, and indeed says: "…That was actually pretty good."

"i know!!" Nepeta says, angry that no one else has noticed.

Sollux stays belligerent for a while but ultimately agrees to let her train as a Drone, prompting a little scuffle of feet that makes Jade laugh, as she knows full well was an unintentional happy dance. While they bicker about the details for a moment, Nepeta ends the conversation by admitting to Sollux that yes, he is the taller one. "It's good, though," she says. "I like that you're letting your dreamself grow out."

"You'd use it to stay young forever," Sollux notes.

"I thought you'd just forget," she counters.
When they come to the door, laughing, Jade leaves, not wanting to be caught eavesdropping.

Back in the computer lab, we come to Karkat's meeting, and discover it's about the Triumvirate, announcing their existence to the cast-at-large with Rose and Feferi's permission. He apologizes explicitly to Kanaya and continues on (to be honest, my reason for excluding Kanaya from Karkat's research was so she could drop that hint about Imp Flushes just now). He warns the cast against the Triumvirate's symbols and outlines their dream-powers, which is to say, he reminds the readers, and we remind the readers as well that Hindsight has threatened that the Triumvirate will "test" Rose and others again in a dream.

During this conversation, which mentions CYQ's secret strife, Dave admits his Bro had no Sburbian tattoos, and Rose wonders if Hindsight Dreamed them up to distract her. Dave however, believing his Bro really was his Bro's ghost under mind control, suggests that he was the dreamer, and added the tattoos to send a message to "his kids."

At the end of the meeting, which would not be very long as it's mostly a last gasp of recap for those not keeping up-to-date at home, John asks who the others think the three Masks are hiding, when to everyone's surprise, Rose said she already knows the true identity of one of the three, and explains about the Secret Strife taking place the night after the previous chapter. Naturally, we don't get to hear the answer!
Tiny Breaks in Your Tidy Line

"Your name is Vriska Serket, and for the first time in your life, someone has come to you for relationship advice. What the hell! Even you think this is a bad idea! How do you communicate that to them if they've missed all the other hints. Do you… do you hit them? You don't tend to think of yourself as an unreasonable or unnecessarily violent person, I mean even considering that time, that other time, or that particular long stretch of time, it's just that, at this point, they're clearly not listening to words or facts…

You sit there listening more to your internal monologue than your companion. Every once and a while you glance at your fist but he doesn't notice that either. …Okay, that's it. You don't have the heart. Even a punch wouldn't get through to him now. Time to get the acid.

Metaphorically speaking, of course. The distinction is important: you actually have been saving a vial for a special occasion but that's neither here nor there."

Vriska, as we find out, is talking to Tavros ("Actually maybe this does qualify you mean even if you used it on yourself it couldn't be any more awkward or painful than sitting here and listening."). It seems that Tavros has come to really start worrying about his relationship with Eridan, as he said in the Normal ending of CYQ. Feeling he can still talk to Vriska about this despite her cautions, he begins to babble away about the nuances, many of which would have been hidden in previous chapters.

For what stretch Vriska allows herself to feel for him, she really does (feel for him, that is). Vriska makes a few comparisons that are obviously meant to be read as being about her unrequited crush on John, also seeded through the previous chapters… I hoped. You'll notice I never mentioned it, I don't claim to have expected perfect chapters if things had continued as-planned and the flaws can easily be seen in this outline. The keyword, unfortunately, is "unrequited," so Vriska can't tell Tavros much more than what she feels will not work, and as a result is not really much help. Nevertheless, she comes up with a plan (those paying attention will note similarities with Rose earlier) to have Tavros get Eridan on a big date.

At the end of the conversation, Tavros wistfully asks Vriska how she thought their novel would have ended if they had continued. She admits, privately, that she didn't think it was the sort of thing that would have ended. "Yeah," he says, "I know that feeling, uh, pretty well." He then goes off, and talks to Karkat ("What do you want?")) before we fade to black.

The next section intentionally mirrors Chapter 24 with Rose's setup for her date with Kanaya, except here it's Rose hanging around as Eridan prepares in semi-public. Chapter 32 will have prepared the reader for this kind of setup, which is intentional, because it all comes crashing down the moment Tavros arrives and announces:

"Eridan, I think we should break up."

The entire room is shock-stunned, Eridan most of all of course, though with Rose as our point of view we have to worm through her shock before we can even get to his. She tries to work out exactly what has most flabberghasted her about the entire situation, until she concludes that by tone, uncharacteristic planning and worry, she is most surprised because she realizes Tavors is deeply sincere.

Tavros' tone in the chapter would have depended more on how often readers commented on noticing signs of trouble in the relationship, being specific and measured if they hadn't and emotional if they...
had. Tavros' conclusion is that Eridan is just as dedicated and loving as he's ever been, but can't focus on more than one thing at a time (he compares it to his old genocide plans), so that when the auspistice rose to prominence in CYQ, auspistice being an element the fandom would likely not have considered as a factor in a matespritship, Eridan began to focus on that to prevent CYQ from happening again. Over time, he forgot why he was doing that to begin with. Tavros recites the incidents from across the last Act in clearer detail, digging the hole deeper. Rose's pity turns to shame and guilt when she realizes she's perhaps more responsible for that change in attitude than Eridan himself.

Eridan begs a second chance, but Tavros reminds him that he's already on his second chance, the first chance having dried up before the story began. Waffling in confusion between anger and tears, Eridan looks to Rose, and realizes she'll be of no help. Tavros gives him as much time as he's able but, upset himself, eventually has to turn to leave. The others present give them both their quiet, as people do in situations like these, dignity for Tavros and no comfort for Eridan.

At the door, Tavros finds Gamzee waiting for him, and Gamzee beckons to him and they go off into the tunnels outside the room. As they go, Rose can hear them talking.

"dO YOU THINK, tHAT WAS DID OKAY, gAMZEE,"

"Fucker, you was as brave as any bro I know, you know?" No reply. "…i'm proud of you."

"bUT, dID I DO, tHE,,, the right thing?"

Gamzee pauses, he even turns back towards Eridan. "…Tav," he says, putting his arm over Tavro's shoulder. "the only bro I know who could say if you did the right thing here is you in the first place."

Seeing Tavros leave with his moirail is too much for Eridan, who stammers and stamps and simply does not know what to say to anyone, certainly not Rose. Rose herself, and our narration as a result, is at a loss, so in the end, she defaults.

"C'mon," she says, taking him by the wrist. "We're going to do something."

"What?" Eridan asks.

"I don't know," Rose admits. "I'm freestyling. Come on."

She drags him out, and gravitates to her new comfort zone: the cafeteria where she hung out with Gamzee and Tavros. There, she starts pulling through the fridges but ultimately can't find anything she feels will help. Instead, she ends up sitting with Eridan while she eats ice cream (a failed attempt to "do what Humans do" for lack of any better ideas) while remembering her mother's attempt to placate her once in her youth by signing her for a Dairy Queen franchise. The memory does not make Rose's attempts to be an auspistice – this adult parallel and tangent to parenthood – any easier. She reminds herself that she chose to be there, and that's that's a key difference, but it helps that when she does consider leaving, Eridan pipes up to ask her to stay, realizing that she was going to go just from her disposition.

It soon becomes clear Eridan's just as starved for words with her as he was with Tavros. Finally, Eridan does communicate more than a desire for Rose to say, if only by getting his own ice cream. He eats a spoonful and balks. "this is awfful,"

Rose is then reminded that she chose to be his auspistice for a reason, and, as a result, she can experience a joy no parent ever could: "Then try something else instead of whining," she says, instead of "I'm sorry." She adds: "Asshole."
Eridan ignores her, as she might have expected, but as he lays back into the cafeteria seats. "Did you see him?" he asks. "Tav always coulda told somebody what-for like that but he never did. I knew he had it in him, though. ...Didn't think it'd be me. You know what the worst part is?" he asks her. "...I knew."

They finished their time together in silence.

"Your name is Vriska Serket and clown, clown, oh my god, the clown is in your personal bubble; clown, clown, where did he come from why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why."

Gamzee has come, and Gamzee, much to Vriska's intense displeasure, has come with hugs. He passes on a message from Tavros thanking Vriska for her advice and Gamzee personally thanks her for playing against type (and the incidents of CYQ) in giving the advice. And then he hugs her. "You're a good person," he reassures.

"I don't want to be!" Vriska protests, strangled.

Gamzee than thanks her again, and says Tavros probably needs her to keep being good for him. "I can trust you to look out for my bro, yeah?" he asks. Vriska nods. Vriska nods a very good deal. "That's good," he drawls. "That's sweet. And! If you try to take advantage of him!" he say, and smiles. "I'll kill yah!"

He then both pats her head and ruffles her hair. Vriska stays frozen until she absolutely, positively has to blink, and Gamzee winks back in what he must think is a reply. He then makes his way across the room to Karkat. "Hey best friend."

"Oh what the hell is it no—gak!—god!"

Vriska recovers only to find Rose standing there, chuckling at Karkat but still somewhat despondent. "What do you want?" Vriska asks, immediately suspicious. Rose asks Vriska how she's doing and Vriska locks eyes with her to see if she can scare her off with a death-glare, but failing that, she kicks out a roller chair so Rose can sit. Rose does, and asks her questions for a while, but Vriska eventually has to ask: "Lalonde, are you here for a reason?" Rose is at a loss for an answer, but her crestfallen look is answer enough. "Ugh, you can't honestly be taking this break-up personally."

Vriska reaches over to pat-ruffle her hair and says: "You're a good person, Rose."

Rose laughs. "A bad one you mean."

"No. I hate good people. I'm done with all of you! Capricious schmaltzy bullshit and all of you too surprised that Tavros has a pair. 'What the hell?' to all of you!"

"You knew?"

"I didn't know, but I'm not surprised that he stood up for himself. God, you didn't think I was attracted to him as a mumbling weenie, did you?"

Rose cocks an eyebrow. "I thought you were trying to 'fix' him."

Vriska sighs. "I was trying to help him reach his potential. Nuance, Rose!"

"So you think he'll be okay?"

"Okay?" Vriska laughs. "He's probably West Alternia-ing it with Equius in the repair room right now."
"I'm sorry, what?" Rose asks, waving a hand for silence.

"Oh, uh..." Vriska thinks through a few conversations with John. "What do you call it, when you kiss with your tongues?"

Rose groans at the realization. "Nevermind." She checks up on Gamzee's attempt to get Karkat to keep an eye out for Tavros. "Okay. I'll give you my surprise that he stood up for himself. But I'm still surprised in general. I guess I just figured... they were going fairly strong. I guess most relationships don't go on forever, but..."

"Hey," Vriska says, "they're both good guys. Well, I mean, one of them is, and the other one's an asshole, so..." She holds up hands like a scale.

"Quadrants, yes," Rose agreed. "Carry on."

"I'm just sayin', someone else will want them. Probably one of the ectoclones. Hell! Won't most of us be hooking up with an ectoclone?" She shook her fist as though with a set of dice. "Playing the odds? Trolls, Humans, hell we're talking Hybrids now, aren't we? C'mon, Lalonde, you can hook up with some human thing but with horns, best of both worlds?" Vriska holds up two fingers to Rose's forehead, and has them pushed away.

"Don't do that," Rose says. "The puppet-ghost of my ectofather decided to call me out for cultural misappropriation a month ago, I am not in the mood."

"Culture? Shit, I'm just talking about sex. C'mon, Rose, don't lie, you want an excuse to mess up a good jar like us cool kids." When this only gets mild squirming out of Rose, Vriska changes gears: "Speaking of breakups and jars, how's Fussyfangs?"

"And magically, this branch of the conversation has come to an end," Rose orders. "And we're not broken up."

"Teeeeechnically, yes you are!"

Rose changes gears, and says: "Do you think there's any chance Eridan and Tavros might get back together?"

Vriska shrugs. "Who's to say?" Seeing that Rose is going to be a while, Vriska takes out some knitting Rose taught her and Eridan as an ashen distraction several chapters back.

Rose shakes her head. "I dunno. I guess I simply hope. This is all so sudden for me, even though for Tavros and Eridan it's been sinking in for weeks. I can't adjust." Rose takes out her own knitting. "On one hand, you're right, and maybe they would find someone else... and someone else again black. And that's good! I suppose the heart of the issue is that it's happier with the people you know?"

"Ah, the great fanfiction delusion." Vriska laughs into her project.

Rose sighs. "...Not that you still don't want to hook up with John, of course."

Vriska jabs a needle in Rose's face. "Your friend is a brick." Shakes her head. "...Look, if you give me his door code and I wait there in lace panties, do you think he'd at least get what we're getting at?" Rose laughs. "I can bring Karkat too, solve all our problems in one fell swwop."

"If Karkat wears the panties I will give you the code and a camera phone."
Karkat squirms in the distance. "They're talking about me!" he protests to Gamzee, hoping it will get him free of their conversation.

"S'cuz you're awesome, my man," is all Gamzee will allow, between squeezes. "S'cuz you're there for your team."

"Are you going to give me a death threat when this is over, too?" Karkat asks.

"It's coming."

Rose shakes her head. "And somehow you've managed to make this conversation about sex as well."

"Oh, well, sorry, lusus," Vriska says, returning to her sewing.

Rose sighs. "Vriska, as someone who already has to put up with you in one quadrant and doesn't really want you banging against a neighbouring wall in the middle of the night—"

"That's a pretty vigorous make out session you're describing for someone who doesn't want to talk about sex."

"…look, just ask John out again. You're infuriating."

Vriska pauses, but finally says something Rose did not expect: "I already screwed up because of Jack," she growls. "Gimmie some damn dignity."

Rose is about to reply, but Vriska then returns, adamantly, to sewing. Rose decides to give her her space by doing the same. This serves as our transition as we find Rose and Kanaya sitting back to back, sewing, on the surface of the meteor.

"And then she just doesn't say anything!" Rose protests. Kanaya shakes her head. "I don't know. Everyone seems… well, as all right as I could expect. I was more worried about Eridan, to be honest, but a few minutes later, he actually showed up to talk to Vriska."

"To Vriska?" Kanaya asks. Rose fills in that he came to ask her if they could do something — anything — to take his mind off of things. "And you trust them to do just that, on their own?" Kanaya asks.

Rose almost finds her own feelings funny. "Yes! I actually do. …I'm not sure since when."

Kanaya sighs. "I used to worry about Eridan, after Feferi broke up with him. I thought he might do something drastic."

"I hear he attacked some sort of Consort species?"

"I'm not sure of the details," Kanaya says. "I meant later, though, when we were together in the lab. I figured, if I got the chance, I would try to funnel his rage to more productive ends but… he never got to me."

"I guess he never got angry," Rose says, with a shrug.

"I'm not sure," Kanaya said. "Did he ever say anything to you?"

Rose sets down her needlework when she realizes that yes, he did. Or rather: "Tavros did. He says Gamzee served Eridan some of his pies—" Kanaya grunts disapproval, "—and Eridan started getting weepy about a whole whack of things."
"Well, tears are better than laser fire," Kanaya admits. "...I'm glad you're here, Rose. Even just in general. I think you're helping. I think all four of you are in your own way."

"By what metric?"

"Hm?" Kanaya is confused.

"By what metric," Rose repeats. "I'm not doing anything to help us defeat Jack. I'm fairly sure things only escalated between Vriska and Eridan as a result of my ill-action. What metric?"

"Personal growth? Is that valuable to you?"

Rose shakes her head, she does not know. "But I will turn it around," she says. "I'm glad you're all here. In my last dream..." She hangs her head. It's clear Kanaya does not know the details, but Rose deliberately changes the subject by taking Kanaya's hand and squeezing. "And I'm glad you're here. Here specifically. With me."

"Yes, well," Kanaya says, aware that Rose is dodging the subject but perhaps eager to pursue this as well. "A lot has changed, hasn't it?" She scoots over to face Rose, still holding her hand. "So tell me, my favourite psychoauspistice," Kanaya says, to keep Rose off-guard. "Did you ask me back Out because of the sad changes, or the good ones?"

Rose nods. "Eridan and Tavros breaking up. Jack... coming. I can't pretend these aren't factors. Maybe I'm starting to understand what Terezi was going on about on that roof." She then looks up from Kanaya's hand to give a shy smile and say: "But it's not like I had no hope."

Kanaya tips her hand toward Rose. "How much hope, then, I wonder?"

Following her girlfriend's invitation, Rose kisses up her hand and arm until she's close enough for Kanaya to pull her in for a proper kiss under the starlight.

Except, as Rose once noted very, very long ago, there aren't any stars in the Incipisphere...
through Time, Space and Paradox Space alike, where they find Nyarlathotep clutching the Incipisphere.

One of the net lines is met there by tentacles, and sees an eye with a diagonal slash as the pupil: Foresight. Presence cuts between them, however, and points Jack's line off to the distance, where he sees another universe glimmering, a Blue frog, and Jack sends the line streaming toward it, past the dead remains of a Red frog, ripped open by a massive blow (Nyarlathotep, no doubt, given his distance from any other candidates). The Net comes to rest on a very particular spot in spacetime: one that I have to admit was not well set up for such a treatment. Specifically, Jack touches down on the rally seen in the Troll propaganda video in Chapter 14, and seizes on the Empress and her quadrant-mates. Jack transforms before Dave and Aradia's eyes, picking up the weapons of his unwitting allies, including the 2xTrident.

Unfortunately for Dave and Aradia, these new "powers," while nowhere near as powerful as a Denizen or Player, nevertheless deflate their primary advantage. Where they were able to defeat Jack before thanks to his enraged lack of foresight and reliance on blunt instruments, the Empress and her posse are organized and coordinated, like the Heroes of Time, and as far as showing this in the game engine goes, they could use Chains. Indeed, being mature and established relationships, they can Chain far beyond a young couple that have only known one another for three months plus time travel. Dave and Aradia were in deep trouble.

But in a remarkable way, this isn't actually the most important scene. Instead, the narrative (I have no idea how, again, this was planned for video) would cut away back to the Lab, where we would find Nepeta, stalking about the Underlab on one of her off-daily hunts. She is stalking yet another ratling, and in the video, the cuts of her chasing it would jump to those of Dave and Aradia fighting Jack. This cacophony would come to an end when Nepeta chases a ratling onto one of the suspended catwalks found in the Underlab. Under her weight, the platform would suddenly give, and go crashing to the ground.

As the ratling escaped into the tunnels, Nepeta comes to her senses, no more worse for wear than a broken nose. But things are about to get worse. A nearby access panel, originally blinking "PASSCODE?" suddenly flashes "OVERRIDE" twice before outputting Sgrub console commands like Rose could hear in earlier chapters. It orders the door opened, a heavy garage-style door, and Nepeta is greeted with dozens of pairs of eyes beyond. As she catches sight of them, her mild concern turns to panic, and we cut away.

Back in the main lab, Equius receives a pester and stands up so fast his chair buckles, and he then runs off to the transportalizer. Pesters then begin to ring out around the room from Nepeta: Jade, Karkat, Kanaya, Sollux. But before any other can get out, a claw in the dark cuts power to the Computer Lab, and the kids are left in the dark with no transportalizer as Karkat and Sollux begin shouting. In the basement, Nepeta's drawing pad is seen, abandoned, green blood leading off into the darkness.

Returning to Jack, Dave and Aradia, our heroes and their time clones manage to hold off an onslaught from Jack's Chains, but he ultimately has the edge. One by one the clones are forced to retreat until only the foremost remain, though Jack has been stripped of each line connecting him to his powers. In the final motion, Aradia severs the line to the Empress, but Jack is not left unarmed: he still has his regisword, and pulls it out and stabs her repeatedly: a shot cheekily borrowed from [S] Wake when Jack murdered Dream Nepeta. Borrowing more art (or at least, descriptions thereof), Aradiabot explodes, leaving behind a heavily bleeding Sprite. Jack raises to strike again, but is intercepted by Dave chaining-in (<3). His first parry succeeds, but when Jack, having caught on to an emotional opening, goes for Aradiasprite again, Dave catches this blow with his arm.
Cut to the bone, Dave is reeling before Jack, who begins flashing and flickering in a flurry of excitement, when suddenly the blow is knocked aside by the audible of a whip. Jack looks up and is shocked, but no moreso than Dave and Aradia, whose response is almost as much shock as terror. Before them is Dave from the future, if his new clothes are any indication, or his sword (a real-world companion to Rose's non-canon Caledestitch from CYQ). But the real surprise floats behind him, dressed in a red hoodie and carrying a glowing, blue whip: Aradia Megido, very much alive.

"Day One-Hundred Fifty-Nine," she says, "hour twenty-three." Their saviours are from the evening before the kids launch the Rat Trap.
The following few chapters compose the End of Act 5, a monster of a project falling under the heading "[S] Underlings: Last Stand", or "ULS". You might ask why on earth I'd have planned for a larger project after the previous flash was such a failure.

...Well I wasn't planning on failing at the time now was I?

Actually, the aim with ULS was to bring in an artist or two to help me out, with work starting after CYQ's secret strife. While I did programming work to expand the engine to Stage P2 (Prototype-2), introducing minor enemies, flying enemies, sprite overlays (a means of applying Underling prototypes, really, and also to fix Vriska's eyeball when she faces right), giant enemies, flanking (players flanked, players flanking) and fraymotifs, the artists would hopefully be there to throw in some characters and bosses while my lesser art skills would be restricted to churning out shitty Underlings and props. You'll notice I planned for this in earlier chapters as well, where I constantly describe the Underlings as being poorly animated and simulated. Alllll part of the plan.

Also part of the plan was to divide this flash into multiple releases, more or less coinciding with the chapter divisions you'll be seeing here, though the next segment probably would have been split in half. This would hopefully allow the artists and I to release segments without taking an entire year, but no hypothetical promises.

Because the quality of the flash would be in the hands of a team, it would also have been my job as producer, designer and manager to make sure it was prepared to be cut back. Ergo, what you're seeing here isn't in the same, cautious and trim sort of plan you saw for CYQ, but the all-hell-breaks-loose impossible dream plan that I would have attacking with scissors from start to finish. As such, it bears mentioning what I would have done if I couldn't get an artist or two: I would have just written this out as several chapters instead of making it a flash. And given the relatively low reception given to combat chapters in the past, I don't think it would have gone over well. Not that ULS is entirely combat, indeed, half of it is not…

But the opening scene is, so we had best get started.

> Equius: Find Nepeta!

The opening scene of the flash begins in relative darkness as Equius follows a trail of green blood droplets to his moirail. We tune in just as he's found her, in hiding behind some scrap. She is holding her arm (doubling as her wounded idle, a new loop animation I wanted to introduce in P2) and calls out to him just before something drops out of the rafters to confront Equius. To reduce the workload required by me and the artists at this point, this enemy would be represented entirely by a set of glowing eyes in the dark. Graphical intensity! Blast processing!

Music: I hadn't selected many specific tracks from this point on, so please enjoy this selection from
the Music of Capcom that I happened to be listening to years ago when first planning this flash, and kept around as inspiration. The song-of-choice for this section was meant to be dark and mysterious, to emphasize that while the reader may know Underlings are involved in this flash named after them, Equius does not. Thus: Odoro from Breath of Fire III, a midboss theme so ill-used that many players leave BoFIII thinking they only heard it against a certain set of ghost bosses. More ghost music. Ghost Bro would be pissed.

This fight is essentially a recap of the game mechanics learned against Vriska, without Chaining as Equius orders Nepeta to stay put. Equius is on the right in this flash, however, to ease the reader out of "Player -> Left; Enemies -> Right" mentality before introducing the flanking mechanics proper. Equius kills the hidden thing and it explodes into grist. He realizes then that it was an Ogre, and that Nepeta has been attacked by Underlings.

Going to her (walk sprites, oh but to dream!) Equius inquires after the situation and we learn the Underlings are everywhere, and because the power has gone out, they’re stranded and the Underlings are all autolevelled Level 99. Meaning no disrespect, Equius points out that Nepeta should have been swarmed by them, and asks if Nepeta knows how she got away. She ponders this and realizes that they're acting strange, almost as if they're planning a…

> Underlings: Ambush!

Here’s a feature that occurred to me between releasing the commentary for Rose: CYQ and now: the Bookmark command could appear at the top of the screen then fade out. Simple enough, but valuable: this would let the player know exactly where a checkpoint begins and it'll lead to a few neat effects here, where I can make the command seem to come from Sgrub's hidden ”console,” the one Rose could overhear back in Chapter 3.

Our favourite pale twosome are attacked! Imps and Basilisks pour out of the woodwork to their right. This coincides with the emergency lights coming back on, so these Underlings would actually be visible. The pack includes ground and flying Troops, and the tutorial continues in the player's favour. Music goes to a standard combat theme, though my inspiration came from another Breath of Fire III boss theme, Donden: this was more of a Breath of Fire joke than anything, as the enemy fliers in this tutorial include dragon-prototypes and Hope-winged seahorse-prototypes, and Donden is used for fights pertaining to BoFIII's war between Dragons and Angels.

The tutorial for this section pertains to minor enemies and fliers, namely how to steamroll from one target to another. The player is in absolutely no danger in this fight. Spells are selectively reintroduced, still not giving the player full reign but showing us Equius' Void area attacks and Nepeta's minor healing spells (as she's still wounded from before). This is also probably a good time to talk about my art intentions for Nepeta: namely, that she be roleplaying that she's in a roleplaying game, fist pumping to the camera she doesn't realize is really there, probably shouting out spell and skill names. Nepeta also may have chained-in an interesting fashion. See, because of the sheer size of Eridan's laser beam in CYQ, the "chain-out" animation I was going to draw for Rose involved her ducking backwards. If possible, I was going to angle Nepeta so that her chain-in was a pounce, starting just on top of where her partner was chaining-out, so that it looked like she was vaulting off their shoulders.

If an Ogre sprite was available at this time, another would arrive near the end of the Strife! to teach you about fraymotifs (remember that Nepeta and Equius' is single-target, so while you could use it on an Imp, it would be overkill to demonstrate on one). If there was no Ogre sprite at this point, it would
be demonstrated in the next release.

After clearing the fight, Equius and Nepeta note that the others have restored emergency power, so maybe the transportalizers work. They hurry off to meet up with them or to escape, whichever proves most ideal.

> **Sollux: FIX IT GODDAMMIT**

Using simplified walkthrough sprites, we now meet up with the majority of the cast in the computer lab, and see that Sollux is responsible for restoring emergency power, but he can't confirm what's going on. Karkat stops shouting at fate long enough to start giving orders to his team, and begins sending others through the transportalizer.

Which others? Well, my original plan was to focus on characters that had been neglected in the Original Draft, but I think I've had better coverage since, except for John, who's starting to become a running joke. I think you could have counted on him being in this release in the spirit of the original plan. Dave and Aradia are obviously still out. Beyond that: I would *not* have included Sollux and Feferi. Feferi I didn't want to include because then I would have had to adjust the game heavily to account for her Life powers (I often considered just making her a heavy healer, but after Jane revived in canon I realized I could no longer cut that corner). Sollux had to stay because the plot demanded he do so. Next, I wanted both Space players *in* the party because they have a special mechanic that's valuable to me.

You might wonder why I don't immediately say that Eridan and Vriska would be included, considering they have existing sprites, but I feel mine would be quickly outclassed by actual artists' and so was planning on putting them aside for this entire flash until someone with actual talent and practice had time to work on them. So the answer to your question is "shame." So much shame.

The last time I planned a group, after I had given up on using only forgotten characters but before writing the timeline for this draft, the team was as-follows. Gamzee was in, in hopes of showing off his new arm (his combo has a few more difficult timed hits that hit much harder to represent the club he holds in his new arm – he's not used to using it but it packs a whallop!). Tavros and Eridan were in, to emphasize that they're still so sad over their break-up that they can't even Chain as Friends (trying to use their <3 Chain would end your Chain automatically with a special dialogue, after which the Chain would be disabled). Next: Jade and Kanaya, as explained, and also Karkat. That's the group we'll be pretending is present, and we'll be pretending that everyone else is left behind. It hardly matters to begin with, as neither side has very many lines. Cutting down on text was ideal. The less text present, the less a Hard-level player has to skip to get to the Secret Strife, and as I said, most of the flash isn't even combat.

The player starts by controlling Rose before anyone leaves, and improbable as it seems, those that leave all leave immediately after talking to Rose! I know, spooky! Karkat stays for last, however. It's likely that the player would get a chance to talk to everyone at this point, probably even be able to use their computer to read eerie, hanging messages from Dave and Nepeta (nothing from Aradia). Most characters are talking about the current situation, Team Drone and Feferi especially, but there are notable exceptions:

John and Jade both talk about Dave's absence from the pesterclient, as does Feferi for Aradia
(frankly, between her OCD panicking bipolar matesprit, her furious pseudo-co-leader and missing auspistemates and the fact that she can't use the transportalizer to help anyone, Feferi is just a few stale sea puns from a rage breakdown). Eridan and Tavros are certainly concerned for the others, but are still eating themselves alive about the breakup. Kanaya kisses Rose goodbye when she goes, which prompts a mild response from Terezi, but not from Karkat, who remarks: "Yeah, yeah, thrilling. LIVES ARE AT STAKE HERE!"

After talking to Karkat at the end, he tells her to get a report from Sollux to see if he found Rose and Feferi a route to Nepeta's last known location. Karkat then leaves. Sollux tells her that things are going poorly, and that if Rose and Feferi walk through the tunnels, they won't make it in time to help Equius and Nepeta. While Rose has no strong connection to either, she does not want to leave them in danger just because she's afraid of the Triumvirate. If the player tries to leave through the door at this point, Rose will back up, experiencing an attack of conscience. Terezi waits by the portal and talks to the player if they approach, and the two will talk about the secret strife that occurred a few days ago: it seems Terezi was in that dream, much like how Dave was in the first. Terezi realizes what Rose wants to do, but can't decide if she should advise against it or not. "Don't you hate that?" Terezi says. "When you really want to hit something, but you shouldn't?"

[That line is a reference to a quick fic I wrote on the forums once about Moirallegience, and Nepeta shipping Demonhead Mobster Kingpin <> Ms. Paint, but not in the direction you think. "Because sometimes you really want to paint something (but you shouldn't.")]

"That's one way of putting it," Rose admits. "I'd much rather just get through without them even bothering me."

Terezi just laughs at that, but after a pause, says: "...I'll cover for you. Go."

Once the player actually leaves through the transportalizer, however, things go badly. The back-up power flickers out, and the smear of light that indicates transportalization in the walkarounds lingers over the transportalizer. Sollux warns the others away, saying Rose is probably trapped in between rooms.

"Trapped in the void, you mean," Terezi says, angry at herself.

Sollux tries to maintain order in Karkat's absence, but leadership is not his skill no matter how effective he's become at threats in the Drone Club. As soon as he has his back turned, Terezi enters the transportalizer.

But rather than end up in an encounter with the Triumvirate, Terezi and Rose are spat into the Hub, but then sucked back in and back to the Lab, where they find Dave waiting for them. "Finally," he says, "She worked it out. Bad enough trying to pull you out backwards, figured you'd never get here. It's tomorrow, by the way."

Rose stands and has only begun asking what's going on when she sees the room. The camera pans to reveal the other character in the Main Lab, most not very far from where they were standing prior, strewn about and torn to pieces. The camera pans back slow to Rose, who says: "...We've gone beta."

"Bingo," Dave says. "Welcome to my daily grind."

"The others?"

Dave shows no emotion. "Megido's called in a body or two. Vantas. Zahhak. No more luck than that."
"...Jack?" Rose asks.

"Can't be certain," he admits. "That's why Aradia said we had to find you. She limped off to Zahhak's to find the transportalizer hub and then to go get herself some spare parts. She's in bad, Lalonde," Dave admits. "She needs some work done. But she can buy herself enough time to pull this off. Then it's gonna get weird, but you don't need to worry about that part."

"Pull what off, Strider?" Terezi asks, looking impassive, before Rose can ask how things will "get weird."

Dave does not want to talk to her at first, but caves. "I can't risk jumping back in time and running smack into Jack. I thought I might have but a guy's got to play it safe before the endgame. If he's here, we've gotta know before we jump." He looks away. "I need you to check out the scene, tell me anything you can tell me."

"Hmph." Terezi ponders this for a moment, but then grins. "Well, if I'm doomed to die in a beta timeline, I might as well have fun with it, right?" Rose is surprised, but is not at all surprised when Terezi calls: "Watson!..."

> Terezi: lNV3ST1G4T3

"...We're back on the case."

The player character is now Terezi Pyrope. As you might imagine, this section of the game is inspired by Ace Attorney Investigations, and facilitated by simplified walkthrough sprites. I would not even pretend to be interested in copying all of AAI's features, however. Indeed, I can start here with my fall-back plan: failing all else, the "gameplay" and "investigation" would be no more complicated than triggering a few flags as Terezi finds "items" for which you do not even have an inventory, and "cross-examinations" being no more than some boring dialogue puzzles. Time permitting, I would add as many features as possible, in this order:

1. Basic Walkaround Functionality, back-ported from Openbound if need be, though since I'd be using a simple square room, I doubt I'd need most of its features. And I mean "square room." You would be able to walk on the evidence if you want, I really wouldn't have cared to waste time with a sophisticated blocking system.

2. Transition from the low-rez sprites to the mid-rez otherwise used in combat to facilitate emoting during conversation.

3. AA-style page-for-page conversations with Pressing for details and Contradictions submitted via dialogue menus (as above). Here we actually get significant in terms of work load, but given the text system I have in place, I think I could have worked it in a fair amount of time, if everything was set for the Combat portions of ULS. After all, as important as this section is to the story, the Combat portions were more important for me outside of the fanfic.

4. Contradictions via Court Record, which involves programming an inventory system, which I absolutely did not want to do. Fuck GUI.

5. Logic mode.

There would be absolutely no click-to-explore segments, items you can examine close-up, or even the ability to leave this room or to have Rose follow you around.

Though I've placed Logic Mode at the end of the list, it's actually something I really wanted to include. Even before canon Gamzee started messing with Terezi's investigation of Tavros, Nepeta and Equius' deaths, I had planned this joke:
Terezi would begin by announcing she would use "LOGIC" to solve the case. This would prompt the game to enter tutorial mode and display the Logic Mode button, which would open a feature where you can take all the loose ends from the case and combine them together to reach rational conclusions. Once entering the mode, you would find exactly one observation floating around Terezi's head:

Vriska did it.

Clicking it would cause you to leave Logic Mode, and have Terezi go "Hmmm…" as she looks back and forth from the other corpses to Vriska's.

**ROSE:** [groans] Terezi!

**TEREZI:** I'm thinking!

**Music** for these sections would be as you'd expect, perhaps throwing originality out the window in favour of lower-rez fan chiptune'd versions of actual AA music, which can actually be pretty cool.

The investigation would cover the room, noting that many of the bodies have been stabbed as well as rent. During the investigation, it's clear that Terezi and Dave are not happy to be working together, and Terezi notes to Rose that she doesn't even remember what it was like to hang out with him. Rose advises she put it behind her, then, because there's no sense in being bitter. "You can't be his friend, okay. But he can't be your kismesis, and you can't kill him." Terezi grumps around about that.

This section would ultimately end with Terezi contesting Dave's theory that Jack did it, via a cross-investigation with both Dave and Rose acting as her opponents. The general conclusion she and the player reach is that Jack is not responsible. But if that's true: who or what is?
Beginning with the caption "Earlier…" we cut to the Underlab, where Karkat is leading the group through the dark. If the entire group was not yet drawn, he would talk about how they split up, and this release would be split down the middle, no biggie. After a while, glowing eyes dart out of the darkness and Sollux once again gets the emergency lights on. The group immediately falls back into defensive positions and realize they're surrounded, with Underlings on both sides of the hall.

**JADE:** Imps!

**KARKAT:** Dammit, if Leijon let these out this is on her head!

**JADE:** [floater] Kark—

**KARKAT:** Rank up! We are pushing through!

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**Breakthrough**

**Music** would quite possibly be the same second track heard with Equius and Nepeta (after all, Chapter 3 implied Sgrub's music is sorted by area and they're both in the Underlab), but the track I always used for this section was the boss theme from Mega Man ZX (specifically this arranged version) as pretty much all the remaining inspiration combat tracks are from Mega Man games. Welcome to the land of Self-Indulgence and Game Tunes.

Flanked on both sides, the player's objective in this section is to beat enemies on the right, which will allow them to press on to another enemy group, and so on, through about three or four quick fights not likely to strain anyone's patience. This is communicated through nothing less subtle than a giant flashing arrow. The tutorials briefly return to explain how flanking works but the player is otherwise left to their own devices, giving them an opportunity to learn skills, spells, chains and fraymotifs for those characters available. The player also gets Ultimates, and quickly learns not to use them, since they Distact you to high hell, just like Sollux in Chapter 6.

To allow the player to get to know what is hopefully a bulk of the playable characters, the enemies are not much of a threat and I don't have much to say about any of them. Most of them are borrowed from the Equius and Nepeta fights, possibly with Ogres-in-the-light this time. The only major addition are Liches, who have player powers and so are very improbably prototyped with characters I've already included in the game, ie: Karkat's group, Equius, Nepeta, Eridan and Vriska. I know, that's even spookier than before! The enemy group to the left, which the player does not have to target, would regenerate every few turns if the player does hit them up from time to time, and if the player ignores them entirely, a Lich or Ogre would push its way to the fore to replace the imps, but once popped into grist that flank would leave the player alone for a few turns.

The whole push ends when the player beats a large opponent at the far right, either a simple high-power Underling like a Giclops, **Acheron** or **Lich Queen**, complete with Lich-derived high-power
moves… yet again from characters that have already been introduced. Even in Hard Mode this fight is not likely to be much of a blockade, which is perhaps ideal, as it would encourage players to give the mode a try even if they had been scared off thanks to Vriska in CYQ.

On that subject: the player unlocks the Normal Mode ending and the Hard Mode Secret Strife by beating all the Strife's from here on out in that difficulty. For organizational purposes, the highest difficulty the player has cleared in each fight is indicated with coloured lights to the Strife's! bookmark on the main page: green for Reader difficulty, orange for Normal and red for Hard. Because of the piecemeal release of the flashes, I would also have offered a code that would "unlock" the early Strifes! on Hard but disable it after a brief window, or possibly copy CYQ's plan and not release Hard Mode at all until the game was complete, unlocking Normal Mode's ending "for free" until Hard Mode was properly added.

At the end of the flash, Karkat would probably echo Terezi, Dave and Rose by wondering aloud what's going on: in his case, where on earth the Underlings are coming from, and who's responsible for their sudden intelligence. He and the others press on.

> Terezi: Locate the murder weapon

With Jack eliminated from their query, it falls to Terezi and the others to continue their search. Terezi figures the best angle of approach is to find out what caused the stab wounds around the site, if it wasn't Jack's sword. This prompts an in-depth investigation of the victims' weapons, a few other areas pointed out by Dave and Rose, and conversations with Dave and Rose as well, as they both have stabbing weapons on-hand as well and Terezi suspects everyone just out of habit.

Just because they're so ambiguous, I'll clarify that every one of Vriska's dice are found tucked in her specibus: she never got the chance to draw them. Aradia later IMs the group to say she found Gamzee, dead, and that he was carrying "nothing but his clubKind." No jokerKind in this universe.

As the investigation goes on, it's clear the kids have come to the conclusion that their friends uncovered an Underling boss deep inside the lab, who was either already armed or who overwhelmed them after taking one of their high-powered weapons.

The conversation with Rose in this scene goes into things outside the investigation. As Terezi is investigating the Quills of Echidna, Rose asks her how she's feeling about Karkat's death. Terezi remarks that it doesn't matter. "None of us matter in a beta timeline," she says, "just the case."

Still, Rose presses: she confesses some of her fears about Terezi and Karkat's kismesis, reiterating some of the things she said to Gamzee at the start of the Act, and pointing out how childish and outright dangerous the two of them have become.

"Wasn't it nicer... wasn't it nicer at all when you were friends, or matesprits?" Rose asks. "I'm not saying you should be that again… I just don't think this is right."

"Why not?" Terezi asks.

"Because neither of you are happy," Rose says.

"I think you're confusing 'black' with 'unhappy,' Human," Terezi says with a bit of a grin.

"…Okay," Rose says, crossing her arms. "Give me a minute."
"Going to channel your vast ashen experience into my relationship woes, Lalonde?" Terezi teases.

"Yes, actually," Rose says. "Or at least, to help me understand exactly what I'm trying to say."

Terezi hands back the needlewands, and when Rose takes them, she gives her answer. "Respect. You don't respect one another. That's how this started and it's how it stands now. Neither of you have grown up one iota from your 'sharp, pointy rocks' and a distraught girl telling children's stories on the rooftop to her poor, confused future friend."

Terezi pauses, snorts and then shakes her head. "You're not my friend, Rose," she says, and then holds out her hand again. After a pause, Rose deliberately drops the Thorns of Oglogoth on the floor directly from her specibus.

"Better I not touch them," she explains.

This brief window, in which the player can pick up the Thorns, is used to hide an easter egg: the player need simply use the transportalizer to reach it (to help the player find it, I might turn its lights back on, but only if the transportalizer pad is out of view when you talk to Rose!). There, Terezi would somehow universe skip and encounter Roxyverse Jane, who would confer with Terezi on the case (I also considered bringing in Zeniah from the Grublings universe, who would shrug off any questions about her actually being real). Jane doesn't actually help you with the murder weapon issue, but that's okay: her conclusions could help the player jump-start the final phase of the investigation, instead!

Once the Thorns are picked up, Terezi would immediately start hearing voices and the world around her would constrict in darkness, the spotlight of light around her restricted in the shape of the Mind symbol. She would nevertheless continue to examine the wands, pausing only from time to time to glance into the darkness. "They're clean," Terezi says, as she drops them back in Rose's inventory, perhaps referencing this early page by putting them directly into the Tree Modus. Terezi would then pause, reach out, and clap Rose on the shoulder.

Once you've found all possible weapons, all of them clean, Dave would call Terezi over to his side of the room (well, "call" in a sense that he shouldn't be shouting if the last weapon was his and she's standing right there). Conversation would lead to perhaps another short cross-examination, but mostly the conclusion that none of the weapons could have done it. Rose reminds them that the Boss may have been armed on its own, but just as someone is taunting the gods of irony by saying how anticlimactic that would be after the extensive search, Aradia trolls into their computers, reminding Terezi that there are X many other bladed weapons still unaccounted for.

Aradia pesters them that she's been examining the transportalizer hub as she effects repairs ("Robots," Dave mutters), and has noted that even though Rose and Terezi were trapped in it, it has nevertheless been used in their absence. She concludes that Rose and Terezi must have gotten "very far out into the Void at one point." They ask her about the others, but she says she's found them all, and they've all died, each divided far from one another and alone, as if split by a great panic.

But it's worse than that: one of them, Aradia says, though she refuses to say who, has been hit worse. "half 0f them is missing" she says, hoping to sound impassive. The player, and Terezi, is left to work out the details by asking Aradia a few questions, trying to find the one that will actually illuminate the situation (Phoenix and Edgeworth do this all the time, and for some reason, they are often talking to someone who should just be saying something outright!). With these details, Terezi works out that their friend may have been bitten in half. Suddenly, the wounds at the scene make sense: not a sword, but claws for the slash wounds and teeth for the stab wounds, teeth able to bite a Troll or Human in half, as big as swords...
If necessary, the Flash would be split here, depending on available sprites. For now, I'm going to carry on, make this a giant formatting nightmare, sounds like a good plan to me.

> Reunite

We return to Karkat and Friends (complete with any other characters drawn in the interim) as they reunite with Equius and Nepeta. This is not a casual meeting, however, as they are still divided by a pair of Centaurs, who autolevel at their approach via the same "console" that generates our bookmarks. But this time, the good guys have Underlings surrounded. The new flanking feature is in play, and it pretty much has to be: the feature was designed to help me fit all sixteen characters in the same battle without them looking ridiculous. Pretty much every battle from here on out besides the Secret Strifes is double-flanked in the player's favour.

Musically, it only makes sense to jump from ZX to ZX Advent, and its boss theme Slam Down, though I'm a bit more partial to the Gigamix montage version (from the linked 3:34 to where it bleeds into the next song a minute later). Realistically, though, what I'm saying is that the same standard battle theme from before would probably continue playing a third time.

Despite their earlier buildup, the Centaurs here are simply fodder for another tutorial. You'd be shown how Space or Rogue players have a passive ability to attack any target on the field, not just the ones at the front of the line (and thus get behind the invincible Centaurs). Reader-difficulty players would not have to put up with invincible Centaurs at all, able to push through them like any other enemy. **Hardcore Gamer Note:** Technically, Kanaya and Nepeta can chain-in or attack anywhere in the field, while Jade is a missile troop and can do that to begin with. What Jade has is a Spell that lets other people on her flank attack anywhere, which makes her more of a support troop… she'd have to be, since she's still only something like Level 89.

Centaurs can also be killed with magic but the game conveniently forgets to mention or allow you to do that until you've finished the tutorial. I don't mean to strong-arm players through a tutorial but we are pretending to be at the end of a game here, and I was trying to build and demo a full-featured engine at the same time, so either way we would have had a lot of info to get across.

After clearing the flimsy blockade, Karkat ignores Nepeta's big smile and bouncy demeanour and points out the Centaurs were guarding a nearby door: Nepeta confirms this is where the Underlings came from to begin with. He wants to know what's inside.

**KARKAT:** Leijon, take a strike force through the rafters, I want them covered from the back.

**NEPETA:** A "strike force"? Um… kay.

[Nepeta picks several people she is buddies with, half the party plus Equius, and leads them away. She leaves Kanaya behind, half because I want the jumpers to be on both sides. Karkat grabs Equius by the shirt.]

**KARKAT:** Not you. You get the door.

**EQUIUS:** [flexes] Gladly.

[We cut briefly to black before it is interrupted by a beam of light from the left. The source: a broken...
The lights turn on at the presence of players, revealing a huge warehouse room. Nepeta's squad arrives on the right.

Underlings are scattered pell-mell around the room, all about a single, central element: a giant, pulsating sac of flesh tied by strips of muscle to the ceiling and floor: a Greater Marble Shoggoth, first introduced back in Original Draft Chapter 2 (now numbered 3) for this very purpose (and seen in this draft in its own Chapter 2). The command Sgrub prompt reappears, and begins furiously identifying players and issuing directives, Underlings respond as ordered. Player character text is kept to the bottom half of the screen to avoid interrupting the Prompt. Unusually, the Sgrub prompt now has a user entry field, though it is not in use.

KANAYA: A Greater Shoggoth. This is where the Underlings have been coming from!

[When the player progresses from Kanaya's text, the game instead advances the Sgrub prompt, which does very quickly to avoid trying the player's patience. At first, the prompt continues to work chaotically until an unseen hand types the command "> OVERRIDE(ISPHERE.LAB, 341)" The prompt replies: "Session ID:" and receives: "> H1025" The prompt replies. "Authenticating... [beat] [beat] Authenticated. Orders?" The Underlings pause in their idle states, orders no longer coming in from the game.]

KARKAT: That means if we can take this out, we'll finally be rid of these pains in our ass once and for all? No more of my teammates getting jumped in the fucking hall?

[Nepeta exclaims.

The prompt user types a new command. "> DISENGAGE AUTOLEVEL." The console replies: "Manual control engaged." "> AUTOLEVEL(99)" "Engaged." The Underlings all undergo a powerup animation. Gamzee, who can hear the mechanics but is not self-aware enough to inform the others, simply questions.]

KARKAT: Ohh, I can get behind "No more Underlings!" I can get RIGHT behind that shit!


KARKAT: We're taking out the trash, people. Even if we have to do it [he arms] piece by piece!

[Simultaneous with Karkat, the user enters one last command, and finishes typing as he arms. "> UNDERLINGS: LAST STAND" The console retracts, leaving only the command, which now resembles the bookmarks that have been appearing throughout the flash.

The Underlings snap back awake, Centaurs push to the front and Liches dive for cover behind them, all radiating out from the Shoggoth. This is all very quickly done, not unlike some of Homestuck's casual animated gifs. The player is given a full zoom of the field and the prompt "STRIFE!", this time in red.]

Music: This would be the mid-boss theme encountered in Chapter 3, but for our inspirational
purpose, I've been using Soul Ablaze from ZXA, seguing off of Slam Down in the Gigamix or available in this arrangement.

As the title segment of the flash, this is the most complicated part, unless you suck at Ace Attorney. Reader difficulty is never complicated, but in Normal, you would have to land your timing, and on Hard, strategy is a must. The Space and Rogue players must first punch through the Centaurs with Chains on the opposite team. Lichs could be picked off one by one. Counter-elements between the Space players and Equius are a thing the player has to keep in mind, as well. (Here we see that the game indicates a counter-element damage with a lightning bolt symbol, by the way.) The real threat is the Shoggoth itself.

For those that didn't recognize it in Chapter 2, the Shoggoth works like Legion (aka Granfaloon) from Castlevania: when you hit him, he drops live monsters. Left on his own, he drops Lichs, Basilisks and Centaurs to a certain maximum (in Hard it would even "bank" those that go over the maximum, dropping them when its defenders reach a certain minimum). When you hit it, it would drop live Imps, which would quickly begin to flood the screen. Indeed, to handle them, I decided to rely on a trick from Paper Mario, where a group of Shy Guys attack you as a powerful single monster until they've been pruned down to an individual.

Area attacks from Tavros, John and Equius could help thin the herds of mixed troops, but Equius' attacks, the most powerful group attacks of all, are counter-element to Space and would hurt Jade and Kanaya. Jade and Kanaya's attacks hurt him as well, though, and that's a price careful players should have been willing to pay, since Space and Void spells would give them the best control of the battlefield.

I would have liked to see multiple appearances for the Shoggoth, showing it as it begins to lose pustules and reveals the grist-filled sac beneath (it really only has two animations otherwise: Idle and a generic "Pulsing," animation used for both spawning and being wounded). If you remember Chapter 2, inside the Shoggoth is giant piñata filled with goodies… and also a surprise giant-sized enemy like an Ogre or Giclops. Jade and Karkat discuss this when the Shoggoth is down to 10% health, but they press on and puncture the thing.

Grist flies everywhere, but the screen begins to rumble…

Panning up the long, serpentine tail of our creature, we have our reveal, though it would be cloaked in shadow even if the sprite was ready. It's monstrous, like a great snake thanks to its prototypes, and Humans in Karkat's party are stunned to see it.

Music: No question. Hard-hitting and with an opening motion befitting a monster rising into the air, my pick is the Mythos remix of Neo Arcadia from the Mega Man Zero series.

The Trolls are certainly not happy with what they see, but hold their ground as bits of rubble pelt them. They've seen this sort of thing before, though this one varies thus:

GAMZEE: Crab.

ERIDAN: Seahorse.

TAVROS: Bull.
NEPETA: Cat.

KARKAT: Dragon.

JADE: What… is that?

KARKAT: Jormungander. Bonus bosses. Superbosses with enough prototypes. Designed to scare the player toward the Denizens if they kill the Queen.

KANAYA: Karkat, that thing is going to tear the whole lab apart.

JADE: What do we do? How do you kill it?

EQUIUS: We’ve never… done that before…

KARKAT: [puts on a battle face] Everybody hold your ground!

[The rumbling intensifies. In the initial release, the flash begins to fade to black, while later releases would make the scenes contiguous.]

KARKAT: THAT THING DOES NOT LEAVE THIS ROOM!

Chapter End Notes

For some reason, for almost a year I remembered the monster Equius and Nepeta observed on LOLCAT as being snakelike, or perhaps more like Phalanx, the 13th Colossus, who actually does the rising thing I'm describing, which is weird because I haven’t played SOTC since it came out. In pre-Act 6 drafts I addressed the monster as an "Ophiuchus" as a nod to older fans that remembered theories of a 13th Uracil Troll. The Jormungander thus had to use lean prototypes to become snakelike and match my mental picture. Gamzee's goat dad was originally in the mix as well, until I realized that would have no game advantage, as all its water attacks could come from Seahorsedad and Gamzee has no element for it to borrow without glitching the game. Oh well.
We return immediately to Karkat's group ("return" implies so much redundancy. Frankly, I've often waffled on whether this scene would be in the previous release or this one). We are not given much time to acclimatize. When hitting the bookmark, the lines from the end of the previous release would be repeated:

**KARKAT:** [puts on a battle face] Everybody hold your ground! THAT THING DOES NOT LEAVE THIS ROOM!

**Music:** The music of this section is meant to work in parallel with the music of the final, indeed it would be best if they were remixes of the same source, or one a remix of the other. To this end, for inspirational purposes, I'm pulling out Mega Man Zero 3's *Cannon Ball*, with this fight being either the original or **DS remake**, which is dramatic but distant and sad (Zero brings an end to his father's ill legacy by destroying a piece of himself), or more likely, ZX's *Cannon Ball – Hard Revenge –*, which is dark and oppressive (a demon from the past comes to haunt the player character).

This fight is one of those fights that the game is going to interrupt, and so what you do doesn't really matter. As a result, it exists identically in all difficulties, and isn't required for the bonus ending or Secret Strife. After a short number of turns in which the Jormungander lays into you with rubble from the ceiling and Cat Lusus attacks, it unleashes its real power: as a full Boss, like Jack, it can use player abilities from its prototypes, and it pulls out Terezi's Ultimate: *Uber - Mind Break*.

Mind Break slaps the player characters with so many Distaction tokens that they effectively can't hit or defend against anything. The Jormungander is distacted too, as a result of using the Ultimate, but simply keeps using group attacks to avoid missing, like its rubble attack and Seahorse-derived "Rushing Tides" attack used by the Adonis. While some players may be able to adapt to the distraction, I imagine the impact will hold for their first playthrough, which is all it really has to do.

After a while of the player suffering, the game cuts away into cinematic (I admit, this is inspired by a moment in *Cannon Ball – Hard Revenge –*, specifically [here](#), but I would need it to run longer than that). The camera shows Jack stabbing Aradia in Chapter 34, and then wounding Dave (if their sprites are not ready, as is assuredly the case, they would simply appear as distant stars on the skyline, which is unsatisfying but necessary). The camera then cuts down, to where Sollux and the others are still trapped in the main lab. Jumping sideways, as if through time, we find our three Ace Attorney cast members lost in confusion and frustration: Rose fiddling with her hands, Terezi, her cane, Dave shifting his feet.

Between the four groups, the end result is clear: the kids have been split up – far too conveniently for it to be a concidence – and if Terezi can't solve things now, things will play out exactly as they did in the beta timeline. In the versions where the previous chapter ended a bit later, it would end right here, with the text to follow moved to the start of the next chapter.

In the version as-stands, the following exchange takes place alongside the shots described above, convened with the help of my colour bordered text boxes.

**TEREZI:** But that can't be right. If there was a Boss Underling, how did it get in this room?

**ROSE:** Maybe they fell back. Ran from the fight, bled out here.

**TEREZI:** And died exactly where we left them? No. Something must have happened in **this** room… And that makes it small.
DAVE: But if an Underling got in here, where's the weapon it used?

TEREZI: What if it wasn't even an Underling? What if one of us did it? I'm not saying willingly. Maybe they just... lost their Minds? Killed everyone else, then ran off down some Bosses' throat, weapon and all.

ROSE: Well that's lucky. Swallow the weapon but not the body?

DAVE: Yeah. Unless the last survivor killed them too, but since the bodies are scattered, they'd have to be in this room. If that's the case... where is it?

[The Music comes to an end. Terezi, who is now on-screen, stops fidgeting and closes her eyes.]

TEREZI: …

[Music shifts. If I could get permission: Vigilante ~ Cornered. The scene dims out around her, so that only she is visible.]

TEREZI: I know where the weapon is. [she opens her eyes, and the scene returns] I know what happened.

Terezi then leads the others (and the player, who has to fill in the details with evidence) through her own summary of what happened that day. Ace Attorney players know exactly what I mean. She does indeed seem to be chasing the theory that someone had lost their Mind, who she addresses as "The Perpetrator," but she deliberately avoids mentioning where the weapon is, what it is, or (of course, what kind of theatrical detective do you take her for?) the identity of the culprit.

If my style of sprites are used instead of portraits, Terezi gets up and begins pacing back and forth, gesticulating wildly. She is standing nearer to Dave when she finally reaches the end of her explanation and the others demand to know where the weapon is. There, she hesitates, as though scared of her own response. Dave presses, and she does not respond, but when Rose asks, Terezi explains: "If I'm wrong, that's actually fine. If I'm right... it depends on how right I am."

Dave's not happy with that, however. "Pyrope, I've got lives to save, now where's the weapon?"

This question is our segue to the big moment, when the player has to pick the weapon out of the Court Record, or however things ended up being implemented. The weapon would be easily missed if you had come just for the flash, I'm not sure how I would have hidden a reference to it in the game itself. Much like Phoenix or Edgeworth, Terezi started the investigation with an innocuous item: not a badge, but her cane.

It would seem that over the past few months of being angry at Dave, such that she can't even "remember what it was like to hang out with him," she forgot that it was prototyped with his half-sword. The player who used the transportalizer while Rose was in stasis was Terezi herself.

On selecting the cane, the music is killed, and Terezi suddenly rounds on Dave, putting the swordpoint at his throat. It is smeared with multicoloured blood. Music changes to an Announce the Truth theme.

TEREZI: [in response to Dave's question:] It's right here.

ROSE: T-Terezi!

TEREZI: Ah! [she waves the weighted sheath of her cane in Rose's direction.]

DAVE: What the... the hell...
ROSE: But… why? What's going on?

TEREZI [frustrated]: Don't be stupid, Rose, c'mon! If I did this… You know how things work with me. There are two mysteries. One on top of another. [she frowns] Be Watson one more time. I gave you all you need!

Indeed she has: when doing her summary of the situation, Terezi deliberately seeded information that was not actually required to explain the murders, the perpetrator, or the weapon. She repeats these now and asks Rose (and the player) to answer a few questions about these points. It appears that, when viewed in context, a single element of the crime scene cannot be explained. I was not 100% certain what this detail would be, as it would have to be very carefully hidden and I felt it would be better to have finished designing things first, but I suspect it would have been a particular wound. The piece of evidence is very strange indeed. It "cannot be explained" not because they're missing information but, as Terezi has proven with her multiple points, but because it is inherently contradictory even though they can see it from all sides.

TEREZI: And what does that mean? What did Karkat say in the meeting the other day? That info came from you, didn't it?

ROSE: …

TEREZI: If you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be true… but that's not true in the game!

[As Terezi begins to lose faith in her own proposition, she wavers, and Dave stands up, angrily.]

TEREZI: Rose…

ROSE: …We're in a Dream Bubble. Everyone's alive— [Beat. She, too, rounds on Dave.] We're in a Dream Bubble?

[Dave begins to pull aside, but Terezi, reassured, lashes out twice with her half-sword across his neck. Blood spatter hits the nearby wall in a "V" on opposite ends of his head, and Terezi stabs him through the gut. Dave is momentarily stunned, but the wounds begin to pull back, his skin sloughing or burning off to reveal the grimdark glowing shadow of Presence, which grows to fill the room with Shade.]

TEREZI: Time to go!

[She reaches out to grab Rose and pulls them toward the transportalizer, but Rose slams her eye shut and pulls them out of the dream through force of will. They are spat out in the Hub, and the transportalizer reactivates behind them. For a moment, they catch their breath. Rose slumps to the ground, Terezi against her cane after she resheaths the sword.]

ROSE: [panting] How did you know… it wasn't me?

[Branch ~ Ace Attorney often does a thing at the end where it gives you a chance to answer someone's personal question, but will carry on if you don't. This is one such instance. Terezi simply has to present the Thorns of Oglogoth:]

TEREZI: You've got a lot of problems. Lalonde. But this one's in a league on its own.

ROSE: [smiles, then laughs] I guess it is.
TEREZI: [pauses, obviously unsure, and then laughs] Who else was I gonna kill?
ROSE: Ugh, you... [after a moment, she chuckles once, putting us on bar with the other scenario]
[Branch rejoins here.]
ROSE: You shouldn't have come after me, you know.
TEREZI: Yeah. [she holds out her cane to help Rose up] But I'd do it again.
TEREZI: Says who?

[Rose stands, and the two run off to the Leo transportalizer. As they leave, the game puts up a piece of GUI, not unlike the one used at the Secret Strifes to tell the player they have received a new powerup. This GUI depicts a blue Circle, but in a flash of light and simple tween, it transforms into a grey diamond. Chain statistics are updated at the bottom of the box.]

> vs. The World Snake

The camera returns to the scene of the battle (Music silent), where Karkat's party has been completely devastated. Most of the members have fallen, Gamzee collapsed in an attempt to cover Tavros, and Eridan hovering by both of them on wobbly legs, Karkat (or, if present, John instead) the only other one on his feet. Zoom to Eridan.

ERIDAN: You done yet, fucker? Well do your worst! You can't out-screw life. I've already lost! I've lost my moirail! I've lost my matesprit! But you can't beat me! You know why? Because I've still got one thing left, something special, and you...

TEREZI: [She is offscreen. Text box is a floater.] Mind Brace!

[Eridan gets a teal power up, as do any unconscious bodies in sight. The Distaction tokens over Eridan's head clear out one by one. He shakes his head to clear it. A few moments later, Nepeta's green gives them all another power-up, healing them.]

ERIDAN: ...[grins] And you don't. [he rearms] Ivve got more than fivve seconds left, asshole!

KARKAT (OR JOHN): Everyone up!

The camera zooms back out to reveal that Rose and Terezi have arrived. If any other characters were drawn between Update 2 and now, excluding Feferi and Sollux, they would be added to the batch, having arrived with them, divided evenly between the two flanks.

Music shifts. If the last remix was sad, this remix must be its tonal opposite, nothing short of triumphant. Cannon Ball (Mythos)
TEREZI: Miss us, Karkat?

KARKAT: Like the plague! Light 'em up!

Rose (and Vriska, if present) casts a Light spell, revealing the Jormungandr: it is like a great snake flying in a circle, biting its tail. Being revealed, it roars directly at the players below, prompting the game to finally reveal the prompt: "BOSS STRIFE"

-- Combat --

The triumph of the soundtrack extends well through Reader and even into Normal difficulty, such that this fight will probably seem easier than the complex Shoggoth fight. In Hard that is not automatically the case. There is a simple reason for this: in Hard, the Jormungandr does not stop using Ultimates, and not just Mind Break. Mind Brace is one of Terezi's base moves, so that's easily enough countered, but the others play havoc with the player, with direct damage, healing and worst of all, access to Karkat's Blood powers, which it charges up over the fight.

The intended strategy comes down to group buffs and careful use of one's own Ultimates despite the cost in Distaction: Kanaya and Jade's short-lived Ultimate will make players invincible for one turn (preferably when a full-power Blood attack is coming). The Breath Ultimate gives a single character a double turn, which will probably be mandatory to help poor Nepeta and her low healing power on top of the party's wounds. And so on. That's all I thought of. Players are a clever lot, I'm sure they'd have worked out an ideal course of action.

The player's biggest advantages against the Jormungandr is their fraymotifs, and the hidden fact that if you Chain together seven or more elements, the game automatically gives you a high-powered fraymotif: "Seventh Hour", "Eighth Hour", "Ninth Hour", and there is an "Tenth Hour," "Eleventh Hour" and a final attack after that (indeed, two: one in general and a "+" version you get if you actually manage to chain all 16 characters) but without Sollux, Feferi, Aradia or Dave, you can't reach those levels. The trick is finding a moment in which one isn't running damage control up and down across the party to find 7+ characters available to attack. There's the first turn, sure, but after that, good luck to you.

<End of turn after Rose and Terezi Chain for the first time.>

GAMZEE: [who can see the game mechanics, and thus the Chain diamond effect] Ha-hah! All right!

[Ideally, he high fives Terezi, who will be next to him in formation. Camera cuts to the opposite flank.]

JOHN: What is it?

ROSE: [smiling] Nothing. Tell you later.

<Boss at 50% health.>
KARKAT: So where were you dicks, anyways? What's a guy got to do not to be flattened into the ground by a hideous monster?

TEREZI: The only way you're going to keep people from trying to kill you is a complete personality overhaul. And I'd miss you!

KARKAT: Oh, lovely. Glad you were concerned.

TEREZI: Well what do you want? We don't pop into existence at your beck and call, Karkat. We're not a fucking room service!

KARKAT: Even lovelier, I should have just dropped dead [Terezi frowns] so you wouldn't have to put up with the sight of me. Remind me to stay that way next time so we won't have to piss you off [Terezi hangs her head] with life-threatening situations.

TEREZI: …Yeah, okay, you deserved better than that.

KARKAT: Glad you agree--

TEREZI: We almost died too. Horroters. In the transportalizer. Cut everyone off from you. Think she set up this whole thing. Where's Strider and Megido I wonder? Oh yeah, this goes deep.

KARKAT: [he calms in his posture, lowering his weapon somewhat.] …Oh. …Look, I didn't know.

TEREZI: Yeah. I guess you didn't.

KARKAT: Well it's not like you would have run off for no reason.

TEREZI: Nah, I was stabbing a demon looked like Dave.

JADE: [offscreen, floater] You were what?

KARKAT: [returns to his base idle] Why'd I'd have to miss that?

TEREZI: [grins] Next time I'll warn you?

KARKAT: Deal.

<Pre-Victory>

Ideally, the pre-victory text would occur after you've given your orders for a turn, so that as soon as it is done, the actions take place, as if rolling off of any speech. I wasn't confident I could pull that off in CYQ due to a quirk in the code but I figured I could iron that out in time here.

KARKAT: Hey! Asshole! [if possible, the Jormungander turns to face down at him] I've got a message for your boss! From alllll of us! [The camera pans across the group, from member to member.] You tell them that we are all getting out of here. We are getting through Jack, we are getting through you! every last one of us are getting out of this alive! And if you send another one of your monsters to pick us off, we're gonna walk through! STARTING RIGHT HERE!

[Pan to the left flank from a wide zoom (to avoid jarring the player), entirely Trolls.]
KARKAT: Trolls!

[Pan to the right flank, which includes Jade, Rose and if available, John.]

KARKAT: Humans!

[Zoom wide during Karkat's next line.]

KARKAT: WITH! ME!

[If rolling directly into the turn, the characters will then immediately leave to perform their actions. As all of Karkat's Knight and Blood abilities involve him moving into combat, he will almost certainly leave as well (thus: "with me"), unless he just so happens to be using an item. I'd assign an Achievement to that ("Ruining the moment") but I honestly don't like failure achievements so let's just move on.]

.<Victory>

As described for the Adonis, the Jormungandr shakes, stops moving entirely, and then explodes into grist, its health bar and gel blown into dust as if by the shockwave. We zoom in on Karkat, as he spins his sickle in his hand and rests it on his shoulder, satisfied. Fade to black.

.<Bonus Scene> ("> Logout")

We return to the command prompt in a void. Its last few messages seem to be updates on the battle, indeed I may very well have saved the player's last win data to their file and had it output actual damage counts.

USER: > DELETE SESSION(H1025)

CONSOLE: Logging out…

[The next few messages appear very quickly in sequence.]

CONSOLE: --ERROR-- Unable to contact Entity.BLACK_KING
CONSOLE: --ERROR-- Unable to contact Entity.BLACK_QUEEN
CONSOLE: --ERROR-- Unable to contact Entity.AGENTS(Factions.DERSE, 0)
CONSOLE: --ERROR-- Unable to contact Entity.DENIZENS[0]
CONSOLE: --ERROR-- Unable to contact Entity.DENIZENS[1]

[And so on, through:]

CONSOLE: --ERROR-- Unable to contact Entity.DENIZENS[11]

CONSOLE: --WARNING-- Session H1025 is the only active Command Session.
CONSOLE: Underlings will revert to base AI. Confirm? (Y/N):

USER: > Y

CONSOLE: Command Session lost.

CONSOLE: --WARNING-- Session H1025 is the only active Session.

CONSOLE: User will be unable to create new Sessions. Sgrub Access and Control will shut down. Confirm Account and Password (H1025 Account 1 of 2):

USER: > h413b-jnoir

USER: > ********

CONSOLE: Confirmed. Have a nice day, Archagent. Confirm Account and Password (H1025 Account 2 of 2):

USER: > h413b-command4

USER: > ********

CONSOLE: Confirmed. Have a nice day, madam.

CONSOLE: Session deleted. Sgrub Access and Control will shut down…

[The console clears and is replaced with the message:] 

CONSOLE: --ERROR-- THIS SESSION IS OFFLINE

[The screen distorts and deactivates.]
Narratively speaking, Act 5 is spreading out from CYQ to show how CYQ's conclusions apply to the society in the lab as a whole. Rose's conclusion from both the Strife and Secret Strife, reiterated to Gamzee, is that relationships, sought out for personal reasons, nevertheless resonate with one another and become intertwined as the very threads of society. For Humans the cardinal thread on a personal level is family and, in adulthood, is extended to one's own chosen family, or in some cases, exchanged for that chosen family, as Ghost Bro angled Rose to conclude in the Secret Strife. The Trolls, meanwhile, start with nothing and interweave multiple relationships with much stronger bonds, the weak points in these connections held together by the firm hand of an auspistice, without which they would fail.

Through Rose's poor handling of her own auspistice, three relationships nearly came to an end, in violence for that matter, and one did end all the same, not to forget the peripheral damage from Rose's misunderstandings (her relationship with Gamzee and Kanaya, now repaired). After she woke from the Secret Strife and spoke to John and Eridan, Rose realized that if she did not safely dissolve her auspistice (too late once Vriska attacked) or regain her grasp on her it and mature the relationship from a childhood relationship to an adult, all relationships connected to it would fracture, and Eridan and Vriska might very well try to kill one another.

CYQ largely resolved these plots, which end the portion of the plot governed by childish mistakes: Hindsight begins to step out of the limelight, and Presence, situated near the end of the kid's time in the Incipisphere, slowly takes prominence. The bridge between childhood and adulthood is adolescence, the teenaged years, and so this becomes our focus. Childish mistakes give way to issues of maturity, of sexuality, and of the assumption of adult roles. These issues are pulled from the background of Act 4 where they were seeded beforehand: for maturity, Karkat and Terezi's kismesis, which is plainly immature to the point where it may be in the wrong quadrant entirely, and Rose and Terezi's moirallegience, which is Rose's first formal relationship entered and to be conducted on an adult level (because both parties are entering for mutual interest, and both largely understand the impact). For sexuality, Rose and Kanaya's cautious sexual maturity, and Team Drone's attempts to conquer their own taboos, the latter a theme carried into Act 6. For the assumption of adult roles, we have the auspistice theme of course, but more than that that I'll get to in a moment. For the time being, Act 5 arranged for new background plots to replace those recently upgraded. Act 6 will cover the cusp of adulthood, and so these themes will grow in some quarters, fester in others (as one chooses to define), and expand to cover not just the microsociety in the lab, but the new world they might yet form.

The largest thread in A Hand in Holding Hands is a question of whether or not Troll relationships are functional, and whether or not Humans can be a part of them. This was given its sandbox and allowed to grow for three acts, until the relationships were in play. Then the questions began. Act 4: can the relationships themselves survive? Barely, but CYQ shows them carrying on. Act 5: can the society that includes these relationships survive? And then Act 6: can the smaller society grow into a full society, or will it be torn apart by external threats (Jack) or even internal ones as it is forced to tackle a larger scale? The Act 5 question is related to the question of whether or not auspistice and Troll/Human relationships actually work, as any relationship that can survive in the vacuum of fanfiction but not in a context has not truly survived. The third question is more future-focused, something I can prepare but not fully answer. It is the domain of Foresight, as smaller societies often settle their own affairs only to come into conflict with society-at-large. Growing societies also have greater and more complex needs than the smaller, so on either approach, you have trouble.

Are you writing this down? Jesus, get a fucking pen.
So here we are, nearly at the end of Act 5. How did it go? Could the society born of these relationships survive? The stakes on the table were myriad, but always divided down the seam of Troll/Human relations, where they are weakest. Rose and Kanaya's relationship struggled on levels other than the sexual, but they have begun moving forward. Gamzee and Rose's relationship could have become a kismesis at the Act's opening, but they organized and this was patched to mutual interest. Jade and Nepeta's relationship remains a hotbed of contention. The Troll/Human Hybrid question lingers in the shadows, waiting for its turn in Act 6. On top of these, another plotline has just been introduced, however infant, but I'll keep that close to the chest. Last of all, the more general question: whether the Trolls and Humans can trust one another against a major threat, as surviving Jack is key to forming a society in the first place and there is no sense in worrying about the future without dealing with the clear and present danger. The answer to that last question lies in Underlings: Last Stand.

Underlings: Last Stand exists to resolve Act 5 while it foreshadows Act 6. From the moment Presence directs Jack to cut down and Aradia in their unity, to the moment Karkat wins his second-last victory as general inside the game, it asks what the cast needs in a crisis, what they need right now: that is to say, what they need to keep their presence of mind. The conclusion of the main Flash is obvious to a player that has had to live through it: divided, the cast falls. Without Space players the player can't beat Centaurs, without teamwork and strategy they can't beat the Shoggoth, and without every individual member the characters run the risk of a hole being punched in their defences like the Jormungander and its Mind attacks. When reunited with the others, Karkat tells off the Underling Boss and its masters, saying that "every last one" of them will get out of the game alive. Point.

Counterpoint…

The Secret Strife begins with Rose in darkness, appearing screen left, with Presence screen right. To differentiate them even beyond Presence's skin, glow and gut wound, Presence has a sloppier stance, and is also more relaxed in her standard idle loops (and angrier when agitated). She faces Rose sideways (ie, her body is facing the camera. Technically a little toward Rose, but mostly the camera) and holds her left arm behind her back just to emphasize the laziness, using only the right for gestures. Rose notes her and crosses her arms.

ROSE: I see the False Derse isn't in full working order.

PRESENCE: It's a myyyystery. [she waggles her fingers at Rose]

ROSE: Get to your point. I take it you're here to fulfill your role in Hindsight's hoop-jumping experiment, now with additional violence?

PRESENCE: On the nose, sweetcheeks.

ROSE: [shakes head] You know, the more I consider about you three, the less I can honestly think of you as a democratic body. You're more like a metamind.

PRESENCE: [questions] I'm not following.

ROSE: You don't honestly have a say in playing Hindsight's game, do you? Oh, she convinced you to do it, but in the end it's your goal as much as hers. Your little symbol [it appears in what would functionally be the background were a room present] represents self-awareness, and if you're "Presence," that means the hindsight and foresight are simply other parts of your mind, relevant to… you, aren't they?
PRESENCE: [smug] Yeah, I suppose they are! Never thought of it that way.

ROSE: But for how long?

PRESENCE: [questions] Whuh--

ROSE: For how long? The Ghost of Christmas Past is eternal. The Ghost of Christmas Future is eternal, if eternally intangible. But the Ghost of Christmas Present dies at the stroke of twelve.

[Presence exclaims, grits her teeth and takes a defensive stance. She may even shake a little.]

ROSE: The next question is "what is she Present for?" I already know it's this "Key Moment" Foresight is talking about. When all three of you – that is to say, the metamind – want us dead. I don't know when that is, or why you want us dead, but I wonder what happens after that, oh evil twin of mine? I think I'm starting to understand your rage issues. You've can't shake the spectre of the future, coming to tear your five-minute life away at the end of the line. Tell me! What do you think your past life did to be masked and roped into this dead-end trap?

[Presence begins to shake more violently as Rose talks, fear turning to rage.]

PRESENCE: Oh, you think you're so clever!

[She swipes out her right arm, and the dream bubble fills with content out from her (a simple spotlight effect will work until we reach the edges). The room behind Rose is still filled with shadows, but otherwise we have brought back the Underlab hallway from ULS's early tutorials.]

PRESENCE: You wanna play mind games? Well there are two smarmy Lalondes here today, lady. You wanna talk about not realizing you don't have any ground to stand on? Try taking a look in the mirror. Any day now you're gonna look down and plunge like a cartoon rabbit into to a pit of things looking to… to…

[From "...gonna look down..." onward, the shadow behind Rose fills with Underling eyes. Rose turns (at the end of Presence's line, above) and they disappear before she sees them.]

PRESENCE: [swipes arm dismissively] Ugh, whatever. My point is, you're gonna realize you're already in way over your head, and trust me, sister, it's even deeper than you realize. I'm gonna die? Maybe. I can take what's coming. [symbol flash] You? You've got everything set out so rigid it's gonna snap with one tiny break in your tidy line. I ain't gonna see you… pissing on my legs about who's in worse shape!

ROSE: "Pissing on your legs?" [shrugs] …Nevermind your word choice. If you're implying there's trouble back at the metaphorical ranch, I assure you, I've got it covered.

PRESENCE: Oh yeah, definitely covered. You've definitely got Troll culture under your weasely Human thumb, no possible mistakes this time. This is the absolute portrait [snaps her fingers] of security right here.

[The shadows retract behind Rose to reveal Terezi and Gamzee. They look around, confused.]

TEREZI: …Hey Rose.

ROSE: I guess the False Prospit isn't working either.

GAMZEE: Fuck, I haven't dreamed in months, this is awesome! [he begins gawking about]
**PRESENCE:** [facepalm] I don't believe you, Lalonde. *That [points] is still a menace.*

**ROSE:** Are you still on about killing Gamzee?

**TEREZI:** Is that who I think it is? [laughs, yanks her cane up out of her sylladex and catches it]
Awesome.

**PRESENCE:** You too, Pyrope? Getting' on the clown-car to hell?

**TEREZI:** What are you talking about? [grins] G4MZ33 RUL3S

**PRESENCE:** [stamps her foot] Even the Mind player! If you can't notice the biggest flaw in your group... if you're gonna put all your cash, and your lives, on double-fucking-zero that Whistles here is your lord and saviour, you're crazier than he is!

**GAMZEE:** [gapes foreward] I'm sorry, what was-- [exclaims and jumps back, shocked. Beat. He continues, hunched over and whispering past his hand:] ...Rose. Why are you over there?

[Rose sighs.]

**PRESENCE:** [snort] If this is your game, I've already got my vote for Hindsight. Just have to follow a little... red tape.

[She snaps her fingers, the symbol appears behind her: two diagonal lines of power run to the central point, followed by a bolt down the middle line. A vortex appears at the central point, growing in size as she speaks. **Music:** Final Stand. Through Presence's next line, we hear the sound of a wet, striking noise, followed by a soft, abbreviated shriek, and two more striking noises.]

**PRESENCE:** [holds her arm high in showmanship] Welcome to the roulette table!

[0:07: Gamzee pops into existence from the portal, but he is not the Gamzee we know on the left. He has both arms, and is carrying two juggling clubs spackled with fresh, green blood. He appears to have recently stepped in blue blood as well. He eyes the others before him with confusion. Presence does not turn to face, but simply grins. Rose and Terezi are surprised, Gamzee, confused.]

**PRESENCE:** Evening, friend. How are things?

C. GAMZEE: eh. not so bad. FILLIN’ UP ON PAINT!

**PRESENCE:** Wonderful. Must be a pain though, no way to stock up on your own purple.

C. GAMZEE: yeah, well. GUY’S GOT TO MAKE SACRIFICES.

**PRESENCE:** Oh, I wouldn't say that. Oh, look! [~0:18: she points to Rose's side of the field] Problem solved!

[C. Gamzee looks up and begins giggling.]

**ROSE:** [floater] Shit.

[Rose and Terezi both arm. Gamzee, seeing them do so, does the same. Presence teleports away with a smile, her teleportation forming a white, vertical line that appears in-line with a symbol flash, which becomes the "SECRET STRIFE" banner. C. Gamzee begins laughing maniacally, his arms spread to the sky, his text in floaters, CAPS and nocaps. At 0:30, he clashes his clubs together,
shouting "BOOYEAH!" in a floater and dismissing the banner.

-- > vs. Canon Gamzee --

Canon Gamzee makes this fight weird right from the start, as he takes his first action before you're given the opportunity. He uses a Bard ability (as a canon character, this is characterized as a Rage ability as far as in-game effects are concerned, as all player abilities seem to come from element modified by class instead of element distinct from class), such that the first real turn begins at 0:52. This ability, *Metronome*, causes the back wall and ceiling of the Underlab set to fade into a vision of outer space (sucking away any background props that might obstruct your view of it), with a giant metronome ticking back and forth across it this "window" while the player gives orders to their PCs. A number is displayed behind the ticks, counting down each tick and restarting at the start of each turn. These numbers start out fair-sized but becomes smaller as Gamzee takes damage. The metronome serves a single purpose: if it runs out of time before the player hits Go, everyone without orders misses their turn. A slider would be provided anyone with motion problems, arthritis or what have you to extend or disable this countdown, but everyone willing to set the bar for a reasonable challenge will have their work cut out for them.

The reason for this mechanic isn't just to handicap the player, but to work with the music. Gamzee is a Bard, and the music plays an important narrative role here: it shows you more results from Presence's roulette wheel. Now, as some have pointed out, Final Stand seems to be more of a *Sonic 2006 remix* than a wholly Homestuck song, but it has the structure I needed: combat song with two motions and a sombre bridge (actually, three motions might have been even better, so long as the second was shortest). As the song jumps from motion to motion or motion to bridge, you see, the game fades to black and the turn is reset. During the cut, Canon Gamzee takes on a new form: a new possibility for his life, with, of course, new combat skills. When the song loops, we'd return to the beginning. Health is shared between forms. The three forms are as follows:

- "Canon Gamzee" the Sgrub player, murderer and second-most important character in Homestuck, described by the in-game prompt as "One of Gamzee's possible futures, as a homicidal maniac." Canon Gamzee uses jokerKind to attack the player with weapons from Rose's teammates, using their attack styles. Miracle of ongoing miracles, only attacks that had already been drawn would be included in this mix, but because these attacks would all have to be drawn fresh for Gamzee, attacks from CYQ would be completely valid and you probably wouldn't see the whole set.

- "Subjugglator Makara," who never played Sgrub and went on to rise through the ranks of his cult, analogous to the Grand Highblood. "One of Gamzee's possible futures, as a powerful, professional maniac." Subjugglator Makara gets the smallest section of the song, as he is the least possible future (technically, the Subjugglators would not exist without Sgrub). Subjugglator Makara appears in a throne, like his ancestor, and arrives with a small cadre of juggalo dressed Imps. The player must hit canon Gamzee before the section of music expires, which will piss him off and cause him to attack you. You actually want this, because if he is allowed to lord over you until the end of his section of the song, he will interrupt even the player's turn to launch a single hit, one-hit-KO attack, "The Vast Joke." You can block this, but fail both tasks (hitting him quickly and blocking after that first failure) and it's game over.

- "God of Rage": "One of Gamzee's possible futures, as lord and savior of all maniacs." Bard Gamzee carries Cal, and appears with a bit of fanfare the first time through the song's loop (Cal even winking at the player as he appears). Bard Gamzee is a flyer, though he appears to be held up by wires. The Bard uses clubKind and throws glass bottles (this and the wires both a recent, Post Act 6 refinement), but what he loses in complexity he gains in sheer power, the
blood vials debuffing you and his club attacks often boosted with Rage skills. When the song loops and Bard Gamzee becomes Canon Gamzee once again, Cal remains sitting to one side (against the invisible back wall) until he is needed again.

Between Subjugglator Makara's time-based instant game over and the Bard of Rage's sheer power, the player should only really feel comfortable in the unpredictable first stage, if you can consider that comfortable, and should aim to beat Gamzee in as few loops of the song as possible.

On top of that, the player is at a bit of a disadvantage against Canon Gamzee from the start, no matter his form, and that disadvantage is local Gamzee, who still can't cast any Spells as the game still can't decide his Element (just making Presence's point for her, Gamz). This was true in ULS' main story as well, but there he was one of a half dozen or more players: here he's one of a fire team of three, and a much bigger liability. The closest thing the player does get to an advantage is miniscule: this chapter is in the past, and Rose and Terezi are ranked O2 instead of <>1 after their relationship switch-over, giving them a minor Chaining advantage over the alternative (Friendship and Moirail chains are distinct in terms of gameplay, but for those munchkins willing to toss aside the actual value of a fitting, mutual relationship for sheer power, I'd take the higher number over the lower any day).

<C. Gamzee at 50% health.>

C. GAMZEE: hey, c'mon, man!

[Gamzee exclaims..]

C. GAMZEE: YOU AIN'T HITTIN' ME HALF HARD ENOUGH! i know my own strength, and check out that robot shit you've got there!

GAMZEE: [grins] Hey man, do me a favour and stand still a second, then we'll see who can hit.

C. GAMZEE: [laughs] you know, I always thought I'd be something fucked up when I hit the fleet, BUT I NEVER THOUGHT I'D BE JUST A STRAIGHT-UP PANSY. what's your element?

GAMZEE: Fuck, I dunno.

C. GAMZEE: [laughs harder] YOU TWO PROUD OF YOURSELVES? he should be busting your heads

TEREZI: Aw, you don't even get it. Gamzee is Gamzee and if he's that way because of me, that's just 'cause he gets that I'm cool. C'mon!

[Gamzee giggles and Terezi smiles.]

C. GAMZEE: YOU JUST DON'T GET US, MOTHERFUCKER. he will bust your heads. IT'S WHAT WE DO!

TEREZI: Maybe, but I'm not gonna crack somebody over the head on a maybe. But I'm gonna stand by my asshole while he's still my asshole, eh? …Crack you over the head, maybe.

C. GAMZEE: just you come and try it. <3<

ROSE: [exclaims] …That twisted, backwards little monster! I could kiss her! Right on the beak!
TEREZI: What? What is going on? Why is there beak-kissing.


---

After defeating Canon Gamzee (the symbol appears and cracks along the Presence line, as implied in Chapter 34. Once again, it remains cracked for the rest of the fic), I come up to an issue. See, previously I would have been fine, but now Andrew has said that Gamzee has never died in any timeline. Ergo, I would probably close out the fight with a joke: Canon Gamzee was not literally canon so much as a close match from one of Nyarlathotep's hundreds of pet universes, and this one is just a shadow of the reality. I would do this by referencing, uh, this. Thinking on my feet! Gamzee is quite disturbed by this treatment of his duplicate, and does not quite look well after the fact.

The player gets their reward weapon here: the way this segment ends doesn't really leave a gap for the item to be rewarded, so I'm doing it here.

GAME: You got the Bloody Clubs! Equip them to Gamzee in any Strife! Just don't tell Nepeta!

---

<Wrapup>

Gamzee still somewhat stunned by his dead body being tossed into the void, and does not speak. Presence and Hindsight both teleport back into the area, both against a symbol flash (in an ideal world, Hindsight's diagonal teleportation would be represented by her motion coming into reality, but to minimize art work for the artists, Hindsight would have only minimal art, probably just talk loop, an idle loop, and one more you'll see below. She is leaning into her left-tipped harpoon).

HINDSIGHT: No bad, Rose, darling. Not bad at all.

PRESENCE: [floater] Hmph.

ROSE: Mirann. I hear you're an Empress, and a Pharaoh on Earth now?

HINDSIGHT: Less "now" and more "then." I've had my days in the sun.

TEREZI: [laughing] Lady, your eyes look ridiculous.

HINDSIGHT: [smiles] Heh. And yet a few centuries of blind devotion from the masses makes your insults bounce right off!

PRESENCE: Stop black-flirting with the children.

HINDSIGHT: I'll stop "black-flirting" if you stop black-matchmaking her with Makara.

PRESENCE: [exclaims] I did not! …Ugh, shutting up.

HINDSIGHT: Congratulations, Rose, darling. You've overcome a rogue friend, in a brightly lit room, with backup and fair warning. Applause.
ROSE: I'm aware of the nuances.

HINDSIGHT: I doubt it. "Stand by my asshole," Pyrope? Rose, you of all people should know better, but as always, your self-awareness is hampered by an ego fogging everything past your nose.

TEREZI: She's got a point, Rose. You're pretty much Exhibit A of "don't trust your weird friends, they'll go crazy and try to kill you."

ROSE: Love you too. Listen you two: I'm on to you. I know what your third test is going to be and I want to know why. Do you even realize what the other is doing? Presence is trying to kill Gamzee to somehow extend her thirty seconds in the spotlight, that's clear. But if that's the case, why is Hindsight trying to help them… and us?

HINDSIGHT: Rose, I'm not trying to help you. It's like she said: I jump people through hoops. It's instinct.

ROSE: Awfully specific hoops.

[The camera zoom-pans to Gamzee.]

GAMZEE: …fuck. [he shakes his head] 'Rez, did I just kill myself or am I on a super bad trip?

[Terezi questions.]

HINDSIGHT: Tsk, tsk, tsk. Loyal one, you have plunged. It's just not going to be any fun when Presence goes after you with her toys.

[Foresight teleports in to the right. He is facing away from Rose and the others. Now that he is here it's clear the three Minds are facing in their respective directions: Hindsight left, Presence largely fore and Foresight right. Foresight's talk loop involves him looking over his shoulder, toward the viewer and thus, the present.]

FORESIGHT: Probably not even worthwhile.

PRESENCE: Do I step on your toes at work, old man?

FORESIGHT: I'd certainly hope not, Christmas Present.

[Presence snarls and Rose laughs.]

ROSE: Well at least you keep an open pair of ears.

[Presence turns to face the future.]

PRESENCE: Are you threatening me?

FORESIGHT: …How about I make it up to you? Solve this problem in one swoop? Not that you'll believe me. Gamzee Makara! [Gamzee looks up] "Once, when the world was young, there lived a Troll who was advanced in years and had a single heir."

GAMZEE: Oh shit, dude, I am trippin' mad balls here… [he clutches his head]

TEREZI: Gamzee?
Foresight’s story is reflected in the Dream Bubble in place of the “outer space” left behind by Canon Gamzee. The story is illustrated with a pair of shadow puppets, constructed out of simple primitives (rectangles, circles and the like representing components of the arm and torso), using in vector art to give them the surreal quality implied by the vector spell and motion effects.

**FORESIGHT:** "And one day, the man bought a mirror at market, and found that it showed not his reflection but a vision of the future. In it, he lay dead, not much advanced in age, surrounded by wealth. And he thought to himself, 'My kismesis lives and my rivals are many. I must be certain my wealth will be put in the right hands: better out of theirs, best of all in some hands that will topple them in my wake. So he made out his will and sacrificed to the church, [an image of subjugglators laughing at a joke] and it was signed with blood."

Gamzee clutches his head again at the mention of his compatriots. Purple sparks begin to fly from him.

**FORESIGHT:** "One day, his heir fell sick, and was well cared for. But in his illness, he wandered as if asleep, and came across the magic mirror. The man was present when he found it, and saw over his shoulder, seeing his heir reflected in a hideous skull."

The skull in the mirror is given a prominent image.

**FORESIGHT:** "So the man struck and killed him. And the church revised his will, saying, 'This is the oldest and best joke of all: better to trust your hands, than some weakling other.'"

The power lancing from Gamzee intensifies as he starts sniffing. He wipes at his face, a careful viewer will see tears.

**ROSE:** Gamzee, what--?

**TEREZI:** I don't know, it's just an old story!

Gamzee's power begins to race along the "screen" at the back of the room as his psyche begins to distort the dream bubble on its own. This initially takes a shadow-puppet picture of Subjugglators, but Hindsight slams down her harpoon and the screen flashes with the Symbol. The left branch begins to flicker in harmony with Gamzee's energies. Suddenly, the images are replaced: shots from Homestuck appear, which flicker and are replaced with image manip showing some of the many changes between the canon and H universes. Feferi's dead body disappears from the horn pile. Jack Noir is seen entering a cave on LoFaF instead of the Frog Temple during Cascade.

**PRESENCE:** This is bullshit, old man, and I'm still going with the worm plan.

**FORESIGHT:** Oh by all means, redundancy in spades.

**ROSE:** [furious] What did you do?

**HINDSIGHT:** [smiling] Once upon a time, Rose darling, Gamzee Makara knew exactly who he was going to be when he grew up. But that was a very, very long time ago.

Gamzee's energy begins to go haywire, scenes flickering much faster (scenes reused to simplify things). The last of these shows the pages that built-up to Cascade. Doc Scratch collapsed in his room, while in the H-verse, the room is empty and tidy. Jade's death as seen in canon, while in the H-verse, Jade is alive by that same strange cave on LoFaF. And lastly, Doc Scratch's overturned candy bowl, spelling out "> [S] C A S C A D E ." After a flicker, the bowl is clean and empty, but a second flicker shows it from above. It seems that even though Doc Scratch stopped existing in this
universe, he nevertheless left a message before his disappearance: the letters "> [T] D O W N F A L
L." The screen zooms into the image as it appears, and all but the letters disappear, which flash on
a slow loop. The game awaits user input: the image is a hyperlink. After a long pause the game will
produce a dialogue box suggesting the player click the link (if they didn't notice) or restart the Flash
to title.

[T] Downfall have would be hosted as a proper chapter and part of the fic (after a brief period
following the release of the Secret Strife. Putting it up at the same time would leave readers confused
as to which they should read first, and since the SS has to be earned, they would never pick it first!).
It was too important to consign entirely to a secret strife, and certainly too freaking long and
complicated to do with sprites, so I wasn't even going to think of it. For our purposes, it will be
included as the next chapter.
I was of mixed minds on how to describe [T] Downfall. During the run of another fic, I tried out a system of transcript describing an animated flash by time signatures, and while that worked to a degree, I don't think it would work here. I suppose a summary will work, I'm just iffy about this sort of highly visual chapter. I was going to describe it from Rose's point of view, but she quickly loses herself in the viewing and we subtly lose track of "Rose saw" and "Rose noticed" and simply have the events appearing in Gamzee and Hindsight's vision play out in narration.

The sequence begins when a single, thick white line descends above and into a black void. It is racing down, at irregular but incredible speeds, allowing Rose to notice its motion even though she has no point of reference but the "screen." Focusing on the line, she sees a magma-covered infant world: Alternia, post-scratch, and canon, not that she realizes. The planet rapidly cools before our eyes, water forms and then plant life.

We cut close, and see the first Trolls begin to walk in silhouette, and we cut close to see Doc Scratch arrive. Dark shadows in the shape of tentacles appear in the sky, and Gl'bglyb appears in the water of a nearby ocean. Trolls arrive, and Scratch touches one of them on the forehead. Like an electric shock, this Troll receives visions of Lord English's hatching in the deep future. The Troll collapses to their knees, Scratch vanishes, and the Troll begins thrashing. In the thrashing, they bite through part of their own tongue to reveal Purple blood, and are soon tearing at their face and laughing. The silhouette breaks intermittently, and we see the outline of a skull scratched raw onto the Troll's face by their own nails. Exhausted, the Troll begins to mutter rhythmic chants, and the other Trolls edge in to listen.

A Troll is seen applying face paint for the first time, when the beam of light speeds up and makes it impossible for Rose to follow the details. Trolls spread across the planet, logging and building. Suddenly, the line splits, the fracture deepest red from the white whole, which having lost the red begins to dip subtly down the spectrum, something Rose probably only notices at once because she's a Seer. Rose focuses on this tiny thread, and sees a game of lots going in favour of one victor over another. The main line continues to splinter, when sudden it outright ruptures into two violet streams. They slow, and Rose soon sees the reason for the disruption: a Troll camp in the badlands, where we see, via bandages and eyes, that this is a tribe of Brownbloods. Suddenly, in the purple line to Rose's right, a sea Troll woman appears among them: Hindsight, as the Lily Empress. Pulling a harpoon from her inventory, which seems more than out of place, technologically, she slashes her own palm for the assembled group and reveals a wound with white blood. The tribe in the left light does not experience these events. We see Doc Scratch for a moment on the left, burying the text "> [T] D O W N F A L L." with fresh hyperlinks: on the right, he has disappeared, and his message stands alone, awaiting its recipient.

The two lines continue to race on, but Mirann's tight control over her timeline is evident, keeping those destined to certain fates from falling off the alpha. As such, her line remains purple, while the canon's other gradually degrades, to blue. The Lily Empress' tribe finds the frog temple and sets it up as her headquarters, while the Lily Empress herself vandalizes the source code found in the ruins using her harpoon. After this, the Lily Empress is seen reigning young as ever for what must be centuries. In the blue universe, the early Subjuggalators express their dominance over the others. Several of these events are mirrored in the purple universe, implying that they still happen despite our focus on the Lily Empire. They come to a close when the Subjuggalators come into an alliance with
the sea Trolls in both universes, and in the purple universe, they burn the capital of the Lily Cult. The Empress is nowhere to be found.

The Trolls spread uniformly in both universes: the delay in fighting the Lily Empire is quickly eradicated as the first Empires conquer the entire globe in spite. In the Troll Iron Age and in both universes, Troll storytellers tell the young Trolls about when the world was young, these tales seen as surreal shadow puppets against canvas backdrop. These trolls and their young are roughly detailed, and tell The Tale of the Bowyer, though there are no differences in the story between versions. The years pass again, as shown through key technological developments. From time to time, we see the Subjuggalators, and gradually, Rose comes to notice will note very, very minor differences in how the other Trolls seem to be reacting to them, especially Brownbloods. As the land Trolls take to the sea on ships, new stories are told, by technologically diverse storytellers. Many of these tellers are Brownbloods, some carrying cult idols and icons in the purple verse. The Tale of the Lone Soldier appears, as does the tale Foresight told Gamzee, but this latter story has a change. The scene where the Heir looks in the mirror is seen, and on the blue universe, his face is not a skull, but eaten away by disease. In the purple universe, the Brownblood teller has an obvious statue of Fluthlu resembling the idols in Call of Cthulhu. The iconography disappears after this point, and soon the tellers are of multiple blood colours in both verses.

Suddenly, the universes diverge again, this time on the left. The Alternia of the surviving branch is pelted with meteors, and its timeline begins to scatter in multiple directions, and it is a while before we are following only a single line once again. We watch the central, and soon see the Dolorosa leaving the caves with the Sufferer. When the Sufferer rises, he appears in a crowd of rough-drawn Trolls, while in the purple universe, a stranger does the same. Zooming in on our subjects, the Cancer symbol appears on the Sufferer in red: the Elder Sign appears on the stranger in white. A second comparison is made with the Summoner and another double, wingless, both leading identical rebellions. Still, fables are told, and while many are identical, in the purple universe, the Skull has become a reoccurring motif.

Another hail of meteors, this time in both universes. We focus on one in particular, and discover Gamzsee being adopted by his lusus. As he grows, he watches the old stories being told (it's unclear if he is watching a TV or computer or if this is metaphorical for him being schooled). They terrify him in both universes, and on the right, the skull motifs are repeated from earlier in the story. When he is told The Tale of the Bowyer, the story has changed in the purple universe. The press of cultural influence over generations has changed it, and when the children are killed in the middle of the story, they are all finished off by Re, the story's villain, who is unmistakably a Subjugglator.

Over time, Gamzee beings to learn about the Subjuggalators directly, and begins drinking Faygo, trying the unicycle and sopor pies but his failure on the unicycle seem to put him off more in the purple universe. One day, he learns that he is supposed to kill people for his religion. He seems initially eager, but in the purple universe, something changes. His own face is intercut with his imagining of Re, who is bigger and spiked like an Imperial Drone in his mind, and he imagines all the terrified people he had learned about in the past. In both universes, he contacts Tavros. We see the following exchange:

TC: And I've got to say, my man,

Blue Universe:

TC: And I've got to say, my man,
TC: It's gonna be pretty awesome!
AT: Well then, I have to say,
AT: I am pretty psyched for you,
AT: i BET YOU’LL LOOK GREAT WITH THE PAINT AND, uH, gIANT SHOES
TC: FuCk ThE sHoEs ArE gOnNa Be ThE bEsT pArT
TC: AnD sPrEaDiNg ThE gOoD wOrD!
TC: hOnK :o).

Purple Universe:

TC: AnD i’Ve GoT tO sAy, My MaN,
TC: I’m AcTuAlLy KiNdA sCaReD.
TC: ThOsE mOtHeRfUcKeRs ReAlLy MeSs Up OtHeR pEoPlE’s ShIt, YoU kNoW?
AT: yEAH, uH, i KNOW THAT,
AT: bUT I DON’T THINK YOU’VE GOT ANYTHING TO WORRY ABOUT,
AT: i CAN’T SEE YOU DOING ANYTHING YOU DON’T, fEEL COMFORTABLE WITH,
AT: mOSTLY BECAUSE YOU’RE PRETTY CHILL ABOUT, uH, eVERYTHING,
TC: YeAh MaN, i’M pReTtY cHiLl AbOuT lOtS oF sHiT

In both universes, Gamzee is then seen mooning over the computer. In the blue, he has hearts in his eyes. In the purple, diamonds.

From this point, the blue line again scatters. In smaller windows, we see Gamzee on rampages, slaughtering his friends, including some of the scenes we have seen in the comic leading up to the birth of Doc Scratch. These events do not occur in the purple universe, which only branches in thin, irrelevant threads. Both universes enter the game. Both universes have Gamzee reach his Denizen, but while we don't quite make out his Denizen in the blue universe (since we don't know what it is in the comic), in the purple it is clearly Capricorn as we know him. We see Kanaya and Karkat in both universes, looking up at the in-progress Genesis Frog, and the blue timeline suddenly extends into a swirling blue and red band. The purple band likewise expands, but this new section is likewise purple. We see Gamzee rise up to strike the Black King in the blue universe, but there is no such luck in the purple. The damage done by his fellows, however, is notably higher, as indicated by the thickness of the attack effects lines they cut through with their attacks. When Vriska strikes the final blow, the fight ends in both universes, and the lines rush forward, the red and second purple lines breaking off into parallel universes.

In the blue and original purple, Gamzee trying to troll the Humans (red and purple bands shoot off from the Humans' timelines as Dave works: Beta Dave returns and becomes Davesprite in both verses). Finally, Gamzee is sent the ICP video. In both universes, he initially reacts in the same way, but slowly, the purple universe's Gamzee begins to calm. Soon, he looks upset.

The purple window grows to cover the screen as we focus on it momentarily. Gamzee walks the halls, morose, when he suddenly runs into Tavros, lance drawn to go off and fight Vriska. Gamzee puts his arm over his friends' shoulder and drags him off. As they go, they encounter Eridan, who is going to approach Kanaya about a wand, but is snatched up under Gamzee's free arm without a moment's thought. They are next seen in Gamzee's room, as Eridan stares disdainfully at one of Gamzee's clown posters, and is soon babbling to the others. Soon, they are all hanging out happily together, and Gamzee and Eridan are both completely zonked on sopor pie. Eridan falls asleep on Tavros' lap, and Gamzee smiles. When Vriska begins to troll Tavros, Gamzee is the one at the computer, and he tells her that Tavros decided he'd rather go take a nap. As Kanaya once said, a moirail can change a person on a deeper level, but it was never Gamzee who needed to be calmed in this universe: it was, if anything, Tavros, and moreover, Eridan and Vriska. Gamzee has just put an end to nearly half of Horrorstuck.
Abruptly, we cut to the Humans' session, where Jack has just murdered Dad Egbert and Mom Lalonde, and the window retracts to show that we are once again watching both universes. Rose goes grimdark, and we see Dave arrive on LoSaF to go frog hunting. But as things play out in a familiar fashion on the left, the purple universe diverges, showing Dave getting a new message from Gamzee. We don't see the message, but Dave suddenly up and leaves. Jade follows him. Back at the Battlefield, Jack stabs John: we see his health bar, which drops below zero in the red and blue, but drops to exactly 1 in the purple. Rose fights back, hitting harder in the purple universe. As Dave is killed in the alpha universe, he intercepts a blow meant for grimdark Rose in the purple, cutting into his arm (as he later would catch a blow for Aradia). After an exchange of swordplay, he too is killed, co-temporally with his canon counterpart. When Jade arrives (in the purple universe) and John revives, the purple Jack retreats. Jade kisses Dave in both universes, but then stares aghast at Rose in the purple. This is intercut with a scene of Eridan fighting Sollux and murdering Feferi in the red and blue. In the purple, however, he simply glares at them, and Gamzee arrives as if from nowhere to clap him on the back, calming him down. Eridan is seated next to Tavros and Vriska, and they chat amicably. Zooming in again to the purple, we see Jade and John confront Rose, who becomes sheepish, nods at something and flies away. We see her go through a gate, ending up deep underground under the oceans, and she soon arrives in Cetus' chambers. There, the great Denizen, with her bright pink eyes, offers Rose the Choice, which Rose sees as two glowing balls of white light hovering over Cetus upraised foreclaws. Suddenly, we cut to Karkat, who is trolling John about the cross-universe teleporter Sollux has located on LoFaF. Present!Rose realizes that this transporter was introduced thanks to the Lily Empress' vandalism of the game's source code inside the temple, which is presumably also responsible for the players' strength boosts. Back in the Denizen's chambers, Rose points to a hand and Cetus closes the other, snuffing out its light. Rose is then offered the second to touch. When she does, a black miasma rises from her body, slowly draining her of her Grimdark state, leaving behind a writhing tentacle-cloud fills up a space nearly as large as Cetus. When the process is completed, Rose faints. Cetus seems for a moment as though she is preparing to withdraw, when she is tapped on the shoulder (or flank, as appropriate). She looks back up to see the dark cloud has touched her with a tendril. Grinning, if possible for her design, she holds out her upturned claws, and the two balls of light return. The cloud makes the opposite Choice to Rose, and begins to surge into the light. We return to the split universes, where we see the events of Cascade have begun to play out in the red and blue. In the purple, Jade, John and the revived Dave have gone to LoFaF with an unconscious Rose. But before they reach it, we see Jack. In the red and blue, he decides to retreat after laying Jade on her Quest Bed. In the purple, he looks up at Skaia, and sees it darken. He flees, instead, to LoFaF, beating the kids to the cave, where he finds the universe transporter. In both universes, he slaughters the Aradiabots on the other side. In the deep dark of the Land of Light and Rain, Cetus is seen convulsing in silhouette. Her bright white silhouette against the dark of the cave becomes a black against white. The kids en-route to the universe teleporter see the world begin to corrupt and distort, as Skaia goes black. In the darkness, they are ambushed by Hephaestus, grimdark, as the world devolves around them. Slowly, we return from this narrative image to the Dream Bubble where this began. Gamzee has collapsed, and Terezi is crouched near him, apparently having tried to help him but since taken a low, defensive stance. Rose, also armed, is standing, but is staring at the "screen," of Gamzee and Hindsight's vision. She stares, agape, to Hindsight. The shot returns to the spirit in the Denizen's chamber, as the cloud disappears into the Denizen's light.
Rose is breathless. "Cheaters," she says. She turns back to Hindsight. In the background, the white image of Light's sun appears on Cetus' silhouette, but it suddenly blackens out like her skin, as if in eclipse. "You're Cetus."

Hindsight smiles, and reaches up to her face, which has become a Mask. She pulls it off, and Shade spills out of her, filling the room in the shape of the Denizen of the Land of Light and Rain, marked with the brand of an eclipsed sun. Behind her, the image of an eye appears, an eye opening on Nyarlathotep's arm, bright pink, it's pupil a slant to the left.

"After all," says the Denizen, "what is the Past but stasis and calm to the end of time, Rose darling, an idol to the Terrors and the Throne of Derse?"

In the vision, the kids are rescued by their Sprites, who hold Hephaestus off as they escape into the Troll's session and are snatched out of Jack's way by Aradia. The kid's session is then broken apart by Nyarlathotep, an unnecessary relic.

Terezi gets up: "Give me one reason for us not to mess you up right here," she says to Cetus.

"Because you'd be quickly overwhelmed," Foresight notes.

"Because you've never beaten a Denizen you deserved to beat," Hindsight says.

But Presence is not paying attention. Noting she's been silent for some time after her argument with Foresight, Rose notes her for the first time and sees her looking off, toward the "screen," which has since disappeared. Beyond, Rose can see out of the Dream Bubble itself, into the Furthest Ring, with vague shadows of tentacles cradling the ball from below. Frightened, Presence says: "Because we're out of time."

The other Minds, and indeed Rose and Terezi, look out the same window, into Paradox Space. There, after a brief pause, the sky become ablaze with distant but powerful light, as the Green Sun explodes into existence.

"Time for you three to wake up," Hindsight says, frightened herself, and she casts out an arm toward the trio, who are brushed away and out of the Dream. Our point of view appears to stay with the others for a moment, as the sun continues to pulse and grow, but we soon discover we were never with Rose in this chapter to begin with. Instead, we move out, out of the Dream Bubble, out of the Furthest Ring, across impossible distances and impossible space, past Jack and PM facing down in A2, past Aradia and Sollux to the Green Sun, where the Seer of Light has ascended.

And the Sun is in her eyes, and she sees things, knows things, from across all of existence. She sees and knows the Horrorterror tucked into its corner, clutching its precious incipsphere, pathetic and undaunted for being pathetic. She sees the battle going on inside, co-temporaneous with her ascension, the Rat Trap deployed and Jack caught within, and chaos unleashed. She sees duplicates of her friends scattered through time by the Sovereign Slayer, blocking attacks that won't come, not from that direction, calling for friends that can't hear. She's aware of the Dream Bubbles, clutched below.

In the left, she sees her double with Dave, confronting Dave's Bro at the end of the fight, telling him she doesn't need him. In the middle, she sees her double, and hears Terezi telling a menacing Gamzee she trusts his one-armed clone, as the fight goes on. On the right, she sees her double draw her weapons against a hunched old man, though the battle has yet to begin.

And she sees Gamzee, as he wakes in the past. He's reeling as he wakes, with ghosts in his eyes: his own dead body, and Capricon half dead on the ground, and the fire of Rage in his heart, beginning to falter. He stumbles, knocks over some cake left over in his room from earlier that day, and desperately seeks his face in a mirror. And he finds it there, washed off by sopor and a caring
moirail, clean and grey. And the Rage suddenly falls away, and the ghosts fade, but he finds no peace in that, struck in the eyes and heart as if by lightning. This passes as well, and for a moment, his eyes are clear, of ghosts and Rage and storms, when suddenly: a spark, a new flame bursts in his heart, formed like a droplet fallen into water and spread out in a single ripple: a symbol the Seer knows as a symbol for Calm.

And she heard a man's voice, out of void and time, speaking to her double, and saying: "…sometimes, you have to start all over, to change the smallest, little thing."

Gamzee would collapse, and would remember nothing in the morning. But the Bard of Rage was dead.

And in here we see a counter to Rose's position outlined, though the casual reader might not catch it. Yes, Rose must trust these people to survive, to build a society. But she shouldn't. Rose does not know them, or their culture, thus her renewed worry about co-opting Troll culture in her conversation with Vriska, after this sequence occurred. Three and a half months is a drop in a lifetime. Rose cannot know them as well as she wants. Gamzee could have become the Bard of Rage, the disciple of Lord English, the Grand Highblood reborn, but he has instead become the Bard of Calm, an unwitting agent of the Triumvirate, and the reader is meant to be put in Rose's shoes by knowing nothing about this new potential whatsoever.

The cast must trust one another to survive, but no situation is so black and white, no plan truly comes down to one and only one eventuality. Terezi suggests they trust while it lasts, but when there are just as many potential threats inside as out, trusting blindly might yet be the worst mistake they could possibly make.

> End of Act 5

Chapter End Notes

You may be wondering how, if the H-verse kids are stronger mortals than the canonverse mortals, Canon Gamzee was able to take their attacks. This is a silly question. The Pre-Act 6 explanation was that game bosses have more HP than they do when they’re in the party, I think gamers in the audience know what I mean.
Teaming up, the cast united with the hope of executing the least stupid of the stupid plans they had mustered: to trap Jack in a box, the "Rat Trap," which would dampen his powers while they tried to hit him a lot. What it lacks in substance it makes up in sheer what-the-hellery so was given the green light, and the kids were soon tearing off pages from their four-month timetable. Having both become new auspistices, Feferi declared Rose her "auspistice buddy." Meanwhile, Rose makes friends with two of the voices she's met in the void: Mirann and her friend and possible lover, Aidan MacDermott. MacDermott, a voice actor on The Squiddles! but, moreover, a Horrorterror worshipping cultist, explains that he has no idea why Gly'b'golyb tried to send a message through the program, or even what it could possibly mean.

Meanwhile, part of the cast has formed "the Breeding Buddies!" or later, "Team Drone," because "anything else would have been better." This was an effort to teach Sollux to be the forerunner of a new "Imperial Drone" job they have poorly defined and poorly understand in general. Coordinating with Kanaya, this team, which included Feferi (sometimes), Karkat (less times), Equius (most times) and Nepeta (all the times), organized the upcoming breeding efforts, which played out in a way no way near as gallant as that seems to imply.

Unfortunately, all this goodwill could not last. One day, while battling Jack, Dave caught sight of the Ghost Rose from earlier, who guided Jack toward Aradia's Denizen as a source of power. This fight was a ruse to damage the False Derse the kids had constructed to keep Rose separated from the Horrorterrors in her sleep, and the Ghost Rose was able to contact her and manipulate her through dreams to attack Gamzee, taking off his arm. John attempted to fix the arm, learning a great deal about ectobiology in the process, but it was ultimately lost and had to be replaced with a cybernetic. Rose was distraught and it took some time for others to trust her again: meanwhile, she and Feferi, the two characters who could be attacked with Eldritch mind control, were told to avoid transportalizers until things could be sorted out. The False Derse was eventually repaired.

Once back on her feet, Rose began to avoid Gamzee, not able to face him. While avoiding him, she found another friend avoiding a pertinent issue: Jade, blind to the fact that Nepeta was considering her for quadrants. Not wanting her to repeat Dave's mistake with Terezi, Rose cautioned her to make a move to specify that she wanted to make no moves. Together, the two bonded over plush toys and memories, and they, with John, wondered after the lives they might have had if they had been normal, and if they can cope without their parents. Unfortunately, all did not end well that started off well. Vriska and Eridan were fighting over a trifle, and furious at both of them, Rose shut Vriska down, inadvertently triggering half of the disasters about to occur.

The first: the emotional disaster, and realization that Rose does not truly understand her relationships or some of her closest Troll friends. This social Gulf raises the possibility that the Trolls and Humans truly cannot be together in strong relationships.

Entering a transportalizer in an emotional state caused Rose to encounter the second disaster, when she discovered the voices in the rift were not truly a Troll or a Human or a Ghost, but three distinct Minds of a vicious Horrorterror, Lovecraft's Nyarlathotep, blessed with power over Shade and bent on three objectives, one per mind: testing the kids to some end, killing the Bard of Rage for some unknown reason, and forming a new Universe as intact as possible. This was all building up to a Key Moment when all three "Masks" of this "Triumvirate" would want to kill Rose and the others. In the night after this encounter, Hindsight attacked Rose, using a Dream or Ghost of her biological father, Dave's Bro. During this encounter, Rose realized that the kids would have to cope without the help of their parents not just soon but immediately, and began to realize that auspistice forms a
guardianship role that adult Trolls may have not just wanted but outright relied on for a functional society, without which their other relationships would begin to fail.

The very next morning, Vriska rebelled with brutality. Attacking Eridan and Tavros, Vriska waited for either Rose or Aradia's response, and got one from her auspistice. Rose, having decided that an auspistice would have to risk real danger to ensure social stability in Troll society, attacked Vriska with Eridan's backing, and they were able to subdue her. During these events, Rose gained the ability to speak in Tone, implying that while many aspects of Troll society may be biological in origin, some could be learned, though the question remained of whether or not auspistice was one of those things. On top of that, Rose continued to worry as to whether or not her current course of action was correct to begin with (Ghost Bro having chided Rose as a hipster misappropriating culture the night before).

In the aftermath, Vriska and Tavros were forced to break off their casual friendship as a result of Vriska's attack. Nevertheless, Vriska declared Rose in the right and stayed as her auspisticee alongside Eridan. Feferi was less pleased, and the differences between her style and Rose's improvisational one began to show and damage their relationship.

Unable or unwilling to deal with Kanaya at the time being, Rose cleared things up with the others, instead, and stepped back with Kanaya to try their relationship from the start with a more open understanding of how things would work. In the meantime, Karkat began an investigation of the Triumvirate, discovering that the Mask calling itself Hindsight was the Mind behind Nyarlathotep's many incarnations on both Earth and Alternia. The Masks Presence and Foresight remained unclear. Rose advised during these meetings that the Triumvirate's primary symbol, a three-pronged symbol branching from a dot, represented not the Triumvirate but a self-aware mind, and suggested that they could learn from it.

Carrying on, Kanaya and John began to raise the issue of Human/Troll ectoclones, and Equius began to apply pressure to Nepeta to pick a quadrant with Jade. Equius' pressure stared multiple fights between Karkat and Terezi, who are on different sides of the issue, Karkat favouring no-pressure and Terezi still scared of the end results of a lax approach to relationships.

A few days later, we followed Eridan and Vriska around as they tried to solve a game set up for them by their boyfriend/ex-friend, Tavros, but the plans blew up in Tavros' face when it made the auspisticees closer but kept him out. Still, he was invited a party for Gamzee and his new arm, where Gamzee, echoing Rose at the start of the act, called some of his closest friends and relationships "his whole motherfucking family," which Rose found both touching and distressing. Also, Equius apparently tried to get Sollux and Feferi to have sex and w-why? Why did that happen? Who's responsible for this. Nepuppet were you typing? …Can you type?

AC: 33 < this one's all you sucker

Ugh.

In the night, Rose was visited again by a Mind, this time Presence, who taunted her on her relationships with her more distant friends, pointing out that she knows so little about Trolls or her individual companions that she cannot possibly build a society with them. He demonstrated by bringing in none other than the Canon Gamzee, in the middle of his Act 5 muder spree, but after a scuff, Rose remained intact and unconvinced. The other Minds arrived as well, and seeing Presence in a tiff over Gamzee's continued survival, Foresight set off a gaslight bomb they had set in Gamzee in his youth. It appeared that the group had prepared Gamzee as an agent of change, removing his Rage powers so that he, as a hidden Hero of Calm, would put an end to the Act 5 murders entirely, before they began. Between him and Hindsight, they created the world as it stands now, but noted
that they were "out of time" when the Green Sun exploded in the distance.

From far away, Canon Rose observed the H-verse Incipisphere, and the three Dream Bubbles the Minds were using to test Rose and her friends.

Back in the main body of the fic, Nepeta was feeling depressed about Equius' pressure on her to get in a quadrant, and she instead threw a curveball by asking to join the Imperial Drone squad with Sollux, which he accepted.

Several days later, bad news, as Tavros broke off his matespritship with Eridan, who fell into another depression, but this time could be helped up by his auspistice and fellow auspisticee. Realizing the time pressure, Rose asked Kanaya back out and they restarted their relationship.

But neither couple was going to be given time to settle into the new arrangement. Presence's desire to see Gamzee dead went further than Rose expected. The Mind hatched a plan to divide the team and try to pick Gamzee off using the last surviving Underling Boss, a Jormungandr locked deep within the lab and hidden inside another monster (and that, my friends, is how you miss a bonus boss!). By engaging Jack with new powers and pinning down Rose and Terezi as a roadblock to keep the cast split in four parts, Presence nearly killed the entire cast, but Terezi broke the blockade and reunited most of the team for a final push. In the process, Terezi and Rose became moirails, and Terezi, following her new moirail's advice, stopped a petty bickering spat with Karkat before things could get worse. In the lab, all was well.

But in the skies, quite the opposite. Using his new powers, Jack was able to destroy the Aradiabot and heavily wound Aradia's ghost-sprite, and Dave as well. The Heroes of Time were saved, as Heroes of Time often are, by themselves for the future, specifically: from the absolute last point possible in the game. But this was no normal rescue, as the Aradia of the future appeared alongside Dave, and seemed to be alive and well. And that is where we pick things up as the final Act begins.

**Timeline notes:**

- **Feferi:** Feferi was supposed to grow her hair out during her moult, sort of a way of seizing the process for herself (while inadvertently connecting her to the Condesce).

- **Triumvirate:** A more recent timeline note, which is to say not from the original timeline at all, was for me to start showing bits of Squiddles Season 3 in the background of this and the final act, with Karkat, John, Jade and/or Kanaya watching the episodes with long-suffering Karkat. Most of the season would be in this Act. This is not tremendously important, and would have just been a few throwaway lines most of the time, but was intended to make sure that the Intermission isn't forgotten just because it's so relatively early in the story.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Chapter and Act open with a dialogue between Karkat and Terezi taking place in the halls off the main lab. It appears Terezi has come to discuss things with him, among them her new relationship with Rose. Karkat does not fully approve of the latter (“I hoped if someone decided to box Lalonde they'd stay the fuck away from me,”) but admits that he spotted Terezi hinting at it ahead of time. Then Terezi turns to the subject her new moirail raised: whether she and Karkat are going in the right direction. Karkat's initial reply: "…That's bullshit."

But he doesn't get to speak any further, as our Point of View rounds the corner: the scene is a reversal of Dave's final scene in Act 3, and has him coming in instead of out, Aradiasprite on his shoulder. His arm is okay, healing candy is good for that but not for sprites, and Aradia is worse than ever. Karkat and Terezi rush to help them, Karkat barking questions about Jack's location.

"It's fine, we'll've got it under control," Dave says, in the way only a Time player can.


Karkat is confused and does so. As the three of them struggle down the hall, Dave has to ask the obvious question: "What the fuck happened to you two?"


At this point, Terezi sees fit to add: "Hey Dave, guess how many hits you can take to the neck."

"Is it more than two?" Dave asks, straight-faced.

"Seen this one already?" Terezi asks.

"Once or twice."

Everyone thinks it's a terrible plan, especially John. But Dave presses even after Aradia no longer can. "You can pull it off, man," he insists. "I'm Harry Pottering with this time travel shit. We've seen her. You can do it… because you're already gonna do it!"

(Jade leans over to say: "John, he's so desperate he's getting nerdy! Just do it!"

The plan is eventually put into action: to create a new ectobody based on Aradia's own DNA (remember the arm in the jar?), and to reinsert Aradiasprite with Feferi's game powers. John begins to prep Aradiasprite herself, preparing a better bandage than Dave's emergency one and other off-screen things. While he is busy/gone, it falls to Dave and Karkat to tell all the others about what Dave and Aradia have been doing, as there's no way they'll be able to hide this sort of major procedure, much less the ideal results.

Any emotional heights reached after clearing the Underlings in ULS is deflated as the news, age-old to the reader, sinks in with the main cast. The Trolls' reactions are mixed. Kanaya (who is not supposed to know, though I may have screwed up, someone catch me on this if you can) is so upset that her moirail kept back something so serious and certainly relevant to their relationship that she has to leave the room. Vriska is stunned; Eridan demands to know who knew, but Rose shuts him down,
insisting it was need-to-know. Equius admits that he suspected, and Nepeta, who has been shakily
tending to Aradia, asks Dave "Why?" which he misunderstands as a question about how Aradia got
so hurt in-fight. When Equius clarifies: "She wants to know why you were risking your lives for the
rest of us," Dave treats this as a silly question in his usual way. Nepeta is such a ball of thanks and
another emotion, some mix of terror and guilt, that she tries to hug Dave for the former and breaks
down crying over the latter, until he's practically holding her up.

The others say nothing, at least not until Feferi gets up to collect Nepeta, and says that John will need
both of them. To restore order, Feferi asks Aradia's quadrant-mates to come and help if they can (this
scene was foreshadowed in the Chapter 23 Roxyverse digression), but insists on only them. She
means it: when Sollux goes to go with them, she rejects him and tells him to stay. Feferi is using the
quadrants as a foundation for her allies and isn't going to let them shift for anything looser. Instead,
she goes to Vriska. Now you may have noticed that this summary has barely mentioned this
relationship at all. This was not an exaggeration or failing on the part of the summary. Indeed, this
poor excuse for a relationship being given validity is a sign of just how seriously Feferi is trying to
make her point. To Vriska, the reminder that she is supposed to mean something to Aradia is
shocking, a revelation of the worst sort, and she shakes her head until Feferi goes away. Dave also
refuses, insisting that Jack can't be left unattended, and that he has to begin blocking Jack's attempts
to net through Paradox Space for powers. He leaves alone.

As Dave heads out on patrol, he finds himself standing by the Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff comic he
drew after his fight with Terezi at the end of Act 3. He remarks to himself how nice it would be to
have Terezi to talk to once again, like everything had been cleared up, but when he looks up, it's the
other Scourge Sister he sees. Vriska's immediately on-point with a counter for an accusation that
hadn't come: "I thought we had more time with Jack," she says.

"You've had as much time as we could buy you, sister," Dave replies.

"So you mean no more?"

"We're about to find out the particulars," Dave admits.

"I'm coming with," Vriska demands.

Dave ponders this for only a moment. "How's your Luck?"

"Just helped crack some Underlings," Vriska says, perhaps talking about something off-screen. "I'm
doing pretty good."

"It'd better be," Dave admits. "We just lost our only other vet."

They head back through Time.

Next, we would meet up with the cast left out of John and Feferi's operation, and see Gamzee talking
to all the others, Calming them inadvertently. Jade has even broken out Nepeta's teaset. In the midst
of this, Eridan and Tavros have civil interaction under Rose's careful eye, while Jade screens Terezi
as her friend's moirail for the sake of having something to do. Sollux has buried himself in furious
work, upset about Aradia and angry at his girlfriend, while Karkat has disappeared, the sound of him
fighting with Kanaya echoing down the halls. It's in response to this shouting match that Jade and
Terezi's subject matter changes. Confidentially, Terezi discusses her relationship with Karkat.

"Eh, fuck Rose," she says. "I'm gonna make it work!"

"Just like that?" Jade asks.
"Just like that!" Terezi drinks the uncharacteristic tea that's been passed around. "Rose's heart is in the right place, and she's got every right to tell me not to do something. Well: now she does," Terezi clarifies. "Rose is my brand new special stupid snugglebuddy, but Karkat's my brand old ratty tattered snugglebuddy that's been loved too much to be comfortable. So sorry to Rose but I'm gonna like what I've got." Terezi explains that she nevertheless does agrees with Rose's assessment that she and Karkat are being a little childish. "But maybe it's not time to go: 'Whoops, everything's not perfect, time for a new quadrant!' Maybe it's time to say 'Hey, let's be serious.' You know?" She says that she was trying to talk to him about it when Aradia came in.

Thereabouts, the call comes in from inside that Aradia is breathing.

---

Hours later, Dave and Vriska return, Vriska sweating bullets and swearing loud. She is also our point of view. When Dave implies that she's going to go running home and not come back, she defies him, promising to be back first thing next morning. "We've got to deal with that crap before he pulls another pair of Trolls out of the paradox space graveyard!" She continues to stamp. "That was Mindfang, that was her, except…"

"Except fucked as hell and dead-eyed? Yeah, I get the weird feeling that wasn't a real Troll somehow." That said, Dave is somewhat entertained to hear her so riled, and continues to tease her. "One time Jack tried to grab us with your lususprites, that was hell on paws."

"Yeah, and he'll just do it again if he can reach through time and p-space for the originals, I get it."

Dave continues: "Megido had to pull them apart, didn't think we were really working together until then." He then adds: "And there's the last prototype to worry about."

Vriska scoffs. "What, the Harlequin? He reaches 'through space,' 'through time,' what, is he going to reach through 'jokes?" Dave shrugs. "Look, I get the game. He'll have more upgrades coming, but whatever cream pie he's got shoved up his sleeve, we'll be ready for that."

There is a pause in conversation, and Vriska humbly adds: "…Sounds like we'd all be dead without the tin can."

"Hey, what am I, chopped liver?" Vriska laughs. "Sounds like you would've been, yeah!"

But as the two of them return to the lab, Jade finds them in the hall. "She's alive," she says before anyone can ask, but signals for them to come with her. When they arrive, Vriska dragging her feet, and the sight of Aradia in her temporary bed is too much for her. Vriska's somewhat picked up to notice that even Strider has to take a deep breath before approaching, but Vriska is choking back vomit and has to back away, only hearing Dave's much delayed: "…Hey," after she's fled around the corner.

Vriska paces about for a while, seeing others leave the room one by one, not noting any of them, before finally gathering the courage to double back. When she returns the room, she finds few of the others still in the designated waiting room, including Equius and Nepeta. Dave, it seems, is alone with Aradia. Those left behind are all obviously distressed about something, and soon funnel out, John going to sleep in a nearby room. Only Equius and Nepeta stay behind, Nepeta stuck to Equius' neck as it were. Having missed a chance to grab John, Vriska asks them what the hell is going on, but Equius waves her down. Weighing her options between bothering John and other alternatives, Vriska takes a page from her auspistice and sets down to eavesdrop on Dave and Aradia. Equius is initially pissed, but it seems his curiosity overwhelms even his sense of propriety. But what Vriska's
hearing doesn't make any sense, Dave talking to Aradia's mumbled responses. Vriska uses the vision eightfold to spy further, seeing Aradia alive. This is a surreal experience, certainly, and it's actually made worse by how relieved Vriska feels in the part of herself that wanted to make up for that murder. But Aradia is shaking and jerking in her movements.

Equius explains: "Miss Megido was deceased for several perigees before the game began, and several perigees more since, and all that time spent adapting to my robotic enhancements. Furthermore, we were not able to separate her soul from the sprite or frog prototype. Her body is too young, her soul is… not her own. We think she is going to have to relearn her body. Certain nuances… dexterity, speech… might take time."

Vriska is agape. "What, 'dexterity' as in… combat abilities? Time turning?"

"I, and I believe Miss Megido agrees with me on this, find this distressing beyond the level of combat abilities, she is essentially in rehabilitation for all sorts of motor functions, and again: speech…"

"In two months?" Vriska snaps, noting the timeline on the Rat Trap. She holds up her hands in protest.

Equius putters through this as well. "I have… not heard any change in Vantas' schedule with the Rat Trap."

"I gotta go," Vriska says. "I've gotta go clear my head. Again."

"Indeed," Equius says, "I should not even be here during this… moment of weakness. My auspistice should not have allowed me to stay. Come, Nepeta. I forget my place."

"Y-yeah," Vriska says, but both are interrupted by the sound of the door behind.

"Hey," Dave says. "Shut out the lights while you go. And Serket…” Vriska does not want to meet his eyes, but does. In doing so, she sees Aradia, beyond, who is having trouble turning onto her side. "…Take first shift," he orders. "Buzz me if you see him, it's the best you can do with no timetables."

"Yeah," Vriska says.

"Oh, yes," says Equius at about this point. He reaches into his inventory and pulls out a sopor pie. "For the skin, of course," he clarifies. "I asked the clown and he said it would be all right. He said he didn't need it, any longer?"

Vriska heads out, but does not immediately leave for the outside. Her head is foggy and disoriented, and she initially seeks out Tavros and Eridan, only to find one in the protective care of Gamzeee and the other already gone to bed, and Rose is missing. Vriska considers asking Jade where her friend has gone, but Jade is too engrossed in a conversation with Kanaya, one they are both clearly using to keep their emotions from overwhelming them. Sollux has not stopped his guilt-coding, and a peace offering, some sort of fish soup from Feferi, lies cold beside him. Having not yet confirmed Rose, Vriska heads to the cafeteria, where she finds Karkat lying in a corner, Terezi asleep in his arms. Vriska meets his eye and whispers: "I'm hunting with Strider now."

"Good," he says. "You're off every shift but that, effective now."

"You seen Lalonde?" Vriska asks. He shakes his head. "Karkat," she says. "You adjusting our schedule for this?"

Karkat takes a while, not for thought but for emphasis before he says: "No," and then: "if anything, forward. We were running out of time before. Now we've got even less. Don't even say a word,
Serket!” he adds when Vriska is about to open her mouth.

Angry now, Vriska continues on despite knowing Rose is not in this direction, into the pantry and the alchemizer. "Two months, fuck. I'll give you two fucking months." She narrates that she was initially coming here to think up some way to outsmart Jack, but now has a better idea.

Cut back to Dave, who is woken in the middle of the night by Aradia, who until previously had been spooned up behind him, sleeping. "With John's permission," Dave adds to the narration, before recovering and adding: "But on second thought, fuck John's permission." She is now sitting on the bed, too wobbly to stand. He asks if she's all right, and she replies with garbled words, her mind not used to her new tongue. Frustrated, she motions to prevent him from saying anything, like an apology, but Dave was not about to do any such thing. Instead, he responds to her confusion by paraphrasing her: "Hey, you're allowed to be pissed off, you know?"

She laugh, and carefully forms the word: "Hate."

"Well I would," Dave agrees.

Aradia holds up the item that got her attention: the electric blue whip Dave saw her carrying when he saw her from the future. Attached to it is a tag, and Dave purposefully scoots up behind Aradia to read it over her shoulder, and she pulls an arm around her waist. (Dave gets some sopor on his cheek from her neck and flicks it off, saying "This stuff is messed, no offence." He then kisses a sopor-clad cheek and she, cautious and deliberate, swipes it off and kisses him on the lips – it's clear that we've missed the first live kiss). Dave notices now that the whip is branched into two lashes, and that the tag is attached to a gap in the handle, in which Dave can see two black and white so-called "d2s."

The tag reads as follows:

**Cat 'o Twin Tails**

ATT * 1.5

All or nothing:

Can't crit, doesn't need to.

Hit at all and do full damage.

Don't miss.

Fuck nuance!

Nuance is now your 8itch ::;)

The chapter closes from here to give the readers a feel for the specifics of Aradia's difficulties with speech, and the fact that she doesn't currently have a sylladex. Dave offers to go for more sopor, even perks her up a bit by flirting (picking up Team Drone's ongoing joke about how they use sopor a substitute genetic slurry, "What else's a boyfriend good for?"), but as soon as he's gone, he can't help but notice Aradia's mood once he's no longer watching. He realizes she's completely overwhelmed by the experience of being alive, and the pressure of putting on a show for the others: acting calm, even, or perhaps especially in front of him. Alone, she takes several deep breaths and tries to move her arm, motions that are stiff and perhaps even painful. Dave gives her her privacy, taking his time, and when he gets back he's upset, but not surprised, to find that she's gone back to sleep without him.

Chapter End Notes

Did a Tumblr post after the fact talking about the design of the **Cat 'o Two Tails.**
"okay wwhats the story gimmie all the details"

"I don't know, Eridan. I just… don't know."

"wwell… is she sick?"

"It does seem most likely."

Vriska's auspistice is worried about her recent behaviour. Between patrols with Dave and infrequent rest, they have more than enough reason to be concerned, but Vriska has also been unusually quiet and introspective when she does speak.

"…roz i think she's concerned for ara,"

"That's absurd. …Then again, I thought it was even more absurd when I thought of it on my own, but now that someone else is saying it I find reassurance in camaraderie."

"believe me it still sounds crazy"

"We have to look into this."

"okay youvve convinced me." He adjusted his cape. "ill do it."

It was like arranging a train wreck and getting caught at the scene when you couldn't look away.

---

But to Rose's surprise, things do not suddenly explode. Eridan approaches the issue with tact, exposing Rose to a near-insider's view of the involved romantic Tavros once fell for. Most notably, Eridan does not even bring up Aradia at any point, as far as Rose can tell. Perhaps realizing that Vriska would clam up or perhaps overreact to any such direct insinuation, Eridan ribs her, talks to her and proves surprisingly competent at keeping up with her. Soon, they're both well recovered from the initial shock of Aradia's death and revival and perhaps even the news about Jack. From these little chats Eridan soon finds that Vriska's gaming mind has wrapped a few things up about Jack that might help with the Rat Trap, and is soon relaying the information to Karkat and John for her, as she's too busy working with Dave to attend wastes of time like Karkat's meetings.

These little chats span about a week or so, maybe more (I'd have certainly plotted out the remaining Act to the day but here in the notes I don't see the bother), and they're not the only one to move. The others are slowly recovering from the news about Jack, and Kanaya and Rose's relationship seems to be picking back up, though Kanaya is becoming busier than ever between the Rat Trap on one hand and Team Drone and her breeding caves plans on the other. The latter is a real sticking point, as it's beginning to sink in that work on the caverns would have to begin not long after Jack's defeat, leaving her to decide what they need from the game, even knowing she doesn't have enough time to get it all. Karkat and Kanaya's relationship is doing less well at first, but Terezi sees to that, calling Karkat out for not helping Kanaya's self-control as leader and moirail. This kismesis tell-off takes place in public and Kanaya and Terezi have soon developed a repartee, not exactly buddies but confidants if nothing else, interconnected in the relationship network (both of them with Karkat and Rose) and not unhappy to be there together.

Many of the others seem to be recovering well from the bad news about Jack, but this may not entirely be to their credit. Gamzee is going into a bit of a hangover as he begins to quit sopor, and I
do mean "hangover," not "withdrawl," as his own powers prevent him from going into outright withdrawl, and are affecting everyone else near him as well, in mood whiplash. With Tavros help, Gamzee soon seems on the road to recovery. He, Rose and Terezi are all optimistic about his new personality, though Rose remarks in private (probably to John or Jade) that Presence's argument about not trusting Gamzee was probably meant as a blanket statement against the Trolls as a whole. "Not that I want to give the ghoul any credence – indeed she seemed obsessed with Gamzee in particular so it's possible she was just blinded by rage – but I'm assuming the other Minds had sway in her decisions. I'm trying to guess their real angle. Specific, general? Who can say?" If we had seen Capricorn in Chapter 21, that chapter would now be explained in one of the scenes discussing Gamzee: Capricorn represented Gamzee's Denizen as a Calm player and as a Rage player merged into one body, but the Rage player side was doomed to die and so appeared as dying, though it was healthy enough at the time to attack.

One relationship you might not have expected to need a highlight is the one between Feferi and Rose. The open-conversations-between-equals relationship they once had circa Chapter 7 has degraded, and the very idea of auspistice buddies is certainly no more. This is really not much skin of either of their backs, both of them casually fuming since Feferi lashed out after CYQ. Nevertheless, the two of them have become one of those pairs who are unerringly polite to one another in public, perhaps because both always expect people they distrust to be up to something worse. It is during one such stilted conversation that we get to see the signs of trouble in Aradia's circle.

Since her revival, Aradia has been moved from Karkat's ectobiology section of the lab, where she was revived, to her own room, but she is barely there any more than when she was a robot. Instead, she spends most of her time with at her auspistice's place, in the gyms, where the frog part of her soul has taken a shine to the pools. She's also often with Dave, but those visits are short. Clearly the biggest issue is Dave's compacted schedule, since he has to deal with all the time-travel work himself, but this conversation, or possibly the one with Feferi that leads into it, would hint that Aradia may be pushing him away.

The scene would begin with Equius barging in after Aradia, "barging" being completely unnecessary as Aradia can barely move faster than a shuffle, and often worse than that, thanks to an occasional limp/spasm that plagues her right leg. Equius is complaining about her refusal to accept a crutch he made for her (Rose notes this thing sounds like it has an engine and just cannot work out why), but it seems his issue, and hers, goes deeper than that. Equius' real issue, is that Aradia refuses to speak aloud to him. Rose knows that Aradia has refused to speak to most of the cast since her recovery, even though she's up and about every day, but this is news to her. Dave is on the shortlist for talk, but it seems Equius has been restricted to slow-speed Trollian chats, along with "the lesser Blueblood."

The fight apparently precipitated because Equius caught Aradia trolling Sollux. To Rose's surprise, this seems to be an issue of relationships and not of blood as far as Equius is concerned: it could even be said that when Feferi prioritized the quadrants in the previous chapter, she accidentally allowed them to become a point of contention for the others. The issue of blood is brought up, however, and while the subtlety is lost in this summary, Equius actually shrugs the issue off, saying that "that issue" is "well in hand."

It's important to note that throughout this argument, Equius continues to "baby" Aradia. His language is diminutive, and he refuses to grant that she would be able to walk back home without the help of his crutch.

On Equius' insistence, Feferi admits that, yes, Aradia speaks to her as well. "She's supposed to talk to me," Feferi insists. Equius insists this is only for auspistice reasons, and no reason for it to be in person, and while he's willing to accept that Feferi has been helping Aradia's physical recovery, he's
outraged that Feferi get any special preference over "any other member of the auspistice." As if that could mean anything else. Feferi's position is weak. Rose knows from Dave, who is a much worse liar, that Aradia is avoiding the others because she's embarrassed about her speech and "just wants to sit and laugh, you know?" ("Think she just wants to dig up a neandertroll or maybe eat too much crap with Captor or something." ) Feferi knows Aradia's position as well, but will not reveal it to Equius as much for Aradia's sake as for the sake of balance in the relationship. As a result, Feferi can't do much more than to shut Equius down hard.

This strong-arm auspistice work does not satisfy anyone in this situation, and it's clear Equius will continue to be trouble in the future. When he's finally chased off, Rose remarks to her former auspistice buddy that Aradia just doesn't seem interested in Equius anymore. Feferi is irritated by the critique coming from someone she feels couldn't auspistice a set of action figures, but continues to force politeness. "Well, she's upset, and I don't want her to do anything rash. But it's more than that. Even if she's not interested in Equius she might still want the auspistice. The thing about auspistice is that sometimes, you don't want it because you need it. You want it because you need someone else to need it."

In other scenes and always stalking about the background, Team Drone's training continues apace. Throughout the chapter we would have seen Sollux and Nepeta jumping couples (official or simply in the wrong place at the wrong time) for "donations," though they are worried about upsetting everyone put out by the news about Jack and so initially only ambush Humans and Karkat. Karkat begins to take this personally, believing it to be a conspiracy against him in particular (it is Sollux and Nepeta...), but they do branch out over time. Team Drone has soon handed out little plastic packets of grubsauce and food colouring which the Trolls and Humans, which are supposed to use for "donations." Dave describes the things as "Ketchup packets" ("Should mine really be red? I mean I think it should be—" "Dave, shut up." "I'm not sure what yours should be either Harley but green just seems a little sick, don't you—" "Dave, seriously shut up.").

For their part, Sollux and Nepeta seem to have grown independent of Feferi and Kanaya's ramshackle tutelage. Instead, they become one another's teachers and coaches, and also one another's biggest and worst critics, not that that seems to dampen their enthusiasm. Their discussions on "genetic extraction technique," and other questionable phraseology become such eyebrow raisers that Rose begins to suspect they're choosing dirtier and dirtier words for their techniques to get everyone else's goats (scaring the others is exclusively referred to as "jerking them around" and eventually just "jerking," as in "Sollux, I'm going to jerk Karkat." "no way lady, he'2 miine and i'm gonna jerk hiim fa2ter and harder than you" "OH COME ON!"). This is backed up by their habit of rapping people with the buckets when irritated (so especially one another). This has the intended side effect: the others slowly become acclimatized to the idea that the buckets are here to stay, and so stop jumping at tapered cylindrical shadows.

Still, something needs to be said about the Drone's training and eventual operation, issues of consent and whatnot, and this finally comes down to an official public meeting on Sollux's initiative. But when this occurs is a bit of an issue...

See, at this point in the plot, I feel I'm essentially missing a chapter: not for lack of subject matter but for pacing reasons. Every plot that has a highlight chapter at the start of this Act has been introduced too recently or too suddenly be resolved in this chapter and in some cases, even the next. An unfair development might be for me to suddenly and abruptly focus on Vriska and John's relationship, but let's call a failure to include John in this story a failure and not spin a chapter about that out of thin air. If I had managed to include more references to this relationship in the finished draft (as opposed to here in the summary), then Vris/John that might have been my solution here, and suffice to say: they would not have hooked up, indeed Vriska would leave the discussion somewhat frustrated.
More on that in a second.

Without any other context I'm forced to scroll through my timeline, which is so incompetently arranged at this point I'll never be sure what on earth I was thinking. The chapter after this was based on Eridan and Vriska's recovering relationship. Wait, the one that only truly started to recover, when, just now? This chapter was supposed to be based on Feferi's auspistice, a plotline that did begin a chapter ago but only really started moving this chapter as well! I actually considered scrolling back the fourth chapter of the act but it really gets its kick out of the Feferi c3< plot so I don't really have a choice. For our sakes I'm going to go with the Eridan and Vriska plot but if things were still intact I'm not sure what I might have done.

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The scene begins with the official What The Fuck Are We Going To Do With The Drones meeting, and I'm not honestly sure how it would go, either. Mandating Troll breeding habits for the next dozen generations? Yikes, count me out, and that's even before you get into the consent issues. It's likely the whole thing would be cropped to a summary, because there's really no way for me to make the chapter work without making up Troll biology facts. How important are paired donations? Do solo donations simply not work? Do weak relationships (or solo donations, if they do work) produce "weaker" Trolls in the sense of "weaker" that's detrimental only in the eyes of an intergalactic despotism, or in the sense of "weaker" that might lead to serious health problems? And again, the consent line. Unless Andrew does a 180 and creates Act 6 Act 69: All Troll Sex All The Time, I doubt we'd be getting any answers. Whatever the details, everyone leaves the meeting begrudgingly satisfied. It's also hinted that Drones will still have some sort of patrolling to do, if only to collect donations, so not to have wasted all the effort they've put into practice so far.

But this discussion precipitates another. Rose remarks to John that despite this in-depth discussion of Troll breeding rights and procedure, Karkat, Kanaya and Sollux somehow avoided all mention Troll biology and sexual intercourse (you know that me skimming the meeting was a reference to Andrew never giving us details, and I know it, but the reader of this hypothetical chapter does not, so I have provided this joke for their benefit). Vriska hears this and comes from nowhere to put her arms over both Humans and asks: "Why? …Interested?" Kanaya, nearby, coughs and immediately excuses herself. Noting that Dave is listening, Vriska grabs Jade before she can do the same and tells them to sit down so she can "explain the mag8c."

It's implied that Vriska does indeed tell them how things work, though the entire thing is glossed over in such a way that it's impossible to tell if the conversation took a few minutes ("John, stop asking questions, the answers just make things worse and worse.") or a few seconds ("Oh, so it's exactly like Human sex." "I guess it is!").

(There's not critical to our summary-at-large, but to avoid skipping over two scenes in a row, I figured this one could be sprinkled with a few jokes. For example: Vriska appears to started out with a juvenile tone to make fun of Jade, but Dave tells her to "pick it up." When Vriska does, this only causes Rose to add social and psychological commentary on Vriska's word choice, deciding that Vriska can't decide whether she's sub or dom or whether virginity is important to her or not. This would cutaway to the Roxyverse, where Roxy (who the narration implies learned about Troll biology months ago by just looking at porn instead of being "a weinee") sees Kankri cry a single tear.

Tavros, Karkat and Nepeta are also present during this meeting. Tavros seems worried he missed some details during schoolfeeding while Karkat and Nepeta have stuck around purely for their own brands of colour commentary. I am just now coming up with that detail and I am now regretting not writing this scene so much, this sounds like the best fanfic I've ever envisioned. Why am I not writing this right now?)
The scene picks up at the end, where Rose and Vriska begin to talk about sexual relationships in general, stemming off of their conversation in Chapter 34. During the scene, most of the other participants will trickle off, until it is just these two.

The point of this scene is multifold, which is why it kept turning out so long in my head. What starts as a conversation about relationships is soon about particular relationships. Rose, like Eridan, is trying to avoid mentioning Vriska's strange, budding-against-all-odds moirallegience with Aradia, but they talk about virtually everything else.

One of the first items on the table after the others leave is Rose's relationship with Kanaya. "So you're thinking about tapping that?" Vriska asks, a bastion of subtlety in a bombastic world. Rose deflects the question (Vrika: "Oh, please," and eyeroll), asking if Vriska is still trying to "tap" John, who has recently left. To her surprise, Vriska immediately answers: "Well I would."

"I'd what?"

"Black gambit. Drone swap." Rose isn't getting it. "You'd pail with me for the Drones."

Rose is of course taken aback, but fits the piece into the puzzle pretty quickly: "What, because you're too horrible to find someone to go black with you?"

But Vriska laughs and points out: "Like you've got better options. Giant monster crab with their spines asking for your spade bucket, life or death, sometimes you've got to fake it."

"That sounds like an awful idea," Rose says.

(Vriska's line was originally "Captor with his spines" but I didn't want to give the impression that the kids had just agreed to reinstate a mate-or-die Drone system. It's a joke that might have worked in the full draft with better context but here in the summary you get this boring note to explain the joke.)

"It is! But you've got red, so Ampora'd have to be my red, but the point is: safety line. C'mon, admit it, if you were a Troll back on Alternia, it'd be a good idea."

Rose chides: "It seems we've got different ideas about how much having sex with you would be a good idea."

"Look, I don't actually expect you to!" This is a bit of relief to Rose, sarcasm aside. "I'm just talking like, fears and shit. This is secure, you know? We're not actually going to die if we don't have our quadrants, and we're not going to magically live if we mess around with them, but it bugs me all the same, and I'm good right now."

Obstinance from Rose, groan from Vriska. "...Look, I'm sorry. I'll be make sure to ask you next time we're talking about a thing that will never happen!"

"Thank you," Rose says. "And yet... you're right. You and Eridan are the closest people I have to a spademate, hypothetical variables all in place. Including me suddenly being a Troll I suppose. And I can't argue with your putting me in black and him in red, at present."

"Exactly."

Rose briefly talks about how her impressions have changed about kismesis. Mostly thanks to Terezi.
"I'm really starting wonder, maybe... well maybe it isn't such a big deal?"

"What, sex?" Vriska asks.

"Kismesis."

Snort from Vriska. "Of course it's a big deal."

"I mean the posturing," Rose says. "I thought it was teeth and knives and mind games and rape."

Vriska raises an eyebrow. "...Rose."

"I know!" Rose looks away.

"Rose, you don't rape your kismesis." Vriska says, trying to hold back laughter for the horror.

"I know!"

"That's just... well, it's probably a fetish, I guess. I don't know. Rose, I'm six. I haven't seen all the
porn yet!" Vriska looks thoughtful for a moment. "...Yet."

"It is finite now," Rose points out.

"Not if we start making some," Vriska teases.

"Don't touch me," Rose cuts in. As Vriska is laughing at her, Rose summarizes: "I guess I'm saying
that kismesis doesn't have to be a big deal."

"Yeah, maybe."

Talk shifts back to John, and Vriska explains the situation. She doesn't want a relationship right now,
because she doesn't want to trip over her own feet again, but she does still want to have sex with
him.

"No one here is going to stamp you down for feeling sexually attracted, Vriska," Rose says.

Vriska is frustrated at her inability to get her point across. "Well I don't mean like, because he's hot." Vriska then stalls.

"...Are you waiting for me to counter you on that?"

"I thought you might, I mean everyone else and John..."

"Well you'd be wrong. Continue."

Once again with Rose's help on the terminology, Vriska is able to articulate that while she doesn't trust herself in a romantic relationship at present, she nevertheless wants a founded sexual relationship. "Not just once or just messing around, I just wanna be able to be: like, we're on the Rat Trap and I look over and go 'You. Yeah.' Like, with the eyes. And just know what they're thinking. And just know! We're gonna have fun tonight. Fuck this construction, fuck this math, forget the whole thing and just... awesome."

"Is that 'just do awesome' or 'just be awesome,'" Rose asks.

"When you're awesome, Rose, everything you do is awesome."
"Makes sense. So this is your… I don't want to belittle it out of hand, but 'fantasy' with John?"

"Well… no…" Vriska admits to one of those mental webs we tie ourselves up in that make things more complicated than they have to be. She wants to have sex with John, and she wants to have a sexual relationship with him, and she does not want to be in a romantic relationship at present, but she does want to be in a romantic relationship with John. "Does that make sense?"

"…Say it again."

After hearing a few times, Rose has to ask who it is that Vriska is fantasizing about, if not John. While Rose would have been satisfied with a general "no one, it's just something I want," Vriska suddenly gets evasive. Realizing from her auspistice experience any subversive attempt to get the name or names will only make Vriska antagonize her, Rose essentially rolls over and plays Vriska's game, throwing out names at random. She starts with the stupid ones that will make Vriska laugh ("Nepeta? Gamzee?") but finally hits some pay dirt in the middle.

"Karkat?"

Vriska laughs at this, hard. "Ohhhh my god. Would you not?" Rose questions, since I can put things that way. "I so totally would. I mean, I would, okay, he's cute, but I mean, I would just for his face. Can you imagine his face? Yeah? Now would you?" This gets a smirk out of Rose. "Oh, wait! No! His face-s. Every one of them. I would do Karkat both ways! Don't tell Terezi I said that. …Oh god, her face too!" Vriska just keeps laughing.

Rose eventually gets the conversation back on track with: "Tavros?" Vriska initially tries flippancy, but comes to realize: "You know, I never thought about it?" She searches for words. "I mean, it started black, because he pissed me off, but over time it just became attraction? Just, in general. I mean, here and there: he's fun, he's a good writer, but it's not like I was looking at him going: 'Yes! The guy who never helped himself do anything. Bone city.'" She waves it aside. "I mean, he's better now, but I'm not supposed to think about him now, and I guess I really haven't."

Rose begins to hesitate, firstly because Vriska just made her a little sad, but also because she's running out of names. "It's not me, is it? I mean, for fun and not for desperation?"

Vriska shakes her head. "You'd be so boring to pail, Lalonde." By this point Vriska is lying across several chairs they brought in for the meeting with Team Drone, and she gesture to Rose with overwrought seduction. "Come get me, Lalonde. Gimmie a kiss, let's see you do it."

Rose ignores her, and changes to a different name, probably Dave. "Yeah," Vriska says, immediately leaving the previous subject. She does not expand on this answer, probably pretending to be Dave instead, straight-faced and adjusting his shades. "Jade?" Rose asks. "Yes!" Vriska says. "Actually… yeah, really! Huh." She puts her hand on her chin. "I wonder… I hope it's not because I've put her to bed so often." She makes a 'throwing fairy dust' style gesture with her hands. "Ugh, it probably is, that's so creepy." Vriska rubs her arms to shake out the jibblies.

"The subconscious can be like that," Rose says.

"So of course you're all over it. Hey, get down here!" Vriska orders. "We look like you're psychoanalyzing me." As Rose deigns to lie down on chairs as well, Vriska returns to Jade. "I'm gonna make something up!" she declares. "It's because she is smart, and she would know what she is doing. Now she would. Thanks to me, just today." After a pause she adds: "And because she looks good in a bathing suit."

"She does."
"So it's not just me?"

Rose shrugs. "Well I'd rather Kanaya for girls but that's a bias."

"Fair enough."

Rose then thinks. "Is it Kanaya? This... sex-crush of yours?"

Vriska sighs after a moment's thought. "Well, I've wondered. After I found out about the whole thing? Would I...?" Vriska begins to open and close a fist. "I think I would? And then I would feel... awful." Rose nods. "I mean, it's hard to imagine it happening, because, you know, Fussysfangs? But... yeah, 'awful.'" Vriska looks over to see Rose's reaction and suddenly adds; "And then worse, because then I'd be mucking things with you." Rose is surprised by this addendum. "...Naw, I don't think I could with Fussysfangs, right now, all things considered."

Rose doesn't know what to say, which unfortunately gives her time to think, making her realise: "...Is it Eridan?"

Vriska breathes, seems to contemplate turning over and away, but then says to the ceiling: "Sometimes it's Eridan. I guess that's your business, sure."

Rose is actually a little hurt, given how freely they were chatting. "We're just talking."

"Doesn't make it any less your business." She does roll aside now. "Yeah, sometimes I want to get with Eridan. When we're talking. When I'm thinkin' about other things. ...When I'm thinkin' at night. I mean, it comes up! He's okay! He's moulted nice, he makes his cape work, who can pull that off? And he's actually not a douchewhip since he got you around, it's like Tav said, really, but he's still, you know, an asshole. I could do that."

"Why haven't you made a move?" Rose asks.

"Be-because..."

"Forget me for a second," Rose says.

Vriska jabs a finger at Rose. "The last time I made a move and forgot about you, you gored me and had Ampora shoot me in the face!"

"You earned that," Rose says, nonchalant. "What I meant is: is it just me?" Vriska fidgets. "Because if you're feeling more black than ashen, maybe I have to reconsider."

Vriska seems surprised that this would occur to Rose, and doesn't seem eager to continue the subject at first, but she does provide an answer. "Because, well, Eridan's still 'Tavros' matesprit' to me," she explains. "It's like you said when they broke up. I guess... I always thought they were going to stick together. After a while... I mean after our fight, and Tavros and I couldn't be friends any more, I wanted them to stay together?" She shrugs. "'Cause then he'd have somebody? So now that they're apart, I'm so used to them having someone that it's like there's a phantom guy hovering over both of them going 'Nope, he's mine.'" She pauses. "...It's actually going to be weird, isn't it?" she adds after a moment. "When they're dating someone else and the new guy's not our friend? You were saying it before but I'm only thinking about it now."

"No, I know how you mean. You're right. I actually wonder how they feel." Rose asks if Vriska really wants to see if Eridan would be interested.

"What? No!" Vriska raises an eyebrow. "What, you trust me enough to go banging him without
strangling him in the night? You're an idiot, trying to hook me up with an ashen booty call."

"I'm just probing the waters," Rose says. "I need to know where you stand."

Vriska sits up and holds up a hand to swear: "My bucket's in both hands, Rose, I'll cope."

"Does that mean what it think it means?" Rose asks, sitting up herself.

"You bet your Human ass it does."

Vriska claps her knees. "So c'mon! Where do you stand, with your Human ass?" Wink, groan from Rose. "Any part of you want to toss clothes and virginity to the wind? Goodbye!" She waves into the distance. Goodbye clothes! Goodbye arbitrary social construct! Did you see what I did there: I listened to your bitching during your lecture. These are the sacrifices I go to to maintain our relationship." Rose has to laugh at that. "You afraid?" Rose snorts. "...I'm afraid," Vriska says.

Rose is once again taken aback, but recovers: "That's because you want to have sex with Eridan Ampora." Vriska hits Rose's knee but laughs. "What's to be afraid of?"

"...Pain," Vriska confides.

"Doesn't have to hurt," Rose says, "not supposed to, at least," fairly confident on that being accurate cross-species.

"Afraid it'll suck?"

"That's because you want to have sex with Eridan Amp—" Hit again.

"I'm afraid I'll blow it," Vriska clarifies. "Starting, going, miss the bucket. That's a thing you know. It's very embarrassing."

Rose can tell from her tone that Vriska is trying to get her to laugh on some level, so says: "No you're not."

"Okay, I'm not gonna miss the bucket," Vriska says. "But I wonder if I might be screwing something up, to go from nothing to banging in one step, or ashen to ashen booty calls. Blow the whole game."

"Well, I don't mean to be callous to your choices," Rose says, "but we will be past Jack in about a month."

"Will we?"

"We will," Rose says, not sure of her own confidence. "Maybe after that you'll be ready for a romantic relationship? But if you're not, you still have your old options. And I don't think you need to be worried so much about right now, I mean, if you can find someone…"

"I'm not going to actually fuck Eridan, Rose," Vriska says. "I just told you 'cause you asked. You know? Because it's true, and... you asked." She shrugs, embarrassed.

Rose's heart is in her throat, so it takes her a moment to continue, which embarrasses Vriska further. But when Rose does speak, it's to say: "Yeah. I want to have sex with Kanaya."

Vriska returns to this subject with almost gleeful abandon. "Now was that so damn hard?" she says. But then: "But she doesn't." Rose shakes her head, and Vriska blows a raspberry for Kanaya. "That's our Fussyfangs," Vriska says.
"It's all right," Rose says. "She knows where I stand, I know where she stands and I'm happy to be what she needs right now."

"Aw, well isn't that cute. You know she's going to hold out all the way to Drone Day 1, right?" Vriska asks. Rose grunts and nods. "If Leijon isn't babbling like a mimickraptor about you having a mile-wide smile while you were donating, after I'm going to get Fussyfangs, that's a promise."

"We'll both be virgins," Rose reminds her. "It's, as you put it, probably going to suck. For the first few times."

"Lalonde, the way I see it, Drone Day is the one day a year the caverns supervisor has nothing else to do alllllllll day. Food for thought! But!" Vriska holds up a hand. "If you're a little eager, you could always get a kismesis."

Rose settles down as if in a huddle. "Oh, this ought to be rich. Is your suggestion… you?"

Vriska plays this up for fun. "Well I'm just saying we have a mutual problem. Eh? Eh?"

Rose ignores this. "Eridan?"

"Oh, that'd make his lifetime, two girls want him out of nowhere, no strings attached. No, I was thinking more… John."

Rose nods. "Oh yes, because I do hate him with the rage of a thousand suns."

"Hey, who was it who made the joke about me, him'n'Karkat?"

"That was, as I recall it, still mostly you."

"Oh, you liked it."

The chapter then ends in summary, narration showing how they went to lunch and continued to talk in half-code, the others not really knowing what they were saying. Eventually Rose decided that if she had to say anything, Equius would be her black booty call. "But how would that even work? Woman of Kleenex here," Rose points out. Vriska shrugs.

Unfortunately it seems someone was listening, as Rose feels the rap of an empty metal container against her wrist. "Good," Nepeta purrs, rubbing Rose's head. "Very good."

She smiles to Rose, then smiles to Vriska, but then shoves her bucket between them and taps them with the side of her left claws. "no, seriously, pay the furrck up"

As they combine their ketchup packets into a disgusting glop in Nepeta's bucket, and she leaves humming a Squiddley song, Vriska elbows Rose in the ribs and says: "Told you you'd be my ashen gambit."

"Was it good for you too?" Rose asks.

"Hated it."

"Perfect."
When to Step Aside

The chapter begins with Vriska coming in with Dave from another fight with Jack. (In the background, just a sentence worth of description, Aradia once again snubs Equius' attempts to talk to her. Setup.) Both Dave and Vriska are healed, but only Dave is "fine": Vriska looks like hell for lack of proper rest. She walks in, clasps Eridan's shoulder more for balance than greeting, and then immediate gives up and leaves. Karkat, who is holding court by the TV, is not amused. He snaps his fingers to call over John and when they they are done talking, Karkat trolls everyone with news that there will be a meeting after construction tomorrow. Everyone knows what it means: the schedule has been accelerated. The one and only topic of discussion throughout the room is the new date, and every possible paranoia they can spin from that. What if the Trap will be missing some of its key systems, defences or countermeasures against Jack's powers? Sollux and Feferi are seen talking in this scene again: the first time since their tension in 41, which is not mentioned.

(Karkat is wrapping up Squiddles! Seasons 3, which provides background colour and ambience. In so doing we're reminded of how the cast discovered that the demon, Prince Dargon, was using Skipper Plumbthroat as a vessel, and how Raspberry/Berryboo coaxed him away from his ethereal space parasite with the Power of Friendship, and how the cast destroyed the latter.)

Our next scene is later that evening, where Jade is up roleplaying with Nepeta. In narration, Jade ruminates that Nepeta seems to be ending some of their endless plots, which has literally never happened. But after they wrap up for the evening, Jade's walk home is interrupted by shouting, and she follows the sound to the Sagittarius transportalizer to discover Equius and Aradia fighting.

The fight is entirely one-sided, though it's not entirely clear why Aradia came to begin with. Nevertheless she now regrets it: Equius can outtalk her, overbear her, and is in full-on dominant mode, his tone running rampant up and down his speech. His running complaint is that she's not clearing out of her "state" as fast as he thinks she should be able, saying "things will not be like they were with your brownblood friend. There is nothing I can create to make up for these fundamental deficiencies: ones, I may not, that you have brought entirely upon yourself." He makes haughty allusions to the others abandoning Aradia in the new world when she fails to return to her "normal ability," if not as a result of the fight with Jack. He makes a point of dragging out his predictions about Dave ("a relationship that was temporary at best. And we are all far from 'best,' as you've made clear simply by humouring this pity-grab with a Human."). He says that once she's been left behind, "the unenviable task of tending to your damaged shell will fall to the only Troll present with any sense of social obligation, whether he feels it would be right to do so or not." Aradia is so emotional in response that she too tries to use tone (the dead tone of her robot self, not the excited tone of her live), but this is a nuance her body can't begin to master.

Equius' demands are all ostensibly for Aradia's safety and recovery, but his manner and mood, not to mention his wild gesturing with his strength, are all dangerous. Jade pesters Nepeta and Feferi, and it's Feferi who arrives first, being only two transportalizers away from the scene. Feferi is livid, first at Equius and then at Aradia for not calling herself. Aradia insists she can handle it, but Feferi insists that Aradia is still recovering and needs to know her limits. This only makes Aradia frustrated, and she replies that Karkat and John are going to push up the date and there's no more time for recovery. Equius takes Feferi's side, pointing out that Aradia still has as much time as Karkat will give, though he's quick to insist that this will only happen if she follows by his orders or she's likely to break herself "even in training." Equius remarks that he's glad "Nepeta" called Feferi, as it's clear she recognizes "the value of [his] orders," "though she's been stubborn as of late when it comes to following them herself." Feferi is quick to shut down his hopes, though she keeps Jade's anonymity. She instead drags him off into the office complex, telling Aradia to wait in the gyms. Trolling Jade
from a psychic tiaratop, she tells her to leave as well, because this is private.

Jade is out of the spotlight for the time being, and we cut ahead to Karkat and John's meeting. We begin with the new project end date: the cast is going to be forced to finish much sooner (this would be more precise if I had a timetable, but let's say two to three weeks). Karkat and John say that there will be regular meetings from now on to check on milestones and make sure everything is up to snuff. One of the "milestones" Karkat and John are chasing are the Human's combat levels. Working off of Vriska's information (via Eridan, see the previous chapter), they now know that Jack's has autolevelled to ~97 or 98. Vriska and Dave have yet to see him use any new Harlequin powers, and worry that that will come at Level 99. Unfortunately, the kids are gaining levels from construction, ala Jane gaining a level for throwing down her hat in canon, so Jack will certainly be at 99 by the time they spring their trap. Karkat plans a few regular exercises to ensure a full set of Level 99s as soon as possible, as much for their own sake as to goad Jack into using his Harlequin powers before the final fight.

Aradia's recovery is also on Karkat's ledger, and we use him bringing it up as an excuse to begin a time skip. I absolutely hate to do this, as I feel that time skips are just a tiny step above telling instead of showing, but it's a response to our missing "pacing chapter" that I mentioned last time and I can't think of any other way around it. We learn that Aradia's speech is improving, though she lacks volume and emotion, often skips prepositions out of embarrassment and still hasn't mastered "s." I'll avoid transcribing the "s," like I do Sollux's lisp, but the missing prepositions will be indicated by a double-dash, since the sentences can look weird without them.

When Aradia does use her voice, she uses it almost entirely to shout down Equius. Dave is pushed further and further away, unable to help in her recovery, emotionally or otherwise. He's not the only bystander to suffer. Equius, it seems, vents onto Nepeta about her quadrants, and Jade notes in narration that their play sessions have become dried up, lacking all energy. Feferi's responses to the pair are inventive but squandered on these two: Rose comments to Jade that she wonders if Feferi's tone will jump from "happy-go-snarky" to "manipulative and backhanded" someday soon. The only bright side in the whole time skip is that Aradia is recovering faster than intended, and that only makes the fights worse.

Finally, we switch POV over to Dave, who had gone to the gyms to find Aradia after a hunt with Vriska. When he arrives, he finds her clutching her whip, furious and upset from yet another fight with Equius. Dave turns to leave but stops, wanting to talk to Aradia but clearly out of patience from the last few weeks. He decides not to say anything in the end, apparently because he figures this makes him "better than Zahhak, at least," and goes on his way, his heart sunk and his Strider personality adamantly denying it.

But as Dave is going, Feferi arrives. She is no longer angry, as she has been for days, but is stoic to the point it's obvious she's in full politician mode and is swallowing her true emotions. Seeing Dave leaving, she nods to him and goes in on her own. In her wake, Dave sees Equius and Nepeta. These two mistake Dave being there as a sign that Feferi designated the current room as a safe "waiting room," and so they sit down: as a result, Dave stays as well. This is probably the only eavesdropping scene in this entire book that's honestly unintentional on both my and the character's part. Four points of view: nothing could possibly go wrong!

Feferi's greeting to Aradia is strange. She seems about ready to say something of import when she instead cuts off and instead asks Aradia how she is, how she's feeling, even questions about her physical recovery. She is dodging her own point. Finally, she sighs and asks Aradia why she's been deliberately going to fight with Equius these days, when before she used to avoid her. Aradia gives some fair, unsurprising answers to this question: he's been infuriating, she hoped it would shut him up, and once again, she feels can handle herself. Feferi changes the question, her voice touching on
hurt feelings: why didn't she come to her instead?

It's clear Aradia did not even think about it, and she's a little surprised at the realization. Unconsciously, Feferi has simply become "the one that stamps down on fights," (the simplistic fandom view of auspistice) an impression I hoped to cultivate in this chapter by avoiding Rose as POV. She cannot think of an answer, and Feferi refuses to provide, implying that she doesn't want to bias Aradia's answers. Aradia says that she was tired of Equius treating her like a wiggler, and felt it would be best if she did it herself, not just in terms of Equius but in terms of her own self-respect.

"Have I been treating you like a wiggler?" Feferi asks, her voice cracking somewhat.

"You treat everyone like -- wiggler," Aradia says, again: skipping prepositions. She then laughs to explain that this was a joke, as her voice is too flat to convey the idea on its own.

But Feferi is not laughing. "…Maybe… you two should talk for a while without me 'stomping down.'"

She pats Aradia's leg and then stands and leaves, gesturing to Equius as she goes, Feferi leaving the section of the lab entirely. Nepeta watches him go, and… and I'm not sure. In the original plan she was nearby the two of them to begin with, but in hindsight it doesn't make sense. Why would Nepeta hover near a heart-to-heart? If anything I'd imagine her leaving, so she wouldn't interfere, and then eavesdropping: she should have been one of my points of view! I'll have to fudge this, because I need her to be proximate to Thing One and Thing Two. Let's pretend she doesn't know what Equius has to say (but is here anyways?) and so follows him in.

Equius is initially awkward and nervous, much to Aradia's consternation and Dave's amusement. But after a moment, he stands up straight, at attention, and becomes a perfect, sweaty racist gentleman. "Miss Megido," he announces. "I have, recently, with due consideration to and from our mutual auspistice, come to the conclusion that you and I may require a-a… a change." He glances to Nepeta, who has just begun to realize what might be up. "She and I have started to question if perhaps you and I have moved beyond the… well the need for such mediation." Dave raises an eyebrow at that, wondering if Feferi has really left. Equius takes a step forward. "It is for this reason, as the morally responsible and genetically superior member of this pai–particular pairing, that I request your hand. I mean, your company." Still boggled, he gestures for her hand, which he has her set on his own. "Your presence. I-in the caliginous quadrant."

Aradia is taken aback, but Dave even more so. His stomach sinks like a rock at the idea of being in an opposite quadrant to Equius Zahhak, who he's come to despise since Aradia's revival, and he also doesn't feel Aradia should have a kismesis right now. He means that second thing as well as possible, though as time goes on it will become fuzzy whether he feels this as a friend or is just uncomfortable with being with a pseudo-polamorous partner (something in my plans since last year but thanks for the confirm, Hussie). Nepeta is having her own strange reaction, her hackles up as she crawls slowly back into a corner. It is unmistakable, even for Dave, who knows just enough from Jade and cats in general to work it out: Nepeta hates blackrom so much she is actually recoiling with fear at the idea of having it one quadrant away.

Aradia recovers, and replies about as graciously as one can after gaping like she did: "I'll have -- think about it," she starts, and adds: "thank you, Equius," after a moment.

But Equius is once again insulted, and says "I should hope that you more than 'think about it.'" He then furrows his brow and gives Aradia a kiss on the cheek. Dave is not entirely sure what was going through Equius' head when he did this, or if he had even thought it through to begin with, but this gesture breaks Aradia's cheek bone. Aradia yelps with pain and Dave starts shouting, but and Equius simply marches out of the room, ignoring them. Somewhere in the knot of "Troll Romance"
that's caught in Dave's throat, he remembers Nepeta, who's been sitting in dumbfounded shock. When he snaps her to her senses, she is of no help to anyone, too shocked at first her moiral's actions and then her own inactions to perceive and prevent the gesture. She looks to Aradia in apology, does not get one (Aradia is fumbling for a sylladex she does not have), and flees the scene.

Dave manages to get Aradia a healing candy during this fuss, and thankfully it does the work, giving Dave plenty of time to think about putting paid to Equius. That said, he is still Dave Strider, and tries to keep his signature cool at another guy coming in and breaking his girlfriend's face, which is to say, he's going to wait and see if she wants to break it first. "Well that was pleasant."

"Somebody's asking for a whip but I think he'd think --'s kinky," Aradia says with a snarl.

But the "kinky" joke has reminded Dave that he might not like it if his girlfriend chooses to break Equius' face herself. In front of his eyes, Aradia pulls herself together and becomes more animate than she's been in days. Her speech trips over itself to complain about Equius and she doesn't even care about it being embarrassing. For the first time, Dave is reminded that his girlfriend's really an alien, and faces the chilling realization that Aradia is absolutely going to take Equius up on his offer. "Who else am I going to go spades with but -- guy who walks in -- kisses me with a sledgehammer?"

Dave is given an excuse to leave when Sollux trolls Aradia, having been informed of what happened by Nepeta. Dave deliberately leaves the lab to seek out Jack, early.

During Dave's absence, we cut to Rose, because I am now desperate for points of view and now regret the idea of having ever limited them in the first place. Alternately, this might have been a pesterlog, but it still lacks a POV. …Oh, let's just suck this up! Okay: Rose and Kanaya are looking over knitting patterns for their next project, which Rose has introduced in hopes of calming Kanaya from all the stress she gets while planning supplies for the caverns. Sure, that sounds reasonable.

The voices she hears are those of Aradia and Feferi. It is later that same day, and Aradia is going to her recouperacon and found Feferi waiting for her here. Aradia asks Feferi if she is okay, and Feferi says yes, though the slightest croak in her voice makes it clear she's very much not. "Did he…?" Feferi asks. Aradia confirms. "And you…? Are you going to… go with Equius?" Aradia pauses, but confirms this as well.

"Did they break up?" Kanaya asks Rose. Rose does not know, and certainly does not know how to feel about this.

"You're going to be just fine," Feferi reassures her former charge. "I-I know you will." She is trying very hard to sound proud. Rose wonders if maybe the feeling is genuine, and is just having trouble breaking through the act of neutrality

It soon becomes clear that Aradia is not sure how to approach Feferi's mask of security any more than Rose was with her own. "Thank you," she says after a moment. "You were what we needed."

Feferi's tone is humorously dismissive, like one does when they shrug. "I just tried to know when to step aside."

"No," Aradia says. "You did good."

"I did all right," Feferi grants. "I shouldn't have given Equius so much ground. I shouldn't have let you… I don’t know where the line is, but this wasn't it. And I should have known you'd need more than cheering when you came back. With Rose..." Feferi changes her mind about chastising her former auspistice buddy. "I should have been better for everyone."
Aradia steps forward here, Rose can only presume to come close to Feferi. "You ask me, only two people can say if you did good or bad here," Aradia says. "And I think you did pretty good."

Feferi sniffs back tears and, almost to Rose's surprise, allows herself to say: "...Okay!" She then asks: "Do you still need me to train?"

"Yes," Aradia says. "...And if I ever need an auspistise again. Clubs," she clarifies, "auspistice" being illegible without "s" sounds. "You know, in the future. I'd like your help with that."

Feferi nearly gasps with excitement. "I... you know )ow to find me!! Aradia. I..."

From the sounds of things, Feferi hugs Aradia, but Rose cannot tell: Feferi soon says goodnight, and they say no more for Rorse or Kanaya to hear.

A day or two later, Vriska returns from a fight with Jack, Dave at her side. They are both bound for the Aries section, Vriska going to visit "John, Rose, whatever." When they arrivethey find Aradia and Equius by the transportalizer, she giving him an extended goodnight kiss as he stands as still as possible. Nepeta is also with them, obviously not wanting to be there but so wrought with worry that she does not seem willing to leave. Vriska, who had come to the Aries section to visit John, "or maybe Rose," looks at the scene with amusement. "Well!" she says. "It's worse than you said, Strider!" She slaps Dave on the back, and as she does, notes the tiniest frown on his face. "...Huh," Vriska says. She changes her mental plans at this point, and heads straight up to the kissing couple.

Turning to poor, despondent Nepeta, who has not even noticed her, Vriska taunts: "Down, kitty!" which causes Nepeta to sink even further into her quiet depression. "Well you two got straight down to business!" Vriska says to the kismeses. She then reaches into her sylladex, pulls out her old robot arm and slaps Equius across the back of the head with it. "Zahhak!" she orders: "beat it! ...My girl needs rest, and that means not sticking her tongue down your throat for a few hours."

"Your girl?" Equius says, disingenuous. "I don't believe—"

"Leave, Equius," Aradia orders. She is obviously suspicious about Vriska's motives, and steps out of Equius' way.

"...Come, Nepeta," Equius says, still not noticing his moirail's mood. They sulk out.

Vriska heads into Aradia's room here, and immediately begins picking at her supply of food. "Break up with Feferi, huh?" Vriska asks.

"Actually, no," Aradia says. She confirms that she/Feferi/Equius is done, but that she and Feferi are still stuck together, so to speak.

"Whatever works for you," Vriska says with a shake of her head.

"Are you here for a reason?" Aradia asks.

"Legitimate question, legitimate concern, legitimate message," Vriska counts off on one hand, with a drumstick. Aradia allows this.

The legitimate question is unnecessary for our purposes, something about Jack or possibly Presence, and would have been used to hide any clues I might have still needed in that regard. The legitimate concern is about Dave.
"You know, my auspistice keeps rattling off about how relationships change you," Vriska says.
"And you know what? I am changed. I used to be the kind of person that figured the humans would know so little about Trolls that they'd blow any relationships with us! And look where that landed me!" Vriska sits on a bookshelf and continues to gesture with her snack. "Of course, they've still been screwing up, but they try. They try hard. Exceeeeeeeep for one. There's this one couple that just barrelled forward, no culture clash! Nothing getting in their way! No concerns at all! It was messed up!"

Aradia sighs. "Dave and I are none of your—"

"Just wondering if you've seen the look on his face when he sees you smooching Zahhak."

"You've lost it," Aradia says. Aradia thinks the idea of Dave looking upset is most ridiculous part of the sentence, and Vriska knows it. "You know, a real moirail would be making sure Equiuv isn't hurting me."

"Yeah, but a good moirail makes sure you aren't hurting yourself." Vriska smirks at the way this makes Aradia pause. "Sorry. I've got a psychologist running clubs."

"Out," Aradia orders.

Vriska backs off, but then immediately turns back to pat Aradia on the cheek, to delivery her legitimate message. "Happy full quadrants, Aradia," she says. "It couldn't have happened to a nicer girl I helped make who she is today."

Aradia actually smirks at this, and retrieves the Cat 'o Twin Tails from her specibus. "Thanks for -- whip, Vrivka."

Vriska grins back. "Does it work?" she asks. Aradia nods. "…You try it on Zahhak?"

"I'm going to try it on you in a second," Aradia says, still smiling. Vriska laughs, and leaves laughing, Aradia smiling in spite.
"All right suckers, let's talk gobblefowl."

It's time for the first milestone meeting, and Karkat has people to shout down while John tries to raise spirits by talking about their great plans to deal with Jack. It turns out these plans aren't very good, either.

"Jade, I don't think this is helping."

"It's called 'you cut two weeks from under me,' John!"

Time pressures being what they are, Jade has had to totally kill her plans to counteract Jack's lesser Time powers, since Aradia can't work on them herself for dexterity issues, forcing her to work through Tavros and Gamzee (who had nothing else to do) just to counteract Jack's ability to escape through time or bring in duplicates. Jade says that she and Sollux were able to kill Jack's Doom powers – the Green and Red Miles, that is – which is good because otherwise there wouldn't be a Trap much longer, now would there? As far as the Net spell is concerned, this should be all right: Jade can still stop the Space powers forming the Net itself, and it's not as though he can reach through time with his bare hands ("Right?" "Eh, probably." "OH, WELL THEN WE'RE ALL REASSURED!"). Unfortunately, this means Jack will be still able to de-synch himself with the combatant's time streams, which will force them into duels and ruin attempts to heal or Chain. Many of the people at the table think is worse than the Net, but Jade just can't spare the time to work with an element she doesn't understand. To emphasize this point, Dave backs Jade up by deliberately leaving to fight Jack, dragging Vriska off with him.

Failures outlines, Jade calculates that she could put her efforts towards stopping either Jack's teleportation or his energy beams (both Space powers), but not both. Eridan, reading from Vriska's gamecrusty notes, suggests that she do the former, as Jack will probably gain Breath powers at Level 99 and figures that it's better to deal with double projectiles and/or knockback (there was never going to be knockback I would never have programmed it) than Jack jumping around them like a quantum flea. Karkat signs off on that.

Thanks to my self-censorship during the sex and reproduction talks, this meeting is our first time seeing the whole group together since Chapter 14, and they're perhaps even more disorderly than before. Before Vriska is dragged out, she and Eridan nudge and jostle each other while laughing "under their breath" but still so loud that Karkat can't ignore them. Rose, who has decided this is harmless behaviour, is playing a game of touch-and-feel chicken with Kanaya, teasing and tickling one another when no one is looking ("Oh, of course I make a contented sound when everyone else has shut up." "Rose Everyone Is Staring I Dont Think Theyre Buying It I Think Its Obvious It Was Me" "That's because you're pleasantly verdant, dear, just shut up and let me take this one."). Aradia has settled with her hand on Equius' arm: both of them are under the ever-watchful eye of Nepeta, whose mood has not improved over the last time skip, and as such she seems determined not to let things go foul again. Terezi, Tavros and Gamzee have snuck in food. John, ostensibly maintaining order, keeps passing notes to others, and when Karkat starts intercepting them, John begins to fake messages from Sollux calling Karkat a "dreamboat." It's a high school classroom with moirails, and Karkat is their exasperated teacher counting the days to retirement.

"I want all of you unloaded when we get there," Karkat adds later in the meeting. "No fluff, cruft or
lucky charms. If it's not boosting your stats, I don't want to see it. You want your cat-hat, you buff it! You want your buckets, you make them weapons."

"ii don't see why you're picking on u2,"

"You know what you did. My point is: bunnykind, plushkind, whatever, I don't give a shit, if it can't kill him, I don't want to see it." And I didn't want esoteric weapon options cluttering up the animations in the final flash.

Nepeta perks up here to peer over Tavros' head at Sollux, eyes lowered and grin evil. "Sollux is lethal with the bucket, though! He just needs to ask someone for their donation and they drop dead of embarrassment."

Sollux gags. "Oh, because the first thing a dog'll want to whip out his stuff for is a cat."

Karkat moves to shut them both up but he is really quite bad at this. "Better a cat," Nepeta says, "than a boy with a thilly lisp."

But before Karkat can herd them both back into behaviour, Nepeta has snapped up, suddenly alert again in the ways cats do, as she remembered her charge and quickly returning to staring down Aradia's hand on Equius' arm with virtually all of her focus.

By the end of the meeting ("NO I DON'T WANT ANY OF YOUR FUCKING SANDWICH!"), Equius has grown quite tired of Nepeta's chaperoning and tells her to go with Jade, reminding her that "we talked about this" and "the deadline is now staring you in the face, I would think you'd be more concerned about what you have not accomplished, like I did. And see where that brought me?"

he asks, referring to his kismesis with Aradia as though that were his doing alone and not Feferi's (and certainly no credit to Aradia!). "What are you accomplishing by resting on your laurels in the public service?"

Nepeta makes a rude noise and says "C'mon Jade, let's go play," so angrily that it almost seems like she is mocking her own juvenile phraseology for once in her life. "Equius wants to spend time alone with his real girlfriend!"

This actually makes Equius very angry, because of course he considers Nepeta his real girlfriend, what insidious manipulation, griping about in the dirt for complaints to force his attention! Why if you had any respect for... but Aradia and Jade tell him to shut up. He tells off Aradia for "her presumptions" but kowtows to Jade, who "he has always respected" and who he hopes will set Nepeta straight on "his true motives and the rewards awaiting Nepeta therein."

Jade and Nepeta's "playing" is particularly dismal today, but as the RP goes on, they end up hugging as part of their plot, a scene designed to echo Tavros and Vriska's hug while writing in Chapter 22/Original Chapter 8. Like Tavros and Vriska's, this hug carries on a little too long, due entirely to Nepeta. This sends Jade into a selfish panic, where she is worried that Nepeta will try to kiss her and "ruin everything" but she soon realizes that Nepeta is upset and just wants to be held, and Jade tries to acknowledge. Finally Nepeta scoots away and repeats that she hates "her" (Aradia) (ala Chapter 14) but now wonders if the reason she thinks she hates Aradia is because she represents how Equius is growing up even though Nepeta feels she isn't ready for "grown-up" relationships. Jade tries to echo some of the things Rose has been saying about mature relationships since Act 4, but Nepeta just keeps shaking her head, wanting things to be "simple" and "happy."

"The only one I've got that's still simple and happy is with you!" Nepeta says, even more upset, and this does nothing to quell Jade's worries. Nepeta talks about how she couldn't tell Equius this because he'd just make a lecture out of it, Sollux because he'd make fun of it, and Karkat because he would do a little of both. "Kanaya would just send me to Rose, and I don't want to talk to Rose stupid, if I wanted to talk to Rose I would have talked to Rose! And Gamzee… if I felt better, I wouldn't know
if it was real anymore! And Terezi is just…” She shakes her head.

She then touches her side and adds: "And my moult is killing me today. Why not? Why… argh!" With total disregard for Jade, Nepeta hikes up her shirt and begins scratching furiously around the edges of a monster welt that runs from her hip and curls halfway around up her side. She makes an angry, cartoonish growling sound as she scratches it.

This sudden change in complaint, not to mention the way it veered worrying toward sexuality in Jade's eyes (the stripping) only to present, I will repeat, a giant welt, makes Jade laugh hard. Nepeta raises an eyebrow. "I'm sorry!" she says. "You were just so serious and then—"

"this" Nepeta says, jabbing a finger at the welt, "is purry s33rious!" She giggles at first, but then sighs (and then scratches again). "Aw," she pouts. "I wish things were only serious when they need to be." She reaches out and takes Jade's hand, much to Jade's surprise, and holds it up. "That's why you're special," Nepeta tells her, and squeezes her hand with a smile before letting it go.

Nepeta goes off to continue the roleplay, Jade gone over to feeling unbelievably guilty.

Okay, I give up! This bullshit can go on no longer. I have no further excuses, no more magical belfries: I cannot keep writing Eavesdropping: The Fanfiction! WE ARE NOW NEPETA LEIJON.

It is perhaps the next day, no more than a few days later, as the kids are working double time on the scaffolds and inside the Rat Trap, giving us our first description of the place. In its completed form, the Rat Trap sill largely resembles a large asteroid, now with great engines on the bottom and pocked with access ports and armour for the multitude of pseudo-scientific/pseudo-magical devices just waiting for their ratling to enter the trap. Its top has been levelled out flat and opens directly into a large cylindrical chamber. This chamber, lined with paneled walls, outfitted with lighting and a series of emergency lights and a few control panels, is where the cast plan to capture and engage Jack, using themselves as bait and shutting the ceiling shut with a force field once he is in and his powers have been dampened.

Nepeta is doing a rare day of specialist work as opposed to the gopher work she's been doing for most of construction (alongside most of the cast, honestly: other gophers include Gamzee, Tavros, John, Karkat, pretty much everyone with no critical powers or skills). John wants her to examine the trap/battle chamber as a Rogue and small animals expert for any exits Jack might be able to escape through, be that on its own, shrunk down perhaps, or even using some sort of Prankster's Gambit. Things seem secure on the Trap and Nepeta is satisfied that so long as the force field holds, Jack will only be able to escape by beating Jade's dampers and destroying the whole place.

This conclusion is not easily made, however, as Nepeta is distracted spends much of her time fighting with an imaginary Equius in her head. She is getting so tired of always winning in her head that she's beginning to realize the real Equius is never going to listen so politely, or collapse like the strawmen she dreams up. Unfortunately, Nepeta also realizes, Heart-receptive and Rogue-aware, that she isn't the only one upset this morning, and nearly everyone is stressed to finish before the deadline. This is partially to prepare the reader for the mood of the immediate next scene, but something far more important would be happening in the text itself. Using Nepeta's early-chapter cry with Jade to hide my approach, in this chapter I would begin a consistent but silent shift away from positive adjectives, actions and verbs. They still exist, especially the verbs, but by the next chapter, their negative counterparts would begin to rise in frequency, and the positive would continue to recede, while the text becomes more terse whenever possible as the deadline closes. As we get closer to the end of the fic, the sense of inevitability and dread should have begun to close about the cast like a thick fog choking them and cutting off their view of the exits.
Finishing her report to John, Nepeta takes the initiative to fix a problem or two before returning to gopher work for Equius, and so goes down to alchemize some materials. On her way down she jumps one of the shorter ladders and feels a sharp pain on her side as her moulting welt splits. Nepeta in her usual work tank top at the time, with exposed belly, and thus welt, and Equius quickly notices. He insists that she patch it up, but she is not in the mood to listen to him and does nothing of the sort, stomping off to the pier where Sollux is still running programming work.

Nepeta goes to Sollux to give him her order, but he is obstinate and insists on also insisting on complaining about her refusal to tend to her cut, not to mention her behaviour with Equius. Nepeta wants to counter his complaints, and since he is presently complaining about her moult, she reaches out to point to and insult the dandruff she expects on his shoulders like all the other male Trolls, like Karkat and Tavros. Unfortunately, Sollux is a dreamself and has none, so she slaps his shoulder backhanded out of irritation. When he gets angry about his, this opens the floodgates and Nepeta lets out her frustrations at Sollux, saying, essentially: "You don't know what I'm going through, you don't know what I'm going through with Equius! You don't get it: shut up!"

But Sollux pivots on his chair, and begins to spell out how he is, in fact, a card-carrying member of the Reasons to Platonically Hate Equius Zahhak Right Now Club, since he strongly disapproves of how he's "insisted" on starting this kismesis with Aradia while she's still recovering. "FF had things well in hand!" he says.

The kiss incident especially bothers him, and it's clear he can barely hold back that he thinks it's Nepeta's fault that Equius kissed Aradia. Nepeta agrees, so this makes her feel even more depressed. Unfortunately, as you already know, Nepeta thinks Aradia is responsible for the kismesis, and uses this as her "out." Things soon devolve into a back and forth argument about whose friends are most responsible for the kismesis, which it seems neither Nepeta nor Sollux even want to exist, and both of them for selfish reasons the other is oh-too-happy to point out.

In the middle of these petty excuses, Sollux points out the moulting welt. "And clean that up!" he demands after another verbal snip at Nepeta's moirail. He produces some medical stuff from their Drone kit and they begin to set the wound, as the games' healing tools refuse to work on natural conditions.

"'Clean that up!'" Nepeta repeats as an insult. "I'll clean it up in my own time, thank you!" Nepeta snaps up the bandages, or whatever, and sets to work all the same. As she works, she feels the need to add: "Why were you looking at my waist?"

"Why was I looking at your waist?" he asks, incredulous.

"There a big fucking gash in it!" he replies. He continues to hand her tools and she continues to snap them up. "What the hell's your problem?"

"What the hell's your problem, you giant pervert?"

"Oh yeah, computer programmer's the giant pervert, you're treading all new territory here."

Continuing their Drone training, Sollux helps Nepeta apply the bandage as it is a rather large if simply surface wound. "Got a girlfriend that walks around in her ablution suit all night long, absolutely nothing worth looking at there."

"Oh, you're charming," she bats his hands away from the bandage after it has gotten to the point where she can easily handle it herself, but he beings to pick her over looking at some of the other welts. "Uck, what is your problem now?"
"Looking for more!" Sollux says, though unfortunately for Nepeta he's dipping into an obsessive compulsive moment is really just making excuses. She bats him away.

"How would you feel?" she threatens, and picks at some of his skin, until they are both smacking the other away with spare hands in what can't be considered any more dignified than a slap fight. Finally they break apart, but poor Sollux's OCD has him go in another time and Nepeta smacks him away hard and shouts with rage.

"Fine!" Sollux shouts. "God, what is even your deal you crazy bitch?"

"I'm the bitch?" Nepeta shouts back. People are looking now, including Feferi. Nepeta and Sollux exchange screaming threats for a while and blame the other for attracting all this attention. "You think… you… Argh!" Nepeta stumps off a step or two, and begins to check her own wounds just to shut him up, but knows Sollux well enough to understand the OCD and allows herself a few deep breaths. "Sorry," she mutters. "I mean… the picking. I know you can't help it sometimes."

"…Your hair's a mess," is Sollux's choice of response. Nepeta rolls her eyes and plucks off her hat, wringing it like a neck in her hands. "It's not doing the teeth thing."

Nepeta calms to hear that, even chuckling a bit. "Nobody notices the teeth thing," she admits, and resets her hair best she can. That accomplished, and a little nervous, Nepeta reaches out a hand to touch his shoulder by way of apology, but to her surprise, he shakes the hand off. Nepeta is almost surprised how angry this makes her. "N-No!" she complains, but then "Fine! Be that way! I thought we were on the same level on this but if that's how you are, I don't even want to be on this level! So fine! Fine!"

"What?" Sollux asks. "I just don't want you getting all touchy-feely, all right? What do you think this is?"

"You don't get it! Do you have any idea how hard this is for me? T- be like this?" Nepeta clenches her fists. "I just… I don't want to be there! I just wanna be joking and teasing and kidding around, okay? I wanted you to understand, but you don't understand! You don't understand about Equius and you don't understand about this! I don't wanna be there. I don't want you to shout at me, I don't wanna shout at you. I like you!" she shouts, angry.

"Okay," Sollux says, hands up. "okay, ii'm sorry. clearly we got some miixed 2iignals 2omewhere. let'2 ju2t… back off, okay?"

Nepeta nods, hand on her mouth and holding back tears. She takes a few steps away when she simply sits on the floor and starts to snuffle.

After a long break, Sollux turns back to her. "I'm not going to come and hug you," he says.

"I know," she grumps. "I don't want you to."

"Good!"

"Good!"

Nepeta, and for that matter Sollux, feel like they're pinned down by heavy weights, and neither moves. Several people pass them by on the way to the alchemiter, including Gamzee, who goes to talk to Nepeta but she rejects him, saying she wants to "work this out myself!", shouting loud enough for Sollux to hear her.

"oh, does that mean you're going to fuckiing talk now?" Sollux asks.
"Yeah," Nepeta says without thinking.

"Then what's the deal? Look, you're not helping anybody on the floor, what do I have to do? You waiting for us to kiss and make up?"

"Oh, you'd like that," Nepeta says.

"This again? Look," he says. "You're a fucking wreck, I'm getting Zahhak." He goes to leave.

"No!" Nepeta shouts, surprised at her own volume. "…No," she says. "He'll be upset."

"Yeah," Sollux says, blunt. He has stepped just in front and to the side of her. "I'm not exactly jumping for joy myself, NP."

Nepeta raises an eyebrow at this [this is the first time he has called her "NP" instead of "Leijon," but this detail is left to the readers]. "You don't get it," Nepeta says, and he throws up his arms.

Sollux pauses, just realizing it himself, and then shrugs.

Nepeta thinks for a moment and then explains: "…He's been bugging me about Jade again. If he thinks you and me are been fighting he'll think I've screwed up all my Drone stuff and he'll get super angry!"

"He's always angry," Sollux says. Nepeta rolls her eyes. "Well why don't you say something to him?" Sollux says, sarcastic.

"Because it won't solve anything," she mutters.

"Tell him off!"

"That won't solve anything either!" she counters.

"It hasn't stopped you with me!" Sollux says.

Nepeta rolls her eyes. "It won't solve anything because I want him to shut up and leave me alone."

But Sollux is nervous when he replies: "You… don't want me to shut up and leave you alone?" Nepeta, her head in her hands, looks up and slowly shakes her head. Sollux reluctantly plops down on the floor, still a few paces away.

Nepeta continues: "He makes me want to strangle him. He's not even listening! It's like: 'Equius, why won't you listen to me about Jade or Aradia or anything?' Isn't what I've got to say important?"

Sollux's response is more sarcasm: "Well why don't you tell him he's being an ass?" Before she can answer, however, he adds: "Is it because he's a colossal bulgewad with no redeeming values?"

Nepeta raises an eyebrow: "Maybe he's so shoved up your girlfriend's nook that he's not listening to anyone?"

"Hey, if Aradia's got him up her nook, it's because that's exactly where she wants him! Wait!" he shouts. "I grossed myself out, hold on."

Where they had been previously attacking the other's friends and defending their own, Nepeta and Sollux take the opportunity to tease Equius and Aradia, eventually throwing their own against their own friends for a while, and by the time the day is over they are both having a laugh at Karkat's expense together. Nepeta uses alchemy work as an excuse her staying over, but the both of them are
clearly just sitting in the middle of the floor pretty much until the end of the day. As the others leave, Karkat decides to tell them off for slacking. "Whole day of me doing gopher work for Zahhak because someone – who actually knows the name of his cooky tools – was too busy discussing… bucket design to bother!"

Both are stunned at this statement and laugh together. "Really, KK?" Sollux asks. "Bucket design?"

"Yeah," he says, deadpan. "What, you worried the recoil's going to bounce up and hit you in the eye? Shut up! You've got an important job here, today, you know! I mean, not really critical but—"

"Shut up Karkat," Nepeta says, making Sollux, Karkat and several others' jaws drop. Terezi has to even go for a high five as Nepeta blushes, just as much for the attention as in surprise at her own reaction. As the others funnel out, Feferi going with a smile, Nepeta and Sollux soon realize that they are completely alone. With a deep breath, Nepeta crawls over to Sollux and kisses him on his cheek, pauses, and then another. She is so nervous about the whole process that she seems delighted the world did not explode for her having done it. "Two," she points out. He chuckles kisses her back and, when she holds out her arms, gives her a hug.

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" she asks.

"No, I think I get what you mean," he says.

She nods. "No shouting, no angry. Not a… a big deal. Just…" She pauses as Sollux settles his hand on her waist, around her bandage, the edge of her welt in between two carefully splayed fingers, "…safe here."

They shift about, and as they do, Nepeta observes: "For the record," she says, "you're not actually a giant pervert." She pulls him into her lap. "…Yet."

"I'll keep it in mind," he says. "And… you're not actually a bitch."

"Of course not, I'm a kitty," Nepeta says with a huff.

Sollux lowers his glasses to look her in the eyes. "And it's not your fault your asshole moirail hurt AA."

"…Yeah it is," she says, taking the glasses and setting them aside. "But he's not going to do it again. Your girlfriend is safe," she adds, patting his cheek.

Sollux grunts. "She's not my fucking girlfriend, what is everyone's deal?"

"No," Nepeta says, laughing. She then kisses him gently on the neck, still nervous, still shy, and he takes this as an invitation to go for her own. "I am."

"…iit'2 driiviing you crazy that you haven't already put thiis on your wall, iisn't iit?"

"no! …now it is."

"ehehehehehehe."

"shut up!"

Chapter End Notes
SR: Why does Sollux keep getting intimate scenes with his quadrants?
AC: :33 < because you identify with your fellow programmer
SR: But I don't identify with Sollux!
SR: I identify with my other fellow programmer: Roxy. And you.
AC: :SS < you're right, that is weird.
SR: And thank you for forcing me to share!
AC: :SS < believe me, the purrlesure is nowhere near mine.

This relationship is the source of Equius' weird proposition to Sollux regarding Feferi in Chapter 32. Equius, having intuited his moirail's black crush, went to Sollux with full intent of warning him to treat his moirail with all due respect, only for Sollux to misinterpret the demand as a weird, matchmaking bit of sexual advice for him and Feferi. Equius, now confronted with a lowblood questioning his advice on a sexual matter and being a Zahhak in the way only Zahhaks can, decided to stay this new course against all propriety.

Sollux and Nepeta's relationship is supposed to emphasize one last angle on kismesis: that it isn't always a "big deal" as Vriska insisted two chapters ago. To maximize this potential, I was initially going to make the relationship simply about "puppy hate," but eventually made it about young, inexperienced teens whose discomfort with the situation intensifies that same inexperience, which I feel helps us sympathize with this alien romantic sentiment just a bit more than we otherwise would. Takaratime put out a much better puppy hate concept just a few days ago either way.
The more I fuss over the final two chapters the more I feel I can't possibly fuss any longer without knowing the exact context you'll have as readers going in. To that end, I figure I had best as well carry on through the next three chapters and final recap before the ending two. That's the structure. After that, the promised wrap-up. That established, let's go into Chapter 45 – Spark.

CG: SORRY, ALL I'M GETTING OUT OF THIS IS A HORRIFYING MENTAL PICTURE OF TWO IMPERIAL DRONE FILLING A BUCKET TOGETHER.
CG: AND THAT'S HIDEOUS.
CG: THE PICTURE IS HIDEOUS, AND THE BUCKET IS THIS HIDEOUS SPIKEY THING.
CG: THE DRONES ARE ESPECIALLY HIDEOUS.
CG: ONE OF THEM IS WEARING THIS HIDEOUS CATSKIN RIPPLED OVER ITS FACE BUT THAT DOESN'T MAKE THE OTHER ONE ANY MORE ATTRACTIVE.
TA: yeah yeah iit.
CG: NO, NO I DON'T THINK YOU DO OR YOU WOULDN'T HAVE EVER GIVEN ME THIS TRAVESTY OF A THOUGHT PROCESS.
CG: YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND.
CG: IF I SAW THIS MENTAL PICTURE IN REAL LIFE I'D HAVE TO PLUCK OUT MY OWN GANDERBULBS BEFORE THEY BOIL IN THEIR SOCKETS.
CG: AND THEN I'D LISTEN AS THEY FINISH COOKING ON THE TABLE, SPURTING OCULAR FLUID LIKE A SOME SORT OF ACCIDENTAL KETTLE,
CG: AND THEN WE'D LISTEN
CG: TOGETHER
CG: AS THE SCREECH OF STEAM BURSTS OUT FROM UNDER THE CORNEAS, WAILING HIGHER AND HIGHER IN PITCH UNTIL IT NEARLY MATCHES MY SCREAMS.
CG: BUT IT NEVER WILL, SOLLUX.
CG: AND DO YOU KNOW WHY?
TA: ii dunno, kk
TA: ii think iit'2 a…
TA: purrfectly good mental iiimage.
CG: GYYYYACCCK!!
CG: URKGG!
CG: GYGGL
CG: GGG COUGH GXLXLXLXXX
CG: IF YOU'RE NOT FOLLOWING: THIS MEANS I'M DISAPPOINTED AND ASHAMED.
TA: no ii got that part.
CG: OH, GOOD, I'M GLAD TO HEAR THAT, BECAUSE FOR SOME FUNNY REASON
CG: NOW WHAT COULD THAT REASON HAVE BEEN?
CG: I JUST GOT THE IMPRESSION THAT YOU HAD LOST YOUR GODDAMNED MIND!
TA: you know, kk, np'2 actually a pretty good kiid once you get two know her.
TA: ii mean 2he’2 unfocu2ed and talk2 a lot about 2hiit ii don't under2tand liike kiitten2
and spliiting jugular2 and 2hiit, okay.
TA: but you put her on ta2k and 2he get2 riight two iit.
CG: OH WELL THAT'S A RELIEF, OUR GENETIC STOCK IS SECURED AND
YOUR DECISION TO CONTAMINATE THE SLURRY WITH PROGRAMMING
FURRY GENES HAS BEEN COMPLETELY REDEEMED!
CG: I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN ALL ALONG THAT ALL SHE NEEDED WAS
A LITTLE DIRECTION IN LIFE AND I TOO COULD HAVE SEEN THE LIGHT
OF LEIJON.
CG: YOU KNOW, FROM THE MOMENT I MET HER I THOUGHT...
CG: "STOMping AROUND IN THE WILDERNESS LITERALLY SCARING
THE SALTY RAINBOW OOZE DIRECTLy FROM THE GENITALS Of
UNwARY AND HASTILy FORMED TROLL COUPLES
CG: AND STORING IT IN HER ABOMINABLE, EVER-PRESENT, SEXuAL
PERIPHERAL
CG: THIS IS EXACTLY HOW I PICTURE NEpETA LEIJON COMING INTO
HER ELEMENT."
TA: hey man don't knock iit iif you haven't triied iit
CG: I WANT ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO DO WITH YOUR IDEA OF
"TRYING" YOUR KISMESS.
TA: ii mean droniing, you a22.
CG: WHATEVER.
CG: JUST CONSIDER THIS A BLANKET BAN ON ALL DETAILS BLACK
AND OLIVE GREEN.
CG: AND IF YOU SO MUCH AS CONSIDER SHIPPING ME WITH HER RED I
WILL COUNT THAT AS YOU THREATENING ME AND WILL REPORT YOU
TO ZAHHAk FOR BLACK INFIDELITY.
TA: oh come on kk iif ii hooked you up wiith np 2he'd be out of iit for week2 we'd
never get anything done
CG: GOOD, JUST LET ME DEAL WITH THAT IN MY OWN TIME.
CG: YOU JUST BOUGHT ME SOME TIME ANYWAYS, SHE'S PROBABLY
GOING TO SPEND ALL HER SPARE TIME FROM HERE TO JACK O'CLOCK
DRAWING THE MOST SPECTACULAR HATEMURAL IN PARADOX SPACE.
TA: ummm ii don't think 2o.
CG: WHAT, HAVE YOU MET THE GIRL YOU CLAIM TO BE TRAINING
WITH?
TA: have you?
TA: kk, np hate2 blackrom liike, 2eriiou2 whoa
CG: WELL, YEAH, BUT SHE'S WITH YOU NOW.
CG: RIGHT?
TA: kk
CG: SHE'S NOT OVER IT?
TA: 2he'2 only cool wiith iit becau2e ii'm handliing her liike the mo2t preciiou2,
delicake flower.
CG: WOW.
CG: HARSH BURN ARE YOU SURE YOU'RE NOT TAKING THIS TOO
FAST?
TA: thank you.
CG: ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THE HATE THING, THEN?
TA: yeah man
TA: ii mean c'mon
TA: 2he ha2 the vocal range of an airhorn, of cour2e ii know, 2o 2hould everyone el2e.
CG: WELL, WHATEVER, IT'S NONE OF MY BUSINESS.
CG: YOU HAVE A PROBLEM YOU TAKE IT UP WITH YOU AND YOURS
AND HER AND HERS.
CG: WAIT, HAVE YOU EVEN TOLD FEFERI ABOUT THIS?
TA: well…
CG: DON'T TELL ME YOU'RE COMING TO ME WITH THIS FIRST.
TA: ff and ii are 2ort of flighting right now.
CG: DELIGHTFUL. EQUIUS IS BADGERING NEPETA ABOUT JADE, FEFERI
IS BADGERING YOU BECAUSE YOU’RE AN ASS, AND NEPETA IS
BADGERING YOU BECAUSE
CG: ONCE AGAIN,
CG: YOU’RE AN ASS.
CG: THIS IS A PERFECT SETUP.
TA: at lea2t np and ii are doiing 2omethiing worthwhiile about iit.
CG: WELL YOU BETTER BE CAREFUL HOW YOU BREAK THE NEWS.
CG: DON’T RUB IT IN PEIXES’ FACE OR SHE’LL TELL YOU TO GO
STRAIGHT TO SHELL.
TA: ii'll be fine, ii'll tell her you and tz wiill be my kii2me2ii2 buddiie2
TA: 2he'll be totally cool wiith that
CG: WAIT HOLD ON.
TA: what?
CG: OH MY GOD.
CG: FEFERI.
TA: what about ff?
CG: THAT'S IT, ISN'T IT?
CG: I UNDERSTAND NOW!
TA: under2tand what
CG: YOU’RE SOME SICK FETISHIST.
CG: YOU’RE TRYING TO TURN YOUR QUADRANTS INTO SOME KIND OF
PUNSTER HAREM!
TA: ye2 that'2 iit exactly you got iit
CG: FUCK WHO’S NEXT?
CG: IF I START TELLING YOU OFF WITH CRAB METAPHORS WILL YOU
CALL EQUIUS IN HERE TO ORDER US TO behoof like civm00lized people?
TA: oh my god that’2 2o hot
CG: NOPE GOODBYE FOREVER
TA: frienddiivorce!

AA: s0 where are we?
You're outside.
AA: Outside of what?
Relevance, mostly.

Day One Hundred Twenty Seven, Hour Three. Counting today, it is one week to the launch of the
rat trap.

Why come to me?
AA: y0u left hints
AA: i f0ll0wed them, simple as that.
I'm sorry if they were too much hassle.
Nyarlathotep and I spoke once.
I wouldn't say it went amicably.
I told him to stop this relentless cycling of universes, torturing their inhabitants to find
out which eventualities would best yield his ideal results, et cetera, and then tossing them aside.
Suffice to say I was pressed for time if I was going to undermine his efforts. Hiding a means to contact me seemed wisest, so I could speak at length with a collaborator.
AA: yes i believe your concern for your wellbeing entirely.
AA: no, please continue.
It's true, though. These dollhouse timelines of his are no more a favour to you than they are to me or my master, though I'll admit they bother me in particular.
You see, he's been able to keep his activity out of my sight.
AA: is that unusual?
Very.
Thanks to an experience with one of your alpha companions, I'm starting to realize that I have a blind spot in the form of Void powers.
But he's using these Shade powers of his, wherever they came from, to create a gap in my powers themselves.
That is to say, by carefully Shading your universes from the Green Sun.
He leaves a pinhole to power your local Sovereign Slayer, I don't think Jack realizes his powers are the quick snap of a tentacle away from being snuffed out completely.
The dog caught on after a while, but Jack just hasn't had the time.
One way or another, its given me the opportunity to see that you haven't been around of late, Aradia Megido.
AA: busy
Not entirely looking for me, I hope?
AA: no.
AA: but its been something to do

Shit, let's be Aradia. Unfortunately, that's not a glamorous place to be, if anything. Aradia is gradually recovering ("Is it 'recovering,'" she notes in narration, "if your brand-new body has technically never been well to begin with?"), but it's come at the cost of the near-wholesale elimination of her spare time. She spends a good deal of time resting still ("I'm sleeping for two now," she tells Equius when he complains, referring to the frog side of her personality), and when she gets up she is quickly roped into work on the Rat Trap, revision work on the Trap for when she had to sleep through, and exercises with Feferi. Time spent on the Rat Trap has increased: Karkat and John approving overtime after overtime, and an additional mandatory two-hour shift in the evening. It's here that I had best note once again that the descriptions will be slowly losing their positive adjectives and picking up on the negative. Aradia's viewpoint, one still solidly rooted in the negativity of her robot self, is an excellent excuse for this narrative demeanor – the trick is that it actually started with sullen Nepeta and that it will be continuing when we return to Rose and others.

What time Aradia does have to herself is spent with her quadrant-mates, but she notes that this is "probably disproportionate" compared to the others. Equius takes up most of this time. Using Feferi as a baseline as she knows Aradia's physical condition the best, Aradia figures that Equius is too doting, Dave doing everything in his power to avoid being overbearing. Vriska is also around, and while she legitimately does not seem to give a shit, she still goes out of her way to chat with Aradia on walks in the halls.

Aradia's kismesis has been heating up as of recent. It took a while, at first, to establish careful physical ground rules, but Equius agreed, but only after getting Feferi to double-check the particulars, a show of trust that made Feferi outright blush. As for the amount of time they've been spending together, Aradia notes that Equius has been sending Nepeta away to her own kismesis, which she figures just as an excuse to buy time with her (Aradia), because Nepeta spends just as
much time with Jade as with Sollux, and Equius, who definitely notices, does not seem to care.

Aradia recounts a conversation she had with Nepeta, in which Nepeta criticized Aradia's attitude towards her kismesis. "Shouldn't you want to be with him just a little?" Nepeta asked. Aradia relates how Nepeta approached the whole conversation like she expected Aradia to lash out at her at any moment: she was clearly more bold than she had been in the past, but not much. But for all her complaints, it's clear Nepeta is still getting her kismesis feelings straight, as well.

"I think it's great!" Feferi says after a cutaway. In fact she seems downright enthusiastic about Sollux and Nepeta's relationship, and more than once has encouraged him to go spend time with Nepeta instead of her "to get him in the habit!" This has endeared Nepeta to Feferi immensely. Like Feferi, Nepeta has taken to keeping Sollux company while coding, and he in turn has taken into letting her into his introvert bubble. Literally, in fact: as he has moved from coding at his desktop to coding on the couch, with Nepeta often sprawled out across his and Feferi's laps, a laptop on her back.

"I hope you realize," he says, "that this is completely impractical and isn't helping at all."

Nepeta, rolling onto her back much to the displeasure of Sollux and his laptop, reminds him that she is not actually trying to help.

One day, Nepeta comes to the pools during one of Aradia's practice sessions, just to visit. Equius follows and stays after his moirail leaves. Aradia watches her go. "Wish she'd be like that for me," Aradia says to Feferi from the pool.

"She's a jealous person," Feferi says, suddenly frank, but with a smile and a shrug. "It's hard to make room for that. I don't blame you."

"I just wish I had thought of it first," Equius says. "Taking on her role as a relation-shipper to cool her down on how much she hates the idea of being black with someone. It's helped acclimatize her immensely."

Aradia grins from the pool. "And it hasn't hurt how much she likes you too, huh Feferi?"

Feferi frowns at these statements, but on further consideration, sighs and visibly relaxes. "You two," she says. "Who needs matesprits?" she says to herself, "I have exes! My exes understand me just fine. You!" she says to Aradia, and swats in her direction with her trident. "Laps, c'mon!"

This segues to Aradia and Equius making out in the shower room. Things are getting rather intense when Dave coughs from a corner. Aradia cannot help but note in narration that for all he pretends not to give a shit about anything, her matesprit seems to go out of his way to interject into her kismesis, to wit, entering the showers.

This is actually our cue to do a roundabout of the rest of the cast. As Aradia relates a story or another of Dave's interruptions, we see another day of work on the Rat Trap, during which some of the others began a conversation about Troll/Human hybrids post-game. The central participants in this conversation are Karkat, Terezi, Kanaya, Rose, Gamzee and Tavros, who are working in the central room, but after a while the conversation "rings around" the build site as others walk in and add their two cents, and then carry it off to their companions elsewhere on the platform. Gamzee is thrilled about the idea of all the grubs and babies, "but Gamzee is thrilled about everything these days." He actually carries most of the conversation (I feel he deserved a moment as a major chapter player, even if it's just to babble, since it's been all the way since Downfall). Kanaya is against the idea still, indeed she now has specific concerns about the Hybrids' ability to reproduce, with each other or with non-Hybrids, especially after a few generations. Karkat, being Karkat, acts like he wants nothing to do with infants but doesn't seem to mind, while Terezi seems to be coming around to the idea: these
two play off of one another well and seem to reach better personal conclusions than they entered with as a result. Tavros raises several concerns about the Hybrids, however, worried about how they will be treated and not wanting them to go through that, figuring it might be better if there were just Trolls and Humans and no other divide.

Our first carry-over conversation starts with Jade, who is is pissed that some people are so against the idea of Hybrids, feeling everyone should have the right to have kids with anyone they want and seeing that as the real benefit. This idea finds a ready audience in the form of Sollux and Nepeta. In another spinoff, John is with Rose and her auspistices, and they have a more reasonable and less one-sided debate about the issue, but Aradia ends up with Equius and Feferi, who are vehemently against it.

Equius and Feferi have some legitimate social concerns about the Hybrids, which everyone else is glossing over in their discussion of reproductive rights and biological concerns, not that the two of them aren't equally guilty of ignoring the issues that don't favour their position in turn. Feferi wonders where the Hybrids would live, and brings up enough of Kanaya's biology argument to point out that if they can't breed with humans, Trolls or other Hybrids, it would have massive social impact, "even if they didn't want to have sex with each other at all!" Equius points out that there is a possibility of Hybrid seadwellers, and wonders if that might cause social divisions among the Humans that the Humans present are not considering. He then calls Human racism silly and starts to go on about how thankful he is for the hemospectrum for making things clear-cut before his ex-auspistees tell him to shove it. Some of these arguments may have been presented against Karkat or someone else in favour of the hybrids to avoid the echo chamber effect, but only after the ideas have reverberated against that chamber for a while. Karkat is ideal here, because Terezi can come with him, and she will be able to back several of the ideas being thrown by both sides, though she still favours the Hybrids.

Eventually Aradia and Equius hit on a certain point, probably economic, that sets the two of them to fighting. Aradia's speech is far closer to clear at this point, though she had still been holding back on speaking in public: that ends more or less here in this shouting match. But the fight only goes on so far before Dave arrives, from wherever he had been working, to break them up. Here we see exactly why this interruption was notable enough for Aradia to bring it up as a flashback: she actually tells Dave off for interrupting the fight. After a good telling off, Dave leaves without much of a reply. As she goes to return to work, Aradia notes Terezi watching from a balcony, and she draws a hand over her head and mouths "Whoosh."

"It's like he isn't even listening to me," Aradia reports back in the present. She is in Rose's room, sitting on Rose's bed with Rose on top of her dresser.

"Of course he's listening to you," Rose says. "I don't think he ever stops listening. If he weren't listening to what everyone wants, he'd never know how to do the exact opposite."

We get a clatter from Rose's bathroom here to learn how Aradia ended up here: Vriska is rifling through Rose's soaps, shampoos and towels. She returns to the room and plops down on the bed on her back, and holds out a hand that smells of shampoo for Aradia to smell.

"Lovely," Aradia says, pushing it away. Vriska laughs and starts picking through Rose's nightstand upside-down. "I feel like he thinks he has to 'beat' Equius if he's going to be my matesprit."

"I wouldn't say that's far from the mark," Rose says. "Dave doesn't understand kismesis. I don't really blame him. I don't. I barely understand auspistice."

"It's true," Vriska says, flipping randomly through Rose's copy of Troll Oliver Twist, "probably trying to find the scene where Oliver butchers Fagan and is duly taken in by a Blueblooded
"I think you have to understand just how unusual this setup is for Dave," Rose says, "while at the same time I think he has to understand just how unusual his reaction is to you. Our cultures aren't exactly compatible in this regard. I know I've had trouble just getting used to Karkat's involvement in Kanaya's life. I don't think I really understood the scope of their moirallegience it until I had Terezi." Something the story might have better portrayed on-camera, maybe during the previous act, but I'll deal with what I have. "Whereas Dave would have grown up expecting to have only one partner and for his partner to have only one partner, he's now in a situation with no time of his own to spend with his one partner, and his partner has four partners. More than any other in our group, in fact! I wouldn't be surprised if we find this goes beyond simply Equius, but he makes an easy target."

"I take no responsibility for this," Vriska says, "but if he comes, I promise not to be an easy target." Vriska begins flicking dice into the air and catching them.

"Well, fine," Aradia says. "I get that. I think?" Rose shrugs. "But what do we do to get him to get that?"

"Knock it into him," Vriska suggests. Aradia lowers her eyes and reaches back, catching the d4 Vriska just tossed before it comes back down. "Hey!" Vriska says, but then perks up: "Blind!" she says, observing that Aradia did not have to look to make her catch. Aradia smiles a little and spiking the die onto Vriska's belly. "Yeah, yeah, whatever, Megido, the sooner you get back on patrol, the better," Vriska says. I need to sleep.

Vriska's smile fades when she returns to the subject on-hand, however. "Feferi pointed out that with jealous people, sometimes you've got to make concessions. I don't… I mean, the way he's been, does he even deserve that?"

"That's up to you," Rose says. "If you're willing to give someone concessions for a problem with their personality, it had better be because you truly value them or—"

"Or because they're not very big concessions," Vriska finishes.

Rose grants this with a gesture. "And it's not like he's not asking a lot of you, as well. Now I can talk to Dave," she says. "Though maybe it's better if I get John or Jade to do it for me. But I've got to know first, and I think this is important: do you… actually want to be with him, still?"

Aradia is confused, and somewhat irritated that Vriska only paused for a moment at this suggestion, seemingly unsurprised herself. "What? What is it?"

"He threw the first punch, but that doesn't mean you haven't been swinging," Vriska says. "That doesn't really work in a matespritship like it does in a kismesis."

"You've been ignoring him," Rose says. "He's not right to overrespond with these invasions of your privacy and kismesis, but if things aren't what you want between you and Dave—"

"I still want to be with Dave," Aradia clarifies at once.

"Well then if he's not be willing to make these concessions, then," Rose says.

"Okay," Aradia says. "Let's say. That doesn't make this a very good time for it. I mean, in just a few days…" Aradia leaves well enough unsaid. "None of us should really be distracted."

Rose is unmoved. "I can't say I agree. But don't let fears drive this. Look at Tavros, look at Karkat and Terezi," Vriska muses at mention of Tavros. "You can't say they're worse off for getting out of
where they didn't belong and heading towards where they do."

Aradia is beaten back by this somewhat, and hangs her head as she thinks back over her time with Dave: fighting with Jack, kissing in the hallway, remembering the feeling of pride and wholeness she had to have him on hand to fight against her Denizen. There would also be a scene we hadn't seen before, where she hugged him for the first time alive, and dwells on the little subtle things, like the feel of his hair or his smell, even the ugly kind of smell you'd expect coming off of a fight with Jack. Well this is only clear to me retroactively, I would hope I had preserved a line from Original Chapter 10 wherein Rose talks about the "little realities" she's come to appreciate about her online friends in real life: the term would reappear here to connect the two chapters, and if I had included a quirk for Dave in the rewritten little realities paragraph, Aradia would enjoy the same subtlety.

Aradia raises her head to Rose. "I don't think you realize just how hard that would be." Rose's polite smile fades. "I don't think you realize just how much easier it would be to let him be happy just a little longer, with what we're going up against. And if one of us…” All three of them freeze, but Aradia leaves well enough unsaid. She stands. "I'm gonna…” She turns to leave.

"I'll talk to Dave," Rose says, interrupting Aradia's exit. Aradia nods, thankful, and goes off to her recopperacoon to rest.

Behind her, she hears Vriska and Rose through the door. "Well that was dismal," Vriska says.

"Wasn't exactly a party, no."

"You know, if they break up, their Chain bonus is going to suck."

"Do you see this? This is a Human gesture of agreement and respect."

"Liar!"

I'm not sure quite what to tell you.
THAT one has always been hard to plan for.
I suppose it's because we have such a great deal in common.
AA: there are only three minds focused on us here
Only three?
I think you'll find that there are a good deal more mind focused on you there than you might imagine.
The Horrorterror's central objective hinges on your session.
Those minds focused on you need only complete their objectives and everything will slide into place for the entity as a whole.
Of course, if he's picked some contradictory sources for his Minds, they might make be less than efficient.
AA: the central mind wants us dead
Interesting that you realize right from the beginning that you are all a nonfactor on the Horrorterror's primary stage.
AA: all of them seems to have personal goals
AA: the first is cetus
AA: she's jumping a friend through personal revelations and hopes
Sounds perfectly normal to me.
AA: that works with what i know about you yeah
AA: i'm just worried about what she's trying to get across
The Denizen makes good sense to me as a Mind. It would give the Horrorterror access to Sburb sessions without needing to physically access the Incipisphere.
I can imagine he'd be hell-bent to satisfy any of her demands, even if her role was, from your perspective, already complete.
You haven't been wasting time trying to keep him out, have you?
AA: guilty
A pity.
I suppose that's something else he and I have in common, in a somewhat more distant sense.
How could you have hoped to keep him out of your session, when he was already there?
AA: the third wants us to create a new universe
And that does not sound perfectly normal to me.
Interesting.
AA: why is that?
Because there's no reason to do so.

We jump ahead another few days, with three days left to go. The cast are working on the Rat Trap once again, and as the day goes on, it quickly goes into overtime. They are soon exhausted, and slip home with very little regard to their usual pairings and groupings. Many linger as they leave, looking up at the great monolithic structure they've constructed. Rather than give them any hope, it seems to dishearten them, this giant thing towering over them and leading their gaze up towards the inevitable, and they stalk off in a daze. Feferi is one of the last to leave, and we find her in the central chamber as she gathers her remaining tools. As she does, she turns to look up, seeing the high ceiling-doors of the hangar above, and remembers another large chamber in her past. She shuts her eyes, and remembers a great glass chamber, drained of water, Sollux by her side and her sprite on the ground, bleeding to death. Above them, circling in perfect symmetry: Pisces, their teeth wet with fuschia blood.

C)(eaters on the concourse esruocnoc eht no sretae)(C
.lwob ym ni sretae)(C
C)(eaters with their heavy arms smra yvaeh rieht htiw sretae)(C
.drow eht E-CROF ot yrt oT To try to FORC-E the world.

Fall apart trapa llaF
.tuo edisni eht morF From the inside out

Can't FORC-E their way in LIF-E.

Less uniform, they carried on at a babble:

"Now can they?" said Left.

"No, I don't think so," said Right.

"We know where that'd end," said Left, with a smile.

"Barren and empty, like everyone else's," said Right, with a nod.

Dead and useless sselesu dna daeD
.dnuorg eht no gniht taht ekil like that thing on the ground.
Ended and spent tieps dna dednE
.E-VIL ot epoh on no hope to LIV-E.

Feferi, who has drawn her trident unconsciously, stomps it on the ground. "I'm not trying to 'FORC-
E' them." She notices the trident, and puts it away. "...And I'm not a cheater."

"You know," says a man, "the funniest thing about growing up is that you don't understand it until you're through with it." Feferi opens her eyes, and finds herself in a black void. To her right stands Foresight, looking up at Pisces, still circling. Above them, a third fish, Cetus, looks down with bright pink eyes, glowing and casting a sheen about the figures below. "In fact, I'd say that's one of the delimiters: as soon as you know, you're not playing, and if you're still playing, how can you know when you're cheating?" He nods his head to Glybsprite. "She taught me that, so to speak, when we had the opportunity to work together. I'd say, if you want to understand the game, you have to start by understanding children, first. So you can remember how you are, and how you aren't."

Feferi side-eyes him and carefully retrieves her trident.

"There's no need for that, sea princess," he says in Eldritch. "I'm just hijacking your dream for a chance to say goodbye." He holds out a hand toward Glybsprite. "May I?"

Feferi considers and nods, and Foresight kneels and takes up one of the sprite's manipulator tentacles, and holds it to his lips like one would a dying loved one's hand. Feferi watches him and Hindsight in alteration, before he finally breaks the silence. "She knew she was beta," he says. "Confused and angry about it, I think. I lied to Miss Lalonde, I'm afraid. Told her I had never spoken to your lusus. This is true, but she certainly spoke to me – jumbled, of course, just as much as her message to you. But I think she was trying to help, talk me out of it, and I value that, and her humouring the patronage of my avatar." He looks up and smiles. "I think I'm the evil brother so much as I'm the actual Horrorterror, what do you think?" Feferi does not answer, indeed shifts her weight to brace her trident. Foresight returns to the sprite. "Miss Lalonde, I'm afraid, isn't so willing to treat me as a person and a Horrorterror so much as force."

"Do you know who I am?" he asks.

"I know the whole you," Feferi says. "And I know the Human you from Rose. But not you in particular. Your trueself. No."

Foresight nods. "What do you know about the whole me?"

"I know he doesn't deserve to be here."

This makes Foresight chuckle. "How generous of you to my time as a Human."

"I know that he's a…" She looks up, to the split Denizen and the other above. "…C)(-EAT-ER."

He nods at this as well. "There are certain things you can force the world to do, even if you're trying to help your own people," he says. "Unfortunately, most of them never stick, and very few people are ever grateful."

"You can say that again," Feferi says. She tightens her grip on her trident. "That goes double for the other Horrorterrors. They don't want your help and you're certainly not going to get any from me."

"I wasn't asking. You have so much left to do here." Gently, he puts down the tentacle, and stands, once again returning his gaze to the Denizens. He raises an arm to Cetus. "Would you like to say goodbye, Amelia?" The Denizen does not seem to reply, though a low, echoing chuckle seems to fill the air. "Ah well," says Foresight.

For those confused by earlier commentary, this line would have been the first confirmation that Hindsight was also on the voice crew of The Squiddles! as "Amelia Everett." At other times I had considered having Hindsight/Mirann talk to Feferi throughout the plot, which would have confirmed
this and also that she and Foresight had feigned a relationship to confuse their masquerade to Rose and the voice crew alike. But then the Condesce appeared in canon, and in the end, it seemed like a bad idea. By the way! I completely forgot! "Mira" is a star in Cetus. The double "n" ending was originally a reference to one of the names of Nyarlathotep, which I believe included an "ann," but the Crawling Chaos has too many names, and I can't remember which one it was any longer!

Hindsight sweeps his hand again, causing Cetus to be obscured by Shade, leaving Pisces alone in the sky. "Is this what you're aiming for?" he asks Feferi after a moment's apparent reflection. "Symmetry? Perfect partnership?"

Feferi glances down at her sprite, rather than her conversational partner. "I don't always like it, but this is the way I know will work. In this case. In a lot of cases!" She gestures up to Pisces, but is unable to look away from her sprite. "I mean… look what they did together." Feferi shakes her head. "Besides, I promised," she adds, looking her sprite in its frozen, dying eyes, and is forced to look away, hanging her head. "I promised. I promised I'd… unite the two races."

He nods. "What's left of them."

When Feferi looks up, the vision is gone. Feferi takes this in, and then lowers herself to her knees and reaches out, clutching at a tentacle that is no longer there. Holding like this, she slowly begins to shake. And though the dream has faded, the voices linger, as does the feeling: voice weak, mind shutting out the world, muscles struggling under the weight of a weapon stained with the blood of gods.

"Please don't tell anyone I got upset." Still shaking. "We have to hold it together, to the end."

"FF, as long as you need, anything you need."

Still shaking.

The others dispersed, yes, but while most went straight home, not all stayed there. Kanaya, dead on her feet, is in the office of her sector, still stuffing things into piles of Must Take and Maybe Take and a third marked Leave, and so on. After a while, she gets a trolling. She reads it, sighs, and opens the door for Karkat.

A few minutes later, they are curled up on the bed in the back of Kanaya's sector, Karkat as if trying to sleep, eyes shut and both in a light coating of sopor. Nevertheless, they are in the middle of conversation, Karkat saying: "Don't look at me, princess, I'm not the one who had to physically restrained to keep her from walking off the deep end into being a crazy pile lady." Kanaya laughs. It's like this that Rose finds them, after she knocks on the door and Kanaya invites her in. She pauses to see them like this.

"…Can't sleep?" she asks. They both shake their heads. "Me neither." Rose eases herself on the bed and cuddles Kanaya from the other side.

"This is agreeable," Kanaya says.

"Shush," hisses Karkat.

"So what are you talking about, if not sleep?" Rose asks them, eyes closed.

"We were talking about how everyone but us are morons," says Karkat.

Kanaya tisks. "We were talking about what's left that's worth doing."
"Alchemy, construction and ammunition, or breeding gear?" Rose asks.

"Dave and Aradia, actually," Kanaya says.

"So 'breeding gear'," Karkat says.

"Hush," says Kanaya.

Rose is surprised. "You too?"

"Your concerns are at least somewhat part of mine," Kanaya says.

"And god forbid there not be a problem on this rock that doesn't come back to me," Karkat gripes.

"Don't complain when you literally asked for it," Kanaya counters.

"I forgot which group of drama queens I was talking to."

The three of them begin to discuss what Karkat calls "tactical liabilities": those members of their group likely to be uncooperative when "things" are underway (along with verb and adjective changes, the characters and narrative now begin refusing to mention Jack by name, or that there is a even fight upcoming. It is just a vague event "soon," "in the next few days," even when we finally get down to "tomorrow."). Aradia and Dave are mentioned among the "liabilities," as are Dave and Equius, Karkat pointing out that any fight involving Equius would soon pull in Nepeta as well. Rose then reminds them that Equius is still badgering Nepeta about Jade and voices a fear of Jade's that he may escalate. For her own part, Rose assures that Vriska and Eridan will be fine. Gamzee is a giant question mark.

Karkat is concerned about Sollux and Nepeta's relationship, which is an unknown factor, and also that the risk that someone might do something stupid with Tavros.

"No offence, Lalonde. They're just psychotic, is all."

"Offence taken."

"Thats My Girl"

(In the middle of this section we get what is meant to be the last joke for a significant stretch, to match our increasingly dismal narrative atmosphere. In it, Kanaya shuts Karkat up during a tirade by poking him in the ribs, revealing that he's especially ticklish. "I learned that one early," Kanaya says. When Rose starts to take advantage of this, Karkat gets back at her. Kanaya: "No, Karkat, I trusted you!")

As the chapter nears its end, the group begins to slowly fall asleep. Other names that come up late in the conversation include Dave and Terezi and Rose and Feferi, Karkat adding in John and Feferi because they have "a severe difference of opinion." "But whatever," Karkat says, "it's not like we're about to hold a philosophical debate in the middle of the Rat Trap. Brush their difference of opinion under the rug for another week, why not."

Kanaya turns to Rose as she plays with her hair. "Any ideas how to get everyone to make nice in three days, oh only surviving auspistice?"

"Lock them into their room till morning," Rose grunts, tired.

"Rose," Karkat asks, changing the subject when he notices that she's drifting off. "Is your triplicate friend going to fuck with this?"
"'S bound to try to jump me in one more dream," Rose points out. "Hindsight, Presence, Foresight and all that. You want me to ask him to piss off maybe? Pretend he's got the manners he pretends to have?"

"It might be worth a shot," Karkat more orders than comments. "I don't like this Critical Moment crap or what it has to do with giant green fireballs but I definitely don't want a part of it."

"Don't worry, Karkat," Rose says. "I'll give him a nice punch in the face from you if things go south."

"That's all I'm asking," he says.

The narrative closes that they exchanged a few more words, but Rose didn't remember any in particular, as she fell asleep against Kanaya not long after.

AA: i guess there's just one thing left to ask
I'm all ears.
Such as it is.
AA: how do we stop him?
Is that all?
AA: i'd like if we could all survive it
AA: i'm alive again
AA: and i intend to stay that way
Kudos.
But that's not part of the deal.
As I said, I'm short on the details. If you want to survive, you and your fellows are going to have to do that on your own ability.
AA: fine.
AA: just tell me the rest, and we'll make it happen.
If you want to stop his plan, all you have to do is simple.
Kill Jack Noir.
AA: curious
AA: that's what he wants us to do, as well.
Yes.
He most certainly would.
Once upon a time, when the world bled, there lived a soldier who worked in his spare time with his relations in the crafting and selling of wooden figurines. But one day, his kismesis fell in battle far away, and things began to change...

Dawn of the final day.

We follow Rose through the motions, as I'd say it's most important of all that we see how everyone is doing and how Rose perceives them. The work begins at the foot of the platform, the group uniting and going to their stations, which mostly involves some final tests and a good deal of emergency fixes. Vriska is dead on her feet from her overnight shift with Dave, and has to be excused. To a mix of surprise and relief, Aradia volunteers to take her place for her first active shift since her revival, just a simple patrol. Meanwhile, Rose and Eridan escort their fellow auspisticee to her room, and she tells them that it's done: every angle Jack could use through space or time is cut off. She warns them, however, that this work has slowly been clueing Jack in on their location, and besides, he is running out of spots in the session where they are not. Still, they're going tomorrow, so all Dave needs to do is team up with Aradia to complete the time loop back on the day the Aradiabot was destroyed, and lie to past Dave about it being the last day as scheduled. "Not that far off from reality," Vriska mutters. Eridan urges her to get some sleep.

On the way back, Rose and Eridan talk a little, but they stop when they get back to the construction site and find themselves staring up at the thing, like the background characters in the previous chapter, but now their gaze is drawn up to the bay doors, high above, which are now opened up to a starless sky. After a moment of this, Eridan says something, though Rose has to ask him to repeat it, as she was not listening.

"I said you did good, with me and Vris," he says. "So thanks for that."

He leaves, not waiting for a response.

From this point until an early break in Chapter 49, we are very roughly following the structure of The Tale of the Lone Soldier in the events that take place. If you superimposed the two you could see the connections well enough, I hope. I wouldn't point it out but I feel the commentary format discourages the reader from thinking too hard about these things on the assumption that I'll point out what's important, so I might as well fulfill that expectation.

Rose goes back up, and we enter the initial outline portion of the fable, introducing the Soldier's relations. The structure of Rose's climb up the Rat Trap is meant to mirror her descent in Chapter 19, when everyone was in very different moods, before ending with a comparison to her flirty scene with Kanaya in 25 – if other Rat Trap scenes existed in full, I likely would have compared them as well. Rose finds the others drained and reserved, keeping to their closest relations and speaking to one another only with short sentences. Sollux pounds away at his computer, Nepeta and Equius are working together, alone, in silence. Tavros cleans Gamzee's face from grime, Terezi and Karkat check the Trap's computers and systems without commentary, coordinating with Dave and Jade in the core. With Aradia gone, Dave is not focusing on his work, nor is Feferi, and perhaps, in hindsight, it explains why Equius and Sollux are lost in work, though it's hard to say for certain. At
the top of the tower, Rose waits for Kanaya to come out of another one of the crawlspace, Rose finding she has nothing in particular to say to John. When Kanaya does come, she sits next to Rose, and simply takes her hand for a shot squeeze. Work overtime three hours into the evening, and we watch in parcels.

Finally the group returns to the lab, where they put on some shitty background movie and browse the internet. Some of the usual groupings remain, though the group as a whole is slow to rise and stray as little as possible. Those that are speaking speak largely about their personal projects, and Rose involves herself in what conversations she can just to keep preoccupied. She removed her headband top at one point, to avoid glancing at the clock in the corner. As the projects go: Sollux is filling Feferi in on a few of his programs and Kanaya, Karkat and John are talking about how the breeding caves worked on Alternia, as Kanaya rests her head against Rose and Rose strokes her hair. Nepeta and Jade are playing with their toys as Vriska and Tavros work on their novel, both groups saying "I always figured" such-and-such, and "I wanted" this storyline to go in whatever way it would have done, as Equius and Eridan listen on, respectively. Gamzee and Terezi, who are lying on opposite ends of the horn pile, talk about recipes and drug legislation on Alternia as they occasionally pull and play with one another's horns over their backs. Dave is waiting alone at Nepeta's computer. Some of these conversations are visited not once but twice, as Rose finds it impossible to focus on the movie.

Finally, Aradia returns. Everyone looks up at once, and Aradia replies "It's safe," before anyone can worry. "Just have our jump back tonight," she tells Dave, "and we'll have everything wrapped up."

Equius gets to his feet to check her condition, and Dave, who legitimately has not noticed him, asks "Are you doing all right?" before Equius gets to her.

Aradia replies ("I – Equius, please – I'm okay, Dave."), gently waving Equius away. Rose watches her cross the room and sit beside Dave, and watches Equius go back to his seat. Lacking the mood the rest of the room had carried before her entrance, Aradia's talk is serious without being despondent. Rose gets the impression after a few exchanges that she is trying to get Dave to go with her to have a private talk, and she wonders if it's the talk she recommended just the other day. Still, they have business to discuss, especially to double check if it's safe to get some rest that night instead of patrolling, and so stay for the time being.

Rose listens to the other conversations as they go, especially the ones not visited in the original second pass. Most notably, Tavros invites Eridan to read some of his and Vriska's novel, which Eridan says he "Never figured you'd let me do!" but Vriska does not stop them. Similarly, Equius becomes involved in Nepeta and Jade's conversation when Jade notices Aradia holding Dave's hand and accidentally draws Nepeta's attention to them. This causes Nepeta to say how cute they look, with no reservations towards Aradia like she had when she first learned they had hooked up (in Chapter 14). Equius that he also thinks they look good together, surprising Rose, Jade and Nepeta alike, but it turns out that Equius has his reasons. He waxes poetic about finding the right quadrant and how it fulfils your life, and while he frames this as though he's had a revelation about going caliginous with Aradia as opposed to vacillation or their time spent ashen, it quickly becomes clear that he's actually lecturing Nepeta about Jade one last time. Jade shrinks away, as does Nepeta at first. Feferi, much like she did Eridan in the fic's opening, is listening in on Equius, and Sollux once again says "Don't..." just as she has independently backs away from what is no longer her business.

Next to Rose, Kanaya, Karkat and John are still talking about the breeding caves, but as Rose is listening to Equius, Kanaya says: "...and... I think that's it."

"Oh?" John asks. He rolls over a few of the topics in a checklist.
"Yeah," Karkat confirms. "That's it."

They sit still, not quite sure what to do with themselves. Rose meets John's eyes, but the Trolls' are on the floor. No one makes any motion to wrap up and go. Rose's attention is drawn to the two of them, Karkat with his computer also set aside some time ago. For a moment, Rose's attention and our narration dwells on the moirails' hands, next to one another on the couch but not touching. At the other side of the room, Aradia is asking Dave if he wants to head out early, and Gamzee is laughing at one of Terezi's jokes. Finally, Karkat reaches out and shuts off the movie.

"because it's none of your business!"

Nepeta and Equius realize at once that they've attracted everyone else's attention, and sink into whispers, becoming more and more frustrated as they realize no one has stopped listening in, but too stubborn to stop.

"It is absolutely my business—"

"Is not!"

"Your care and wellbeing—" Equius stops himself and corrects: "Your happiness and wellbeing have always been my business! Honesty toward your loved ones is paramount, and I expect that from you as much as I expect it from me!"

"I'm being honest!" Nepeta protests. "I'm just not so stubborn I'm stuck up my own... butt!"

Equius lowers his eyes even at that. "You're not being honest to me, you're not being honest to others, you're not being honest to yourself. I can hardly see how you feel this is honest in any way whatsoever!" Noticing the others are still listening, including Aradia and Dave, he leans in closer. "What you leave off today you may regret for the rest of your life."

Nepeta is clearly holding in her emotions, as much on the brink of tears as anger. "Please don't tell me how to do this. You don't know."

"You're not 'doing' anything at all!" Equius hisses. "That is the issue!" Nepeta shakes her head. "You are giving up something dear to you in this rush of infantile sentimentality!"

"I'm not giving it up!" She turns back to Jade, to apologize, but the moment her head is turned, Equius breathes, ready to speak again, and she turns back. "You don't understand! Equius, please, you don't know how hard this is."

Jade is upset to hear this, especially in front of an audience, and moves to intervene, seeing that Equius has backed off as well. Unfortunately, Equius remains obstinate at heart, and speaks all the same: "I know that you don't realize what you're giving up. I'm sorry, Miss Harley, this is rude of the both of us."

"Equius, you don't—"

Equius does not seem to care that the others are listening as he begins to full-on pontificate. "I know you're still running this childish fantasy that you have all the time in the world to play your silly games! I know, for all your playacting, you don't understand the wants of your own heart! The beating heart of passion, the warmth of love that you are just discarding to one side, so much that you can't even face her—!"

"She's my friend, Equius! She's just my friend!"
Nepeta knows what she's done as soon as the words are out of her mouth, childish tone breaking and Equius taken aback. Once again she looks to Jade in apology only to see that Jade understands just as well, and is standing stunned as the pieces fall into place, but Nepeta is a Troll and her attention and battle face is back on Equius. Her initial arguments are strewn with hiccups as she faces her moirail but they are quickly mopped up.

As the narration goes: "John and Rose met one another's eyes in alarm, but it was too late. First Karkat – of course, Karkat – opened his mouth. Then Equius shouted out at his interference, and then Feferi spoke up, and when Equius let that stand, everything descended into a roiling noise, inchoate ferocity as Troll after Troll stood up and made it clear that they had to be heard."

Feferi is shouting for Equius, and for quiet, which she does not receive. Karkat is up for Nepeta at once, and Aradia soon by her side, and every hated moment in her auspistice with Feferi suddenly comes to fore when she talks about how poorly Feferi has been reacting to her simple, direction-free relationship with Sollux. Terezi is for Equius, saying that you have to tell the ones you care about, but none of her care for Karkat keeping her words or his in restraint like they have in the past. Terezi's words echo Rose's words to Aradia in the previous chapter even though she was not present for that conversation: fundamentally changed by their relationship, and so they have come to share some of the same values, even though their personalities push them to different goals and away from different fears. Sollux fight as much for Nepeta as against his matesprit, though he and Nepeta are often pushing one another aside, either because they feel they can make the point better or because they want to make it to the person they're most angry with at that particular second. Gamzee, Tavros, Eridan and Vriska sit on the opposite end of the room, not sure what to do or say, sometimes trying to stop the others from fighting and at one point accusing the others of applying a double standard to Nepeta that they did not for Rose, but as they are the people who most support Rose, their point is soon crushed under the tide of even Nepeta's supporters. Double standards can be like that.

Indeed, Kanaya soon feels the need to throw in her voice against her moirail's, and Rose and John are left alone: Dave, on his chair, comes towards them. Someone pushes Jade aside as she tries to stand out of their way, she has soon joined her friends. They do not dare interfere.

We hear every word from every participant. Terezi's faith in established law and order, her fears of death in disorder; Karkat's faith in his friends even if it means throwing shit right in the face of his kismesis' fears. Nepeta's faith in love to overcome all, from all of them and every hypothetical put up in front of her, and Equius' faith in the spectrum disguising a true knowledge of the bile that backs love for fellows with hatred for others outside of the group. Feferi's mastery of the quadrants, of the interrelations between relationships symbolized throughout the story in auspistice, is dragged out into the open by Sollux the pragmatist, her confidant, to be shown the manipulations they've often been, even in the best of days, and this countered by the betrayal of trust this represents, damaging even his own cause as Nepeta tries to shut him up. Dave's feeling as Aradia's fight with Equius builds to a passion he has no place in; Rose's feeling as Kanaya spits on some of the things she holds dearest, the people she huddles with in the corner, once all the cards are on the table and Kanaya's beliefs most threatened.

"People like you chasing them to the ends of time, FF. People like you watching their steps, checking their pails, like every Empress before you, because 'it works.'"

"How dare you! (ow…" In rage or growth their quirks are all beginning to slip. "This has nothing to do—"

"It does because that's exactly what you're doing!" Nepeta steps forward with a swipe of her arm.

"Yeah!" says Sollux, "and if you keep doing it—"
"You shut up!" Nepeta says to Sollux. To Feferi, she continues: "If you keep this up, if you do this for one generation—"

"ITS NOT R3L3V4NT!"

"OF COURSE IT'S RELEVANT! SHE'S TRYING TO MANDATE IT HERE, SHE'D TRY TO MANDATE IT THERE! NEPETA'S GOT EVERY RIGHT – ALL OF US HAVE GOT EVERY RIGHT—!"

"Rights Maybe, But Is It Even Reasonable?" Over in the corner, Dave raises an eyebrow. Rose prays he doesn't say Kanaya is starting to sound like her. "Have You Seen The Damage You've All Done Without A Firm Hand? Without Feferi And Rose Tailing You And Grabbing You By The Horns Every Time You Try To Eat One Another? If Feferi Has Been Guiding Your Hand, Even Maliciously Done, I Think You All Owe Her A Debt Of Thanks"

"Kanaya, please don't," Feferi says. "I don't want it. I didn't want to, that's not the point."

"It's sort of become the point!" Aradia says. "You've been enforcing this behind our backs. Behind my back, behind his— Behind your quadrant's backs! Behind your lauded quadrant's backs!"

"You think," Nepeta again, "the moment we step out of your tidy little line…"

"That's not what I think!" Feferi says.

Kanaya steps in the way. "That's not what any of us here are thinking."

"Neps," says Terezi, "I'm sure you and Jade are cool. We know that, we all know that."

"She is not."

Terezi tries to ignore Equius. "But once this gets out of our hands, it's going to go flying out of our hands. You know this isn't something to hold on to. Not for everyone. We can't just say… there are four of them! Out of everyone they ever came into contact with, every 'friend,' four! Between them!"

"You trust Rose!" Nepeta counters.

"I trust Rose because she's my moirail!" Terezi says. "Because she's her matesprit," she points, "and their auspistice! Because she took the steps to learn about us and we took the steps to learn about her and we trust her!" John, seeing how adversely this is affecting Rose, sets a hand on Rose's knee.. Jade's is soon on the other, and Dave steps out of his chair and moves defensively towards the others. Neither Terezi nor Nepeta nor anyone else is looking their way. "But they won't. They won't learn, they won't trust, they will eat each other alive. You can't be so childish."

"Of course she can."

"2tuck iit in your eye, 2weatbox."

"Of course she can!" Equius roars. "Humans and friendship! She could have brought this up at any time! Any day, in all these months, but she sits on it like an infant grasping her plaything, not trusting me, or any of you, or even her so-called friend with these feelings or this discussion! And because she knows you have no argument," he is now talking directly to Nepeta, "you've been arguing digression after digression to keep us off base on the actual point!" He takes a stride toward Nepeta, through the crowd, and sticks a finger in her face. "Some of us are going to die tomorrow and this is what you want to fight about?"
John and Jade's grip loosen on Rose. Silence. Nepeta's look of defiance has been replaced with fear, and so too with all the others, Equius' collapsing last, his hand slowly falling to one side as he realizes what he's said. Silence.

Karkat near goes limp. "Well," he says, trying to find the strength to turn. "There it is. Everybody knew it: there it is."

As the word use in the story has changed in the final few chapters, there is one other word that has been phased out, and allusions to it have gone as well: "death." As the battle with Jack has approached, the cast have begun to pull back from the idea that one or more of them may die. Now it is directly before them. From this point onwards, no references will be made in the narrative and dialogue to events occurring beyond the inevitable morning and fight with Jack, with one exception. Now that the fear that has been building over the past few chapters is in the open, the characters have lost their hope in another dawn.

The Trolls exit. First Karkat, who ignores Kanaya's protest and touch on his shoulder. He leaves through the doorway, to go for a walk and to free the main exit for the others. Equius sulks away to his robot pile. Feferi leaves next, through the transportalizer, as angry and upset as Nepeta was before her initial outburst. Nepeta, seeing Sollux watch her leave, sets a hand on the back of his neck, and he touches her fingertips before setting off to his own computer. Kanaya looks up, partway toward Rose, but sees Jade and John's furious glares and leaves after Feferi. Vriska and Eridan get up, Vriska leading and Tavros to soon follow, and they go to the cafeteria, leaving Gamzee still stunned by Equius' outburst and soon lost in thought. Nepeta looks at Terezi, but gets no response, Terezi breathing slow and rattling. Nepeta turns instead back towards Jade, but suddenly wipes at her eye, as much to hide from Jade as to clear up a tear, and leaves through the transportalizer. Terezi, her cane held up and her lips on her hand, finally leaves in Karkat's direction. Aradia, last of all, turns back to Dave, nods and says something about their original plans with Jack, and then leaves through the transporter. The Humans are left nearly alone, with their thoughts and their ties, and with one last night.
…and the soldier’s matesprit fell away, unloved; the pair he advised as auspistice into ruin; and in desperation he turned to desperate measures to save his own life, dragged down into ruin by his own weakness and despair…

This chapter opens on an "overall view" of the lab in narrative, not really tied to any Point of View. This is mostly here to re-establish the mood for serial readers, especially if work on the final chapters had delayed this one, which was likely. This would continue for a moment before settling on Jade, who is rolling about in bed, not able to sleep. After a while, she would get up and find John watching one of his shitty situation comedies. He would let her in and they would have a chat in their pyjamas. For a while, they don't talk about anything in particular, a sequence meant to expose the reader to the way the characters are not referring to events in the future, already spelled out to us here in the commentary. But this only lasts so long, and soon they are talking about the fight in an off-hand way.

While John is happy to chuckle at "Karkat's blowsac or whatever" during the infighting the other day, and even counters some of Karkat's own points from the debate (yes, even though Karkat was defending friendship). Jade is only half-listening. When John enquires, she admits that she is still feeling guilty over what happened with Nepeta: first for not noticing her real feelings, and then for being upset and afraid of the feelings she thought Nepeta had held for her in the first place. She says she just wants to talk to her but Nepeta was nowhere to be found (giving us a timeframe on this scene, as well). John admits that yeah, he blew that too. "I mean I didn't notice either." As he talks about Nepeta it's clear that under his humour, he feels awful about every single one of the Trolls infighting, meant to be a reflection of Feferi's views on stability from another angle. John finally drives the point home about the narrative changes, when he tries to tell Jade that everything will be okay. Unfortunately, he just can't say it with any confidence, and continues to back off whenever he comes near the subject of Jack and the future. This happens whether his subject is Nepeta, Troll and Human unity, Friendship, or just plain survival. Finally, as he approaches the subject of Jack, John finds himself at a complete and final loss for words.

Defeated, he admits to her: "I can't sleep, either."

They stay up together in silence.

We continue back where we left off, in the computer lab, which is primarily done to establish that the Humans have left and that Gamzee has passed out on his horn pile. It is now clearly some hours since the fight broke out, and Sollux is still hard at his self-distraction when Feferi returns.

This scene is meant to be a reversal of way back in Chapter 11, when Sollux and Feferi were making up for their fight at the pool, but with positions reversed. Unfortunately, I'm just now realizing a particular flaw in this draft that I'm not going to be able to fix at this point. Early on in this commentary, I noted that the original draft's Sollux and Feferi plotline was mucked, and that I had cut or changed a large percentage of it. One aspect I shouldn't have necessarily culled from the original draft was this: in the original, Sollux had made a deal with some of the others to keep Feferi
out of his business with Aradia, for reasons that I won't pretend made any sense. This is a problem because in this scene, Feferi is in trouble for the way she has been trying to keep the others in order from behind the scenes, and thus both of them would have been on trial for their attempts to manipulate others. Now Sollux has no real sneaky plans at all, and so my reversal falls flat. Damn.

However, plans and characters are not the only thing reversed. As the fight goes on, instead of things getting better like they did in the pool scene, they only get worse, and worse.

Unfortunately for Feferi, Sollux has spent the time since the fight boiling in private, and while much of that boiling was him being upset at himself, he's presently far more upset with her. They've soon picked things back up where they left up in the previous chapter, Feferi finally lashing out for his personal attacks earlier in the evening and he at her for shaming the Trolls with friends as being dishonest and hurtful to one another. The fight goes against Feferi, and she lashes out by accusing his bipolar disorder for his behaviour. "Why is everything a coin flip with you?" Feeling very guilty but stuck in it at this point, Feferi continues: "You fought against everything Terezi was saying about people being random and untrustworthy and what are you doing? You're being the worst of all of that!"

The fight carries on, but with Feferi having crossed that line, neither of them see any reason to leave other lines uncrossed. For example, during the earlier group argument, Feferi never acknowledged Sollux's claims of her manipulating the others past a certain point, but when he brings them up again, she admits it outright. Unfortunately, she's reaching a guilty panic about the failure of those manipulations, contrasting the Chapter 11 where she's proud of them. It's clear that with everyone at each other's throats, and in her panic she starts to read Sollux's mood as a gauge for the feelings of everyone else. To change the subject, Feferi starts to attack Aradia as well.

"[...] You've gone back because you're guilty!" she says at one point, referring to the incident with Vriska. "You're not there because of some deep, special relationship, you're there because it's easy!"

"Hey!" Sollux snaps. "ii love aa!"

"NO! YOU! DON'T!" Feferi shouts, crossing another line not crossed earlier in the evening. "I bet you don't even love her as much as you did before she died!"

Sollux is wide-eyed and stammering. "F-fuck you!"

"And you don't now!" she snaps. "Do you know how I know? Because she loves Equius, and she loves Dave. Because she loves me, and I love her. Because you've loved me, and I can tell the difference! It's not the same for you, and it's not the same for her!" She huffs about, clutching at the air, before crouches beside him and adds: "And so can you. Sollux, you know what this is. You measure, you quantify. I don't always like that, but it's useful I do it too! Alright? I know you know why you go with Aradia, and sometimes that's to get away from me, and that's fine!" She takes his hand. "It's to get away from Nepeta sometimes, and Equius and Karkat, and that's fine, but if you want a moirail you have to talk to her and Vriska or look somewhere else because—"

"This isn't about moirallegience!" Sollux says. "have you been lii2teniing two anything anyone ha2 been 2ayiing two you or are you two bu2y trying two herd them?"

"I listen!" Feferi protests. "Sometimes I do nothing but listen! And that's why I know what we're talking about instead of this fantasy you and Nepeta have pulled out of her dreamworld! And I might not know how that fantasy's supposed to work but what you and Aradia have is not! That!"

The fight goes downhill from that point, and quickly into petty nothings that I don't particularly need to summarize. Indeed it does not even properly conclude: one of them shuts the fight down
depending on how it was going, either Feferi by leaving or Sollux by refusing to respond, and their points are left hanging. From a narrative perspective, that's fine, because we'll be continuing with those points in just a moment, but from their perspectives, what's said is both said and done.

We cut now to Dave, who has taken to wandering the halls, going early to wait for Aradia for their final jump back. He acknowledges but does not admit that he is hoping she'll be able to cheer him up or at least calm him down, recreating the circumstances of the night of their first date. Before he leaves the building, however, he runs into Terezi. Both come to an awkward stop instead of passing by. This is the first time they have been alone together since Chapter 4.

"Where's Vantas?" Dave asks.


"Just going for a walk under the stars," Dave says, out of instinct. Terezi shakes her head, and it seems for a moment like she might get up and leave. Dave, however, cannot help himself: "You just can't catch a break on this friendship crap, can you?"

Terezi flips him off.

Dave throws in another quip, however, and they are soon arguing about this, with less shouting than our previous couple. After a few short paragraphs, they are essentially where Sollux and Feferi left off in their discussion, as their better understanding of the situation and time-cooled antagonism has put them further along than Sollux and Feferi without using as many words, and with far less ferocity.

"Do you know why I'm looking for Karkat?" Terezi asks.

"You said you weren't looking for Karkat," Dave replies.

"Well that makes us both liars, doesn't it? Where's Aradia?" She did not wait for a response, but continued: "You don't know, so you're heading out to where you usually meet to find her. So shut up. I'm looking for Karkat because I just want to know that one last thing is normal. One, tiny little thing. I've fucked things up with you, I've fucked them up with Nepeta for good, and I've fucked things up with Rose now, too. It can't be Gamzee, it has to be normal. Isn't that what you're looking for?"

Dave pauses. "I want to know everything's okay," he says.

"Just okay? Have you seen the others?" Terezi harrumphs. "Look, you're about to go back in time with this girl and save yourself from Jack. Tell me if you remember: did you look happy? Because there's your answer." Dave does not reply, and for the record, the narration from that chapter would not have recorded. "There's no time to fix anything, Dave, unless you're going to cheat on us. Don't you just want to sit down while you can, be happy for a little while left? Share it?"

Here, she returns to their friendship discussion, where Feferi and Sollux left off, on the argument that Friendship is less important a relationship: "C'mon, Dave. You're not looking for John, or Jade, or Rose. You were with them, and you left. You're looking for Aradia. You two have something they don't."

"Sure, what's your point?" Dave asks. "They're different. So're kismesis and moirallegience, what's your point?"

"My point is in how they're not the same. They're not as serious, they're not as important to you."
They're easy."

"Easy?" Dave is taken aback. "Don't know what tree you've been sniffing, T-Z. Friendship ain't magic. You've gotta work on it."

"SH4M3! SH4M3 ON YOU D4V3 STR1D3R! Your friends would be ashamed of you, calling their friendship work… "

Dave actually gets a laugh out of this. "Yeah, okay. So most friends ain't hard work, can sorta slip into them. And okay, sure, I can get how you might sniff that as flaky as all shit, but that doesn't mean me and my bro and Rose and Jade ain't serious. They're pretty damn important to me. If you get that Rose gives a shit about her friends, you've gotta get that about me, and I just won't buy that you don't get that about her." After a moment, he adds: "…and I won't buy that you didn't get it about me."

Terezi gets upset at this, and deflects it. "So what? You're just gonna cast your super-friendship onto everyone else?" She shuffles her feet. "Okay, yeah. I got what you were getting at when you wanted to be friends… you just didn't get what was pissing me off."

"…No," Dave admits. "Still don't. Sorry I didn't say so earlier." Terezi just nods, and Dave fishes for conversation. "Wish I could have worked that out when there was still time to work with it."

"M1SS M3 STR1D3R?"

"Yeah."

"Well it's too late for that." Terezi looks away again, but then sighs. "There was never a time this would have worked out, Dave. We could have done it without a fight, maybe, but we were still done." Dave raises an eyebrow. "You say you don't get how I feel about friendship still? I'll take one more shot. Rose said once that you Humans used to say 'Maybe we should still be friends.' She wondered if maybe you shouldn't. Then Nepeta said something like it the other day. 'She's just my friend.' 'Just my friend.'"

"They don't mean it like that," Dave says.

"Nepeta does. Everything else she said made it sound like she didn't want it to be a big deal. Like she wanted everyone to shut up about why it was such a big deal."

Dave is unfazed. "That's 'cause Zahhak was making sex a big deal. She was talking about him pushing her on fucking and romance."

"But you still say it," Terezi says. "Even you with your special quadrant-friends. It's a downgrade. It's your back up. It's why you're not with Egbert right now, Dave. That's the difference. It's why you're so worried about you and Aradia and Zahhak that you're practicing your compromise lines on me before going to her."

Dave is perhaps a little too surprised by this, but being a Strider, this just causes him to shift out of emotion and into cool-headedness. "Noticed?"

"Yeah," Terezi says. "None of my business, just hanging around with Rose."

Dave does not even hesitate. "Can I get your advice?" When she acts surprised, he adds: "As a lawyer?"

Terezi sighs. "Sure."
"I'm fucking things up with Aradia?" he asks. She nods. "'Cause of the way I act with the douchewhip in her spades?" Nod again. "What are my options?"

"You want me to be honest?" she asks. Dave nods. "You're fucked." Dave grunts and begins to pace. "Dave," Terezi says after a few passes. He stalls to hear her speak. "Here's the advice: enjoy it while you've still..." Catch. Terezi and Dvae both look away. Terezi continues only after a moment's private scolding. "I don't want to be like that, but these things take time. Years. You might've never pulled it off, after she came back to life. She was literally a different person then. You had it good. That's nothing to be ashamed of." She stands from where she has been leaning against the wall, and puts a hand on his shoulder as she goes to pass.

"No sense in being ashamed about what we had either, huh?" Dave says. "While we had it?"

Terezi does not turn back. "Everyone's ashamed of everything about you, Strider," she says. But she fidgets with her staff. "I'm a little ashamed we didn't just talk in the first place, though, sure."

"I guess that's my fault," Dave says.

"Both our faults," she says. "But at least you noticed."

"Sorry it's too late," Dave says.

She nods. "...Missed you too, Dave," she adds, and then begins to walk away. Dave, going the same way, walks with her for a while, before their paths cross and they go their separate ways, without further comment.

I'm still a little torn on whether this scene should be at this point in the chapter. The original plan was to use the first half of the now-final section and then jump back at the end, but I find this leads to tonal problems. I'm just going to have to put this one out and hope for the best. The scene begins with a series of untagged dialogue between Aradia and Dave, which quickly indicates that it is a few hours later, have rescued past!Dave and Aradiasprite from Jack pre-ULS, and have gone on one last tour of their defences.

According to them both, Aradia seems to be back around full physical potential, at least as far as combat is concerned, but she is exhausted by the end of the double shift. As the two of them conveniently confirm for us that the defences against Jack's net are solid, Aradia pauses against a wall. Dave remarks that the lean would seem casual if it weren't the third time. She sighs and invites him to help her back, alternating between complaining and poking acerbic fun of her condition, and saying that "my thinkspoon is awake it's just that my body's had it."

"Well you don't really wanna be awake right now, so why bother?" Dave says.

"Maybe I do want to be awake!" Aradia says. "Maybe I wanna talk."

Having arrived in the Aries dormitories, Dave and Aradia are within hearing range of John and Jade's yet-ongoing movie session, and so go in the opposite direction, towards Aradia's room. Committing in this way, Dave says: "Well, let's talk, then."

"You're not all right with how things have been with me and Equius," she says, after they're a few more steps around the corner from the Humans' rooms.

"No," Dave says, matching her matter-of-fact tone.

"Why?"
"Just don't roll that way," Dave says. "Can't get what you see in it."

"Equius is okay in his own way," Aradia says. She then adds, as a joke: "It's not like I like him!"

"I'm not okay with the poly thing and the blackrom thing, not the guy you're poly with," Dave says. "Guess I'm not cool with him either but let's not go chasing that if we're just gonna come back to the other two."

"That's fair," Aradia says. "What bothers you about it?"

"I'm not exactly fond of the part where he tried to break your face to make a point," Dave says. Aradia laughs – at his phrasing, Dave hopes. "In fact I'm not even comfortable with the part where him breaking your face just sorta brushed under the rug, if that gives you a bearing."

"No, he was over the line," Aradia admits. "I just…" She shrugs.

Dave talks while she enters her code for her room. "See, for us, that'd probably be past the other line, too. You know, the line where we back the fuck off forever."

"Nepeta's got it, Dave," she reassures. "I trust her. A lot of kismeses don't work without a moirail or two."

"Yeah, Lalonde would have a few words about that, I think."

They head inside, and Dave can't help but comment on her recouperacoon, an alchemized copy of Karkat's. "How do you sleep in this?"

Aradia smirks. "Easy. Just don't eat any of slime."

"The gross, sticky green stuff?" Dave asks. "Gonna take some effort but I'll do my best."

"Oh?" Aradia says. "Are you staying?"

"In the gross sticky green stuff?" Dave asks.

"The floor's fine if you're boring."

"Oh, that sounds all the hell like me," Dave says.

Aradia starts gathering some of her normal clothes to sleep in – alchemized from some of the other Troll ladies, as your headcanons apply. "Are we still talking about Equius or are we going to see how soft you find the tile?"

"Nah, I can take the floor," Dave says. "I'm a Strider, it's been known to happen. But yeah, let's talk."

"...Sure," Aradia says, more disappointment in her voice than she probably intended. Both not really wanting to talk about it, they delay: Aradia even putting back the clothes one by one. Dave loses focus first, and goes over to her as she works, hugging her from behind.

"I know," she says.

They both shut their eyes for a while, until the issue eats away at Dave. "Talking to Pyrope in the hall before I got to you," he admits.

"Oh?"
"She thinks we're fucked. She's blunt like that." He chuckles. "Well, not always, but she'd want me to say that."

Aradia squirms a little. "Fucked with Jack?"

"No," Dave says. "Well… yeah. But no." He pauses but then asks: "How's that treating you?"

"I'm not afraid of Jack Noir," Aradia admits. "I just don't want to do it. I guess. If I had to pick something out, I suppose I don't want to go through the pain. I'm still not used to it." Pulling one of Dave's arms closer around her, she traces the outline of one of his hands. "Not used to most feelings, really," she adds. "You?" she asks.

"I just don't want to disappear," Dave admits. "Gone. Forgotten. The works."

Aradia does not reply, simply continues tracing around his fingers. After completing her course she returns to the original subject. "Terezi thinks it's you and me are 'fucked,' then," Aradia concludes. A little indignant, she mutters: "What's she know?"

"Don't take it personally," Dave says. "She knows me. Better than she should. And she's got Rose, who knows me better than I want."

Aradia swallows, Dave's narration wondering if she's realizing just how much she knows him as well… or how little. This silences them both, and things are left tense, and get worse. Parallels are played up to Rose holding Kanaya on the bed in Chapter 11. But for better or worse, this pair are far more decisive than Kanaya and Rose.

"Hating this," Aradia admits.

"The quiet?" Dave asks, loosening his hug just in case it's the alternative.

"No. This whole problem. I don't want to lose you. I don't want to lose Equius."

"I could stand to live without the bastard but yeah, I'm not gonna put you through that either," Dave admits.

Aradia nods. "I don't want to fall apart. Can't we do something?" Dave pulls her closer in reply. She chuckles. "But you're right. It is too quiet. Think we can talk over music?" She goes to fiddle with an MP3 player on top of her dresser.

"Don't make this about music, babe, we both know how poorly that's gonna end."

Aradia turns around and gestures for him to come closer. He does so and takes by the hips. She laughs and holds the MP3 player between them. "Who alchemized this?"

"Me?"

"So whose songs are on it?"

"300 trillion possible items and one out there just for good music," Dave says, satisfied.

Aradia laughs and continues to look through the song selection. "Lucky us. Not that I mind having someone to be quiet with," she says, tapping him with the MP3 player.

"Tell me about it," Dave agrees. "There's just something to be said about fucking around. I used to be the king of fucking around, you have no idea." He waits another moment but then has to add: "We're stalling."
"Maybe," Aradia admits, suddenly not willing to meet Dave's eyes. "I…" She realizes this isn't going to work without eye contact, and sets aside the MP3 player. "I want you to stay."

"Me too," Dave says, "C'mon, we can come up with something. We're smart people."

"I…" Aradia shakes her head, but then adds: "I mean… sure, but what I mean was…” Having reached up behind Dave's neck, she pulls him into a kiss. Dave returns the gesture, but his attempts to make a joke about how this won't solve anything is soon silenced as Aradia picks up her enthusiasm, rousing his own until he's silenced. Hands on Dave's face, Aradia pulls away enough to speak, and says: "I mean stay."

The narration continues: "Back when Aradia had still been a robot, she and Dave had always had one last routine as they came in for the day. He would change into some work clothes, if there was no emergency, and they would check for damage in Aradia's chassis, welding the lightest to keep Zahhak from finding out the truth. After they had hooked up, Aradia began to make a point of doing the same for him, looking for wounds that might have escaped their potions, binding the worst and admiring the rest. Far away from where he was, Dave knew it was midnight. It the end of the last ordinary day, and old routines came back to life for the two of them, so they wouldn't be forgotten and disappear.

It was not an ordinary night. Not at all."

Deep in the Underlab, far away from the usual scribblings and sketches, and further still from the scrapes and claw-marks of sorties with the Underlings, Nepeta has installed herself in one small, quiet broom closet off the beaten path. There, she keeps one special mural. It is a group shot, consisting of everyone with their lusus or Guardian drawn around the fringes, hinting at a subtle and central detail that might go amiss to an uninitiated eye. There is a drawing of Karkat, with Terezi near to one side. Sollux stands with Feferi, and Feferi with Aradia, Aradia with Dave and Vriska and Equius, and Equius with the artist, near the middle. It is the canon wall in a new form, scribbles and white paint here and there as details have been adjusted over time, with relations defined more by proximity than symbol. There is one special detail left out of the other wall. On this wall, Karkat's snuggle-toothed doodle also hovers near Gamzee's, which lies in between him and Terezi. Karkat is also near Sollux, and near Eridan, and near John, who is as near to Rose as Rose is to Eridan and Vriska. The drawing is not perfect, and the artist has cheated, just once, because instead of simply hovering near, the artist is shown holding her moirail's hand. The drawing has sat like this, friends and lovers, guardians and moirails, for some time.

Nepeta sits beside the mural, long since out of tears, when Equius arrives. He makes no indication of whether or not he knew the mural was there, but he is familiar in how he steps next to her and sits by her side.

"I thought you would be with Miss Harley," Equius admits. Nepeta, already deliberately looking away, does not look back for that. "It would have been only reasonable. Certainly better than the mustardblood, but moreover, she is a skilled markswoman—" Nepeta looks up with curiosity, "—and I have always admired her exceptional status." Nepeta, still curious, rolls her eyes. "All things considered, I can at least be comforted in knowing you are at least in… in good company. And I am willing to admit my faults in comparison to her. I can at least rest easy that you are secure in this… this new life. Humans. Friendship."

Nepeta harrumphs.

"You don't believe me?" Equius asks. Nepeta continues to snub him. "I'm hurt. Believe me at once." Another harrumph. Seeing this is not working, Equius attempts a different angle.
"I'm being serious. You are like someone else when you talk about this. Some rank habit you've picked up from your kismesis, I imagine. Or perhaps the Humans, or those at the peak of our poor excuse for management. It's clear to me that by letting you run free for the past few months in favour of my own interests, I've allowed them to mould you into an obstinate, headstrong young woman who demonstrates just as much respect for me as I deserve, considering." Nepeta looks up, surprised. "As such, I expected you would be with the people who have been valuable to you. Not on your own. Certainly not with the one who squandered the opportunity to be valuable to you."

Nepeta looks up, though Equius is no longer demanding her attention. He looks forward, and continues to speak.

"I realize our connection has been eroding, of course. I should have realized there was trouble at once after the incident with Miss Megido, as much in my fault for doing it as my less-than-immediate apology to either of you. And before I knew it I realized you had grown with them and not with me and that…" Nepeta realizes to her surprise that Equius has actually shed a tear, which he wipes up. "Regrets accounted, that was something I should best accept: that you're going to be with them, and that there is nothing… I can do about this."

Nepeta tries to speak but finds her voice lodged in her throat; when it comes out it is quite hoarse. "E-Equius…" She reaches out to touch his hand. Equius responds to this signal by going completely slack, no movement whatsoever as she climbing over towards him and into his lap, where she pulls her arm around his neck and holds there. She takes his faces firmly into her hands and stares him down, before compassion breaks down her firm look.

"Equius, I'm not going anywhere," she declares. "You keep saying that but I'm not. I'm always going to be right here! Don't you know that!"

"Silly," he mutters, but he is crying more freely and grips the fringes of her coat in what they use for a hug. "There is no such thing as forever."

"Sure there is," Nepeta insists. "There is not and you will admit it!" Equius orders. This only makes Nepeta break out in a tiny smile. "But… there is tomorrow," he says. "And tomorrow, and tomorrow on and on for all the sweeps and while I still have you here I will make the most of it. And that," he says, shifting his weight and reaching up to stroke a cat ear on her hat, "is why I am going to do what I do best, and fix things."

He is so sincere that Nepeta hardly knows what to do, and the look on her face makes him look aside. "I'm sorry," he says, sniffing. "I am not myself."

"Yes you are!" Nepeta says. "Well… okay, maybe you're not but this is good! This is good! Fixing is good!" She guides him to look back to her. "Yeah? Fixing is good. How do we fix?"

This seems to encourage Equius to continue on and into his favourite subject: the failings of others. "Yes, of course," he says. "Fixing is, as you say, 'good.' I'd despise anyone f00l enough to sidestep these issues. They're certainly not going to go away. That's why I realized that if you were going over to the Humans, I had best… ah…"

Nepeta has interrupted him with a touch of the wrist, causing him to once again go slack, shutting him up. When he recovers, he continues properly:

"First, I must make my peace with you being with Miss Harley in this… unusual way."

"Yes," Nepeta says. But… Jade's not going to take me away from you, Equius," Nepeta says.
"Sollux hasn't. I mean, I guess there's less time, but love's got room."

"Maybe," Equius admits. "But time is the great killer. You and I have always known that." Nepeta looks away. "All I know is that in two short months I've grown and you've grown, and I would be extremely disappointed with myself if I missed any two more just because I couldn't stand to share that time with the Jade Human."

Nepeta has tucked herself into his neck, where shakes her head. "She's not. She's not going to take any time from you."

"Don't be silly," he orders. "I know that you feel you care a great deal about her, and so you are going to be with her from time to time. I accept this. And while I still feel that that is completely irrational... I have realized it was no more irrational than anything I've felt for your irrational behaviour in the past, so by that logic, I think your feelings might be just as genuine."

Nepeta sniffs. "Love's like that."

"Let's please refrain from calling your feelings for Harley any kind of love," Equius orders. "That is the first of your side of this compromise." Nepeta giggles again. "Your love is something I'm still only really willing to share with... one other. You must give me time."

Nepeta looks up at him and edges up to kiss his cheek. "Promise," she says. "But not forever," Nepeta says, restraining the urge to pun. "I know this is strange. It's a little strange for me too. I know it's not what you wanted. But I'm not going anywhere either! Jade's not going to take me away from you forever. Or any other friend. I wasn't going to love you any less because I had a matesprit."

"No," Equius admits. "I simply..."

Nepeta waits for the rest, but it does not come. Instead, she settles into his lap. "I'm not going anywhere," she repeats. "I'm going to be here for as long as we both wanna be. From tomorrow, and tomorrow, and whatever you said." He chuckles. "...to the very last day."

"Silly," he repeats.

"You'll see," Nepeta says.

Equius grumbles something about her never really seeing the big picture, but after a moment, he adds: "I would be very bored without you."

Nepeta laughs.

Seeing approval, Equius continues talking. "While we're on this subject, I would like to say that while I'm happy you found some foundation for yourself and Miss Harley in this Human Friendship, I must insist you keep an open for other, perhaps more acceptable forms of alien relation that you may have yet to discover, should any exist."

"Uuuuugh!" Nepeta moans. "Is that another order?"

"These are not orders," Equius insists. "They are mutual compromises being suggested by myself. I don't hear any coming from you. I'm simply saying that if you keep an open mind—"

Nepeta pulls away from her cuddle to face Equius. "Tbbpptb!"

"Now that was certainly uncalled for, and I think we both realize it, now don't we?" Equius says, and without waiting for a response: "Exactly."
And so on through the night.

At this point, we turn to Rose, who has wandered to the cafeteria to get some tea. She has also been unable to sleep, and we get a hint as to why as she goes through the computer labs: she is straining herself not to think about the infighting Trolls, and Feferi's predictions from chapters past of what would happen in such a situation. "An intelligent mind," says her narration, "is the kind best equipped to destroy itself, with sharp, pointy imaginary teeth." Once she reaches the cafeteria, she finds that Vriska, Tavros and Eridan are still hanging about at this late hour, and are still talking. It seems Eridan has been hooked by their novel and they have been recounting the details for him for the past few hours, and Rose stops at the entrance and listens as Vriska acts out a swordfight, jumping nimbly from table to table as each threatens to slide out under her weight. Yes, it's another eavesdropping scene, but in my defence, this one was the original. As a result, it is perhaps the only point in the entire story where the fact that Rose is eavesdropping actually serves the plot.

After upsetting half the room, Vriska's action sequence comes to an end, and she and Tavros wrap that particular plot up. When Eridan asks for more, they're forced to admit there isn't much left to describe after that point. They describe a few transition scenes they had written before CYQ broke them up, scenes that were mentioned in the previous chapter as being the last ones they wrote. Tavros caps the summary by saying "And I guess, you know how that was going to go."

Everyone's excitement winds down after that, including Rose's, until Eridan breaks the silence.

"Hey Tav," he says. "You never said if Pupa and Mindfang ever hooked up in the end."

"Well, no," Tavros says. "I guess that was something that we never really, exactly, discussed."

"No," Vriska says. She takes a sudden interest in staring at a wall. "No, we never did."

Eridan notices this has made both of them feel very awkward, Tavros perhaps not as oblivious as he has seemed on this particular issue, and so changes the subject. "Do you know what I've been thinking about lately?" The others look up so eagerly at the change in subject that it jars him. "Er… like, have you ever really wondered if maybe you were goin' about something the complete and utter fucking wrong way?"

"Like what?" Tavros asks.

"Like Eq," Eridan says. "Eq is all after Nep to go red with the Jade Human and she's all like 'Naw, I'm not red for her,' and so he tries to get her to go black or somethin', bt she's already black for Captor 'cause she's a good kid who's got her head screwed on right." Vriska scoffs, Eridan continues. "So I get to wondering, like… maybe that's happened to me. Me and Fef, right? Wasn't what either of us wanted. Maybe we wanted something else with each other."

"Like nothing?" Vriska taunts. Rose smirks.

But Eridan is adamant. "Well, yeah!" Rose finds it hard not to feel a little proud of him when he says: "I mean sometimes you gotta know the line, right? Even if it…" Eridan taps his hands together, not willing to address Tavros directly. "Even if it's fucking hard."

Tavros adds to this. "Sometimes, I wonder if maybe people work, too hard, to put other people into a box?"

"Gawwwwwwd, yes, Tavros, we get it!" Vriska says. "He was talking about you and me!"

"Actually, I…" Eridan starts, before being interrupted.
Rose is giggling at this and silently advises Eridan from the bleachers: "She's too self-absorbed to notice!"

"It's pretty obvious—" Vriska says at the same time, too self-absorbed to notice, "—that you're just both just trying to rub it in at this point! Okay! Fine! Maybe I tried too hard to get Tavros to like me! Maybe we should all just be like Leijon and make happy little friendships!"

"aCTUALLY, i DON'T THINK THAT, pUTTING ME INTO A NEW BOX, iS REALLY GOING TO BE ANY BETTER, tHAN THE OLD BOX, eXACTLY,"

"Tavros, try to work with me here!"

"Fuck off, Vris," Eridan warns. Rose smirks.

"None of your business, Ampora!"

"wELL IT'S NOT, LIKE I DON'T THINK, iT WOULDN'T BE NICE, tO HANG OUT AGAIN," Tavros says. "It's just, that you would have to refrain, from being as intense, and doing things that derive, from you being that intense."

"Well," Eridan says, scooting his chair a little closer to Tavros, "maybe bein' friends ain't such a bad place to start? I mean…” he glances over at Vriska, perhaps as much for confirmation as to be sure he isn't barking up the wrong tree. "I mean, whenever Roz gets sick of us she just bums off to fuck around with Strider and Harley."

Rose's auspisticees, who have learned more about Humans due to their agreement to learn following CYQ, and who have longer-term exposure to her than Terezi, are picking up Terezi and Dave's conversation where they left off, similar to how Terezi and Dave picked up after Sollux and Feferi. You can see now why this half of this scene was originally closer to Terezi and Dave's scene. On top of this, their perspective on the issues is quite different from Terezi's, thanks to Rose challenging them and their ideas, where Terezi and Rose's relationship is based more on prohibition and reinforcement rather than challenge. Rose realizes and narrates this nuance herself towards the end of the chapter but I figured I'd front-load it here in the commentary for lack of narrative details building up to it in the chapters prior.

The group talk about their conclusions and expand on them for a while. Unlike Dave and Terezi, they are actually fond of the idea of "easy" friendships, and Rose deeply touched by their perceptiveness. As they go, they laugh and flick things at one another for no good reason, and near the end of the conversation, Vriska echoes Rose's observation about kismesis (from Chapter 42) by saying that "maybe friendship isn't such a big fuckin' deal. After all," she says, as she drags out a chair in between the boys. She plops down into it, her arms draped over their shoulders. "Even if I don't get it, you little shits 8re the 8est little shits I know!"

"I think we should take that as a compliment," Tavros says in the background.

"That's probably safe," says Eridan.

Rose laughs at this at first, and then again when Eridan starts cracking jokes with Tavros about Vriska just getting over there to grab their boonbucks when they're not looking, but as Vriska replies to him, Rose feels a strange lurch in her stomach. This sick feeling billows out while the others are laughing, and as Rose puzzles the feeling, she starts a bout of introspection and rationalization that turns that sinking feeling into a burn spreading out from her gut to her fingertips.

_They don't hate each other anymore_, she realizes.
Rose has to get up and walks partway back down the hall. At first she feels "glad. Proud, even, because she should be. Eridan and Vriska had grown up, gotten stronger. The children that she had met months ago were gone, and the young adults she had come to know had taken their place, and they were doing wonderfully without her. Yes, she decided. She was proud of them, and of herself, that they no longer needed her constant guidance, or her advice, or her company, or her help. Rose picked out their voices over Tavros', snarking and shoving one another in the next room, and she realized perhaps overdue that she was no longer part of that, and that, for all the damage she had done to the others with her advice about friendship, it wasn't all that bad, in the end. Because these two – these three, even – didn’t need her anymore, and she could do them no more harm. She would be able to say that everything was all right for Eridan, who had trusted her; and for Tavros, who had looked up to her; and for Vriska, who had challenged her, and would never, ever come back to do the same, because there was no more need to talk or listen and oh god, oh god, oh god..."

Rose covers her mouth to block the sound and leaves double time, wiping tears from her eyes more than once before she reaches the tunnels. As she goes through the lab, we reverse her entrance, and also her self-control and composure in setting aside the stress of the Troll's fight earlier that evening. Now, her strength of will buckles, and her internal monologue begins to spill into the narration, overcoming action and perspective as Rose walks from the site of one failure to the next and her mind kicks and screams for every misbegotten word and unprepared advice she had given to the Trolls, which she now sees as bringing them to this point: to infighting, and ruin, and to death. Like with the Trolls the night before, this final conclusion rings around in Rose's head and about the page (the phrase “infighting, ruin and death” is repeated like a mantra: the fight past sparked by her actions, its present impact fully her responsibility, its foregone conclusion her punishment: the rapid conclusions of a disorderly mind).

As Rose reaches the access tunnels, the narrative description of the tunnels morphs mid-sentence into a description of the metaphorical route the group follows, "cold, blind and in shambles, ending in a quiet place, where Jack would find them, with no one else to blame.

"And everything else fell down around her, Rose knew that she had never before felt so incapable, so unwilling, so thirteen. Her age rapidly became a sticking point in a mind hammering out doubts in such a way that rapidly overcame all conscious objection. They were children playing grown-ups and their mistakes had caught them in the very end. Dave's brother's advice in the dreamworld echoed like a mockery, and her moiroll's stance in the next dream sounded out like a child shouting out rules to a child's game. Rose realized now that to trust in what she had was baseless, to have presumed otherwise had been unfounded, and that all the ideas she had gleaned from the dreams now seemed as misguided as the words Rose had used to set her friends ablaze: to infighting, ruin and death. And there was no comfort, because her love had turned against her; and her balance had gone away; and her friends were simple things, better fit for easier troubles and easier days. And last of all her charges had outgrown her just in time to be safe and far away. Feferi was right: she was even right about the Human who had never known any of those loves, fell slack without those lines to hold her aloft. All of these feelings came one after another, and she did not know why, and even that was childish."

Just then, Rose hears footsteps below her. She has gone just over the computer lab, and can hear the voices of Vriska, Eridan and Tavros below. This real-world presence snaps her out of her funk, but brings her back to her initial point. She quickly becomes angry with herself, and soon, once again upset.

"It was childish to be cowering in her tunnel. Childish not to be cowering from Jack, Rose understood that, and felt it in her very bones, as did all of the others, but that was not what made her so disappointed in her own behaviour. Moreover, it was childish to be fretting over the loss of a thorn in her side, over her auspistice, the silly little thing she had let become an anchor she needed
It was childish that she felt anything but joy for Vriska and Eridan now that they were happy, and that guilt ate at her, guilt like she could never imagined the day she had stepped between them months before, and it left behind loneliness, childish to be lonely because others were not. And it was childish most of all that she was cowering in fear of Jack to avoid that very pain.

We cut away for a time skip (this is where the chapter might have broken in the alternate arrangement of scenes), and come back to find Rose in her bedroom, sick and scolding herself for losing hours of precious sleep. There, Rose hears arguments in the tunnels. Rose dragged herself home not long after our cutaway, and it seems Jade and John heard her late and tearful arrival, and ran into Terezi while they were milling about in the hall, trying to think of an approach. Terezi is trying to argue that she should be allowed in, but Karkat quickly turns this into a verbal brawl, with Terezi's position in the friendship debate turned against her by all involved as an excuse to keep her away from Rose. This scene is meant to be reminiscent of Rose's breakdown after attacking Gamzee in Chapter 20, first with the cry in the tunnels and now with Karkat starting a fight just outside of the room where Rose is waiting. All that is missing is Kanaya, and the others soon realize she has been listening in for some time. This arrival brings John and Jade, already shouting at Terezi for her behaviour in the debate, to a stony halt.

Kanaya is choked – Rose realizes the others are not as far away as she initially thought – and it is only at a whisper that she asks them: "…Please."

Rose waits, still and quiet as Kanaya arrives, too angry at her to show weakness. Kanaya begins to stammer.

"I'm sorry Rose. Don't forgive me, I don't want you to. But…"

Rose can no longer take it and breaks down anew, and reaches towards Kanaya. Kanaya is quick to her side, arms around Rose as she starts to cry anew. And it's not helping, as Rose's mind continues to go a mile a minute, and it takes all of Kanaya's old advice about auspistice (Chapter 25, et al) and begins to spell out her mistakes in the ruined auspistice instead of just the troubles with Jack and the infighting Trolls.

"Too even, Rose thought between sobs. I try to make my peace with the power dynamic and I forget all about it. I tried to make them partners and I made them slip red… or neutral… and now I'm upset! Why am I upset at them being happy? It was so sickeningly inverted she was almost laughing, and Kanaya edged up closer behind her, pulling her into her arms.

Kanaya rubbed at her back, cooed and rocked her slowly back and forth, in turns, until Rose had come back towards calm. And there, Kanaya whispered into Rose's ear: "Do you want to talk about it?"

Rose shook her head, but tried to answer all the same, saying: "Vriska," first and "Eridan," later. Kanaya stopped her from saying any more with a squeeze.

"That's all right," she said. "Don't worry about them, Rose. We all know them. And I want you to know, no matter what's happening, that I think you're doing wonderfully, no matter what they say. They're pig-headed and stupid, and they don't know how wonderful you are—"

Rose silenced Kanaya with a shake of her head into Kanaya's neck, pulled her closer instead, but it did not better. Kanaya complied, and said no other thing, as they sat in the quiet for some time, before Kanaya helped her back to her room, and held her there, because neither was ready to let go. And that did no better, but they held on all the same, because sometimes a heart needs to be held together before it can heal.
Act 6 Recap

In all previous recaps in the finished product, there would have been Roxyverse scene and perhaps dialogue/commentary between SR and Nepuppet. However, this practice would not have continued into this recap due to tonal incongruence. Instead, the Roxyverse would have gotten its last hurrah and a few final parodies in a brief chapter of its own, probably placed just before what is presently Chapter 45 (though I may have written them a standalone epilogue to cap the fic). This recap would instead be presented on its own, more or less as it is here. In fact, this paragraph explaining the absence of a Roxyverse segment actually makes the summary version of this chapter longer than the hypothetical finished product!

Recap 1, Recap 2, Recap 3, Recap 4 & 5

As the group crawls in after the events of ULS, they run into Dave and Aradia, Aradia's robot having been destroyed and her Sprite self terribly wounded. Based on his rescuers from the future, Dave knows that Aradia can be brought back to life, and John, Feferi and several others team up to do exactly this. The others, panicking at the news of Dave and Aradia's patrols against Jack, are only calmed by Feferi putting her foot down and enforcing social norms, a process that had both benefits and consequences alike. Unfortunately, while the revival is successful, it does not work perfectly, and Aradia is incapable of keeping up with her robot self in terms of combat for several months.

Vriska, suddenly thrust into the role of moirail by a combination of Feferi's speech and personal guilt, takes her place.

Back with the others, Terezi resolves to make her kismesis with Karkat work on a more mature level, as suggested however backhandedly, by her new moirail, Rose. Happily, Gamzee is beginning to come down off his high, and Sollux and Nepeta have begun to double-time their Drone training.

Less happily, Rose and Feferi have started to come to odds thanks to minor gripes eating at them since CYQ, but delay any conflict in favour of putting up appearances. As these minor events occur, Aradia begins to regain her feet in her new body, finding numerous difficulties along the way. She has less time with Dave, and Equius begins to baby her, much to her consternation. Feferi tries to arrange things with her auspisticiees, but this goes poorly, and their auspistice begins to show signs of decay.

Later that night, Aradia asks Feferi to stay as her auspistice if another comes along in the future, which she accepted. Later still, Vriska tried to warn Aradia that there is serious trouble in Aradia's relationship with Dave, but Aradia tried to push the problem aside.

Concerned about Aradia's recovery, Karkat pushes up the production of the Rat Trap, forcing Jade to cut several critical systems that would have otherwise prevented some of Jack's powers from
operating in the upcoming battle. This meeting prompts a fight between Equius and Nepeta, and later that evening, Nepeta confides to Jade about how she doesn't believe she is ready or interested in a serious, adult relationship and simply wants to be happy, and is tired of being vilified by her moirail for doing so. Nepeta hints that Equius is dogging her to go out with Jade, instead. She notes that Jade is the only simple relationship she has, but seems to want more, (possibly because she has not yet come into the open about her feelings with Jade). She finds her new simple relationship after a not-very-simple talk with Sollux, with whom she becomes kismeses. The long trail of hookup finally complete, the cast precedes with an attempt to burn everything to the ground.

The troubles begin innocuously enough. Over time, Aradia has come to realize that her relationship with Dave is indeed rocky and that those issues have been left unaddressed. As the other Trolls debate the issue of whether or not there should be hybrid Troll-Humans in their new society, Aradia talks to her moirail and Rose about Dave's behaviour. They both make their suggestions, Rose suggesting that Aradia may have to brace for the eventuality that she and Dave may have to break up, even in the face of the close-coming fight against Jack, but Aradia insists that that would be harder to do than Rose can imagine.

Around this same time, we learn that Aradia has been talking to the alpha Doc Scratch, trying to get a bearing on the players' true situation. Scratch, who has taken a dislike to Nyarlathotep, is happy to try to disrupt the great squid's plans, but in his usual way refuses to address any subject head-on. He does hint that Foresight has no reason to create a new Universe, and critically, he insists that Nyarlathotep's plan could be disrupted by killing Jack Noir, despite Presence having insisted early on and since that killing Jack Noir would support their plan.

Scratch also supposes that Hindsight, being Rose's incarnation of Cetus, would be able to let Nyarlathotep infiltrate the session without entering a dream. The Horrorterror proves this power by contacting Feferi. During this conversation, Feferi reveals that Nyarlathotep is not on good terms with the other Horrorterrors, and that she considers him a "Cheater" in the same style of insults used by the Denizens for the players. Foresight goads Feferi, frightening her with her own, deep-seated idea that the group will fall apart if they do not cooperate in "perfect symmetry."

With the characters in place, it simply becomes a matter of time before the little sparks become a blaze. Soon, the sense of dread regarding Jack has come to a boiling point. The characters come to the realization that they are not ready to face their own deaths, and this finally catches fire between Nepeta and Equius, when Equius continues to demand she pursue Jade “while there's still time.” Nepeta explodes at Equius that Jade is simply her friend, a concept that several of the Trolls have refused to accept as a valid possibility, and soon the Trolls are stuck on opposite sides of a debate strengthened by their relationships in some regards, and intensified by their relationships in others. Some of the Trolls are so impassioned that their vocal tones begin to break and start to appear in new, hasher expressions of personality. Finally the group splits up in a rage and goes their separate ways.

Reactions around the lab after the fight are not good. Many of the group have given up hope without admitting it out loud. Feferi and Sollux lash at one another with personal insults, Feferi declaring that Sollux does not care about Aradia as a friend no matter his arguments in the big fight, and Sollux that Feferi does not care about the others, as she is too busy trying to "herd" them into her survival plan.

In another room, Terezi and Dave reconcile enough to talk, and Terezi points out that the Humans treat friendship as a downgrade from romance, and notes that Dave is probably en route to talk to Aradia. He admits that she's right, and asks for advice, Terezi echoing Rose's advice to Aradia that the relationship may be doomed. As Aradia predicted, neither is able to face this possibility, however, and overreact: burying the problem rather than facing it.
More maturely, Equius and Nepeta make their peace, and are the only characters in the chapter to use the future tense, able to see any hope beyond the morning.

Lastly, when Rose overheard a conversation between her auspisticees and Tavros, she realized that Vriska and Eridan, having been growing closer to one another throughout the act, no longer hated one another, and that she was no longer needed in their lives. This revelation forced her to look at the facts above Jack like the others had not, driving her to a panic attack. Her friends, including Terezi and Kanaya, discovered her after this state had begun to peter out, and Kanaya tried to comfort her, to no obvious effect.

Which leads us up to the morning at last…
Chapter Summary

...And in due course, the Drones came, and the soldier’s moirail fell away, ashamed. And he woke on the day of their arrival, and faced the remnants of his past life, and went out to face them, with a smile on his face.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The chapter opens with a scene in the dark reflective of Chapter 2, once again with Eridan knocking on the door, but when the door is opened, we realize we are with Feferi.

"Fef, we need to talk," he insists, once again echoing 2, before he glances aside nervously and mutters: "please." He then takes a good look at her and says: "Have you been sleeping at all?"

"No," she grunts.

"Was it Sol? Fuck, I'll kill him," Eridan says, starting to turn about.

"DON'T YOU DAR-E!!" Feferi says, and then, hearing herself, she grabs his cape. "I'll kill him myself. C'mon, glub it out."

"Well I wasn't gonna bother you if you hadn't got any sleep—"

"Eridan!" Feferi snaps.

"I'm just startin' to think this isn't a good idea!" he says. Rubbing at the back of his neck, he says: "I mean I know you hate Roz."

"Oh my gods, I do not hate Rose! I don't hate any of the Humans!" She sounds tired just shouting it and slumps against a set of barbells by the door. "It's just hard, and complicated, and nobody's listening and we didn't even let the Humans talk and I feel like an idiot and please just come in, Eridan, I'm tired of listening to myself think. I'd literally rather listen to anyone else."

"You mean… I can come in?" Eridan asks, wary.

"That's what I just said."

"Well it's just… Roz and Vris don't exactly let me in their rooms, is all."

Feferi rolls her eyes and guides him in by the arm. "That's because they hate you, Guppy. You just sort of irritate me these days. In the middle of the night."

"Well that's just the thing, Fef," he says. "Well, not about me irritating you, since when do i irritate you?"

"Eridan."

Eridan does follow her invitation into the room, before finally admitting: "It's just… I dunno if they
hate me anymore?"

The door shuts, cutting us off.

This chapter was originally meant to begin with a pesterlog, calling back to the first few acts when Rose and Kanaya's 18th conversation was still being recounted, and as a result, this one also begins mid-conversation. This time, however, the chat is between Rose and Terezi.

It seems that both have been woken in the middle of the night, and we gather from their discussion that Rose has had her dream-encounter with Foresight, and that Terezi was also involved, a second time. Most of their discussion about Foresight, however, occurs before we tune in, so we do not get many details. But where the conversation begins relatively well-intended, the defeatism of the previous chapters begins to crawl in, especially when Rose addresses herself as "splitter of worlds, the clear and present danger to this session with the power to let the boogeyman in."

GC: YOU TH1NK TH4TS WH4T TH3YR3 AFT3R?
GC: H4V3 YOU OP3N TH3 S3SSION 4ND L3T TH3M W4LTZ 1N?
TT: They haven't exactly been dogging me for the fun and games.
GC: R34LLY B3C4US3 TH4T S33M3 L1K3 3X4CTLY TH3 SORT OF TH1NG TH3YD DO

They talk for a while about the rest of the Triumvirate's plan, which ties back to an editorial sign I hooked to this section reading "Put all missing details here before the finale." For example, Terezi asks why the Triumvirate attacked the False Derse orbiting the lab when Cetus could simply invade the session. Rose points out that Cetus' ability to invade the session never meant that the Triumvirate had control over their dreamselfs, and so they couldn't have run their games with Rose in the three encounters. This worries Terezi as it implied they needed access to the physical session some other reason. Rose supposes that they needed physical access so to Scratch previous failed "dollhouse" sessions, but Terezi is not so sure. She points out that the Horrorterror is in timeless space and so must have had all its advantages ahead of time, which means its immediate goals must be inside the session. Rose agrees, note that the Horrorterror has kept an impeccable sense of time about it, with the division into Hindsight, Presence and Foresight. She says that it's strange the Terror chose to represent itself to them using the three-pronged symbol when it undoubtedly has other, eldritch symbols that are "actually evil, not a philosophical ideal in the hands of a jackass," but they cannot come up with a reason for this behaviour.

When those angles peter out, Terezi comes to ask why Rose is even there talking to her, as she knows Rose is still with Kanaya, probably fell asleep together. Rose admits that she overheard the discussion that Kanaya, Terezi, Karkat and the others had about her crying the night before and says she wishes she had come out to put a word in herself, stand up for herself and maybe about the whole "incident." "Incident" is also the word Rose seems to be using to include Kanaya's attempt at comfort. When Terezi asks why, Rose makes a joke about the smell of the sopor slime Kanaya is using to keep asleep, but ultimately gives up on humour. Instead, she admits that she's not actually comfortable with Kanaya there, and that Kanaya's arrival only helped in the short term.

TT: Do you think it's disingenuous that I wish I had been with John and Jade instead?
GC: NOT R34LLY
TT: Really? No lecture on the comparable value of friendship and quadrants?
GC: I W4S WOND3R1NG WH3N YOU WOULD BR1NG TH4T UP
GC: BUT NO
GC: I TH1NK 1 SP3NT 4LL OF MY L3CTUR1NG 3N3RGY ON ST1D3R L4ST N1GHT :[}
TT: Oh, did that happen? Sorry I missed it.
GC: Y34H 1 B3T YOU 4R3
GC: SO WHY ST1CK 4ROUND W1TH M4RY4M 1F SH3S SUCH 4 D1S4PP01NTM3NT?
GC: WHY THROW 4W4Y P1TYCUDDL3S W1TH TH3 DORK TW1NS?
TT: After Kanaya spent so much time rallying against the value of friendship?
TT: It would be like I was throwing them in her face.
GC: M4YB3 SH3 D3S3RV3S TH4T THROWN 1N H3R F4C3
TT: Are you arguing in favour of friendship over a quadrant?
GC: JUST B3C4US3 1TD WORK FOR YOU DO3SNT M34N 1D DO 1T MYS3LF
TT: I suppose.
TT: Do you have any advice that doesn't hurt the other people I care for in the process?
GC: YOU M34N BOR1NG 4DV1C3
TT: The dullest!
GC: OH WOW L3T M3 CH3CK 1N TH3 B4CK
GC: NOP3 NOTH1NG JUST TH1S B4CKUP PL4N 1NVOLV1NG K4RK4T 4ND 4 B4N4N4 CR34M P13
TT: Oh good! I don't care about him at all!
GC: 1TS NOT GO1NG TO F1X 4NYTH1NG THOUGHT 1T 1S JUST FOR TH3 S4K3 OF K4RK4T 4ND 4 CR34M P13
TT: It doesn't matter I'm already sold.
GC: I W1SH I H4D ON3 TH1S THOUGHT
TT: Oh yeah?
GC: GU3SS 1N H1NDS1GHT 1 W4S SO M3SS3D UP I F0RG0T TO MUSS H1M UP
GC: YOU KNOW K1CK H1M 1N TH3 3GO C4LL H1M 4 BUTTMUNCH
TT: Say goodbye?
GC: Y34H
TT: I know what you mean.
TT: Tell him now.
GC: NO
TT: Why not?
GC: NO
GC: H4V3 YOU TOLD K4N4Y4?

Rose has not, and muses on this in prose for a moment, when suddenly her glasses begin to beep an alarm. Kanaya begins to stir.

GC: 1TS T1M3
TT: Same.
GC: YOU R34DY?

> [S] Dawn

The player, as Rose, initially enters the flash in the computer lab, at the bottom left through Rose's usual entrance. She appears to be late, as everyone else has already arrived. The room is recreated from ULS, and features most of the other characters in the same initial positions (plus Dave, Aradia, Equius and Nepeta). However, recent events have introduced new changes. Feferi and Sollux are not so much as looking at one another (since Feferi's sprite from ULS involved her looking at his screen, she would need a variant, but would still be sitting in her chair). Eridan, Vriska and Tavros are together at one side of the room (Eridan using Karkat's computer), and Gamzee and Terezi are sitting
on the horn pile, testing and re-testing their weapons. The other Humans have crowded the couch area, reflective of Chapter 46. Karkat once again waits by the transportalizer. Ideally, the player would be guided character placement to go in a clockwise spiral, starting with Aradia in the southwest and ending with Kanaya to the south, and then finally Karkat, but the game will react to any order.

No **Music**, or perhaps light, slow ambient. Conversations are as follows.

- **Aradia**: Aradia does not initially seem to notice Rose, so Rose has to call out. This does not earn her much further response, mind. Rose asks if everything went well with Jack, and Aradia responds with terse mumbling. When Rose asks if she's all right, Aradia quickly says "Yeah," and says nothing more. Second attempts at conversation produce no response at first, though Aradia eventually tells Rose: "'Kill Jack Noir.'" "What was that?" Rose asks. Aradia explains: "I have it on good authority that that will scuttle your friends' plans. You have it on their authority that it will help. I just…" She looks away. "I don't know." Rose once again asks if Aradia is all right, but Aradia returns to angry silence. (In all cases, attempts to talk to a character after their second conversation will loop to the first, just in case you missed it).

- **Terezi**: Terezi, carrying off of the pesterlog conversation, is still sullen. She puts up a good front, inviting Rose to "Sit down. Sharpen with me. 1T W1LL B3 OUR BOND1NG R1TU4L" but this optimism doesn't carry into her dialogue as a whole. It appears she cannot break her focus on Jack, and comes the closest anyone else has to admitting that she thinks she will die in particular, but has faith in Rose. During the second conversation, she remarks that surely Rose will "remember an old blind girl" and seems to find this reassuring no matter how much it distresses Rose.

- **Gamzee**: Gamzee is all optimism and juggling, but this only underlines what little an impact his powers are having on the others when it doesn't seem to brighten Rose's mood at all. "Still got a smile on, huh Gamzee?" she remarks. "Till the day I die, Rosie," he says. This only makes Rose more depressed, even better in context on the ideal path. Gamzee leaves for the transportalizer after this first conversation, preventing you from having a second. You can see Karkat from the horn pile, and Gamzee greets Karkat by clapping him on the shoulder and saying "hi best friend—" before he goes. "DON'T TOUCH ME." Karkat calls after him. "I've got paint on my shoulder," Karkat gripes to no one in particular after Gamzee has gone, and he wipes at it.

- **Sollux**: Sollux is all grunts and complaints at first, so Rose asks him about the Rat Trap instead, and he admits that it's in working order. "Well as damned good as it's gonna be!" "BITE ME!" Sollux's second conversation coaxes out mutterings about words like "treacherous" and "backstabbing." If distinct, mid-sized conversation sprites were used (ie, sprites the size of CYQ's, as discussed in ULS), Feferi's would also be visible during both conversations. She is sitting with her elbow on the table and sighs at the first accusation ("treacherous") and slams her hand down at the second ("backstabbing") and she spends the rest of the second conversation glaring at Sollux over her shoulder. Rose notices her reaction, and this ends the conversation as far as Rose is concerned.

- **Feferi**: Feferi ignores Rose at first, but Rose takes a step forward and opens by saying: "I wanted to apologize to you." This gets Feferi's attention, so she looks up. Rose continues: "There's a lot you were right about. Not everything but… I wish I had taken the chance to listen." Feferi sighs and returns to her original position, saying: "That's funny. I wanted to say the same to you." During the second conversation, Feferi speaks first: "Rose?" she asks. "*When* your friend shows up today? I want to hit him." Rose stalls, but then nods. "Promise," she says.

- **Vriska**: Approaching Eridan, Vriska and Tavros will trigger a brief sequence where Eridan and Vriska are joking with one another, only to notice Rose and then immediately disengage. They sit around awkwardly for the rest of the sequence. Rose and Vriska's conversations get
more awkward as they go. It's immediately clear that, since last night, Vriska has realized the ramification of her change of feelings for Eridan, and she is trying to hide those feelings to avoid hurting Rose (a slip of the tongue also implies that, always the min-maxer, she's trying to avoid hurting the party's Chain rating, which gets Eridan to elbow her in the ribs). By the end of the second conversation, Vriska is clearly suspicious that Rose is also aware of the change, and she remarks, "You get me better than I get myself, Lalonde. I mean it." This clearly upsets both of them and they both turn away at once.

- **Tavros:** Tavros is smiling when you initially talk to him, but when Rose asks how he is, he remembers what's going on, and his smile wavers and collapses. He then admits "I'm afraid, I think." Rose, having little other consolation, tries to tell him that everyone's afraid and that that will keep them alert, but this is not much consolation. The second conversation starts with Tavros asking how Rose slept, and when she asks in kind, he relates a dream about hanging out with some of the other friends – clues suggest that he was visiting a dream bubble full of beta selves from the other dollhouse universes, specifically the first draft. This is mostly an opportunity to poke fun at myself for a line of Tavros' in that draft, and would probably go over most reader's heads: just a footnote joke for long-time fans who may not even be around any more. I'll talk a bit more about that in the final write-up, after the last chapter, as explaining it here would definitely take away from the chapter.

- **Eridan:** Like Vriska, Eridan is trying to pretend the auspistice is still healthy, but where Vriska is aiming for subtlety, Eridan's quickly begins overacting his part. He too catches on to Rose somehow knowing or intuiting the truth when he realizes his overenthusiastic pledges of ashien loyalty seem to be upsetting her. For the second conversation, he breaks a silence by saying: "Hey, Roz? I know things are fucked right now, and call me crazy if you wanna, but… I still think you're going to set things right." (Referencing Chapter 27.) Rose is about to object ("I...") but then smiles and nods. With mid-sized sprites, Vriska, who is looking away, smiles as well.

- **Equius:** After a moment of awkwardness, it's clear that Rose has no idea what to say to Equius after yesterday's display. Equius is just on the verge of saying something himself when Rose changes the subject to that of the Rat Trap and its functionality. Equius repeats a few pertinent facts from previous chapters just so we're all back on the same page: the trap will dampen most of Jack's powers, but Jack will still be able to engage everyone in different timestreams and so keep them apart, but it's better than nothing. During the second conversation, Equius apologizes for "the display" yesterday, but Rose calls this out: "The display," she quotes, "not the opinion." Despite his compromise with Nepeta, Equius tightens his jaw and says: "Yes. To you: only the display." The conversation ends abruptly.

- **Nepeta:** Nepeta looks exhausted, Rose finding her slumped up against the table near her computer, though she stands when Rose speaks to her (this allows us to reuse her midsized sprites, or their components, later in the flash if necessary). She asks if Rose is okay as she nervously plays with her tail, and conveys that Jade gave her a rough outline of Rose's night. "Oh," says Rose, "You're talking to Jade?" Nepeta smiles and nods, but then goes back to her tail. "Not much, really," she admits. In the second conversation, Rose remarks on Nepeta hanging out with Equius despite their fight, and Nepeta simply smiles and begins clutching her tail higher and closer to her chest.

- **Dave:** This talk starts when Rose remarks on seeing Aradia when she entered. She notes that Aradia seemed upset, and when Dave has no pithy reply, Rose echoes Vriska circa chapter 4 by asking:

  **ROSE:** Strider, what did you do?

  **DAVE:** …D'you ever tell Maryam or Pyrope or the Wonder Twins something, and you thought it would be a good idea but it turns out it didn't help at all and probably just made things worse because you were just so off-base?
ROSE: No, mostly I just sit around stewing in ignominy.

DAVE: Yeah. Egbert tells me you don't even tell Maryam you love her.

ROSE: Technically I... technically I don't. Yet. Still. There are additional nuances to consider as well and I figured it best to just let it... slide. Why, did you tell Aradia that you love her and got rejected? That doesn't sound like you. You've always struck as more the type to--

DAVE: …

ROSE: [Rose's eyes go wide and she sets a hand to her mouth.] …!

DAVE: There it is.

[Rose inadvertently laughs, but when Dave groans and looks away, Rose realizes that he is upset and her mood falls. She lowers her hand to show that she too is upset now that she understands.]

ROSE: Sorry. I always thought this would be funny.

DAVE: Mhmh.

Second Conversation:

[They stand around awkwardly.]

JADE: What's going on?

DAVE: Nothing, Lalonde's just making high-pitched squeaking noises 'cause she's a sensitive friend.

ROSE: [edges Jade away] What happened?

DAVE: Just what I said.

ROSE: What you implied.

DAVE: No: what I said. Nothing happened that changed anything! That's the part that matters. We looked around, went "Hey, wait, this solved fucking nothing," and pretty much everything we had pushed back blew up in our face like a bible thumper's after-school special going "I told you so." Guess there wasn't any time left to push back the fight.

ROSE: [wincing] I'm sorry. If it's worth anything I really did just think you'd only screw up on more traditional merits.

DAVE: Yeah, well, 'tis the season to blow it four ways from here to Alternia.

ROSE: ...I'm sorry, Dave. It could have... I mean, neither of you necessar--

DAVE: Forget it.

ROSE: Have you tried talking to her?

DAVE: [angry] Half of last night was me trying to talk to her! …[sullen] The other half was her trying to talk to me.
- **Jade**: Jade, like Nepeta, is bedraggled, but the sprite reuse from ULS don't really favour that, so she may have just gotten it across in dialogue. To avoid overlap, the only reference to her talking to Nepeta is Rose addressing Jade as "Something the cat dragged in," and Jade saying "Ha… sorta." She might also gone so far as to say: "I knew that Nep and me would be okay after I thought about it, it's just…" "Everything else?" "Yeah." Nepeta aside, Jade enquires into Rose's wellbeing, and Rose talks to her about the encounter with Foresight from the night before. Jade asks a question that Terezi, being in the know, did not mention in the pesterlog: did Foresight indicate the cast would survive the battle, even if he did so accidentally? Rose confirms that no, he did not say one way or another. "I know what he wants, and what the group-mind wants, and sadly, none of them need us." When Jade asks if Rose thinks any of the Masks will interfere in the fight today, Rose replies: "Positive."

- **John**: John is eager to learn how Rose is doing after running into her the night before with Karkat and the others, but after she confirms she's okay, the discussion turns to the attack on Jack. Rose finally asks the question that has gone unspoken previously, which is if they should delay the attack, but John confirms that all of Dave, Aradia and Vriska's preparation was for today, up to and including buzzing him earlier that night, chronologically. "At least Jack's having just as bad a day as us," John figures. For an abbreviated second conversation, John apologizes for the timing, and asks if Rose really feels they're in such a bad shape that nothing can help them. The exercise of answering this is left to the reader.

- **Kanaya**: Rose and Kanaya do not speak at first. If given midsized conversation sprites, Kanaya looks tense, and Rose sets a hand on her shoulder. Kanaya takes it but it does not seem to help either of them. They try to speak but do not have much particular luck in either conversation, first or second. There is a mild puzzle aspect to this, however. If you seat Rose in the dent she's made on the nearby table, she will take Kanaya's hand (even with simple sprites) and the Music would briefly change to a soft piano piece (a very soft piano piece if we are coming from no music at all). Ideally, this would be something along the lines of Jade Mother. This holds until the player presses Up to move off of the table, at which point Rose will kiss Kanaya's hand (assuming midsize sprites) and then jump back down. They say nothing more.

- **Karkat**: If you speak to Karkat before the other Trolls, Karkat initially tells Rose off for sleeping in (she is the last one there) but does ask if she's doing all right, though he does this as offhandedly as possible. He then asks if Kanaya helped her out the night before, and Rose admits "No." "Yeah," Karkat says, looking disappointed in himself if anything, but not surprised. "But she didn't hurt," Rose adds. Karkat grunts but does not deny this. His second conversation simply tells you to come back to him when all the others have been spoken to twice. Talking to him at that point will produce a prompt to end the sequence. If you've previously gone through this scene on another playthrough, the player can talk to Karkat twice and get the prompt immediately, which will fade-cut to the final conversation.

After Rose completes her second conversations with individual Trolls (not the Humans), these completed characters begin to exit the room after Rose is done talking to them. Specifically, this happens while you are talking to other characters, so that Rose does not appear to be the reason for their leaving; if you are still within range, you may see them leave after you start to chat with someone else. There are exceptions to this rule, however. As noted, Gamzee leaves immediately after talking to Rose. Feferi will not leave until you have talked to Sollux, but they will not leave together and will instead leave at different times during your next conversation; Eridan and Vriska are the same. Lastly, Equius and Nepeta may have left together, but it would have meant extra programming and it might have been simpler to have them leave one after another like the previous two couples.

When a Troll leaves, they will turn their computer off, and when every character in a corner of the
room has left (save Karkat), they will turn out the lights above that quarter. This leaves the lights on the southeast, where the Humans are staying, as they do not leave after you talk to them. The one exception to the above is Terezi and her computer: she was not sitting next to it when she left, and so she forgets to turn it off before she leaves (Gamzee's was already off). This leaves a smell light on in the top-left as the others begin to leave.

After speaking to all the other Trolls, the player can speak to Karkat, who will remark favourably on "the nutbeasts herding themselves." This preamble doubles as an excuse for the game to slip out any Trolls that still have to leave. Karkat then steps on to the transportalizer and says: "For the record, you Humans are all right." John starts to tease him with an "Aww—" only for Karkat to spring back to attention. "But if you stick around in here for more than a minute you're gonna fuck up the good marching order! Especially you, Harley, we've got engines to start! Lalonde: hit the damn tunnels, or you're going to be late twice!" He then looks to the left, and the camera pans with his vision. "And turn off Terezi's computer, would you? It's tweaking my rage OCD."

"I don't think that's a thing, Karkat," John says.

"TRY ME!" Karkat barks. He then calms and says: "Look. Thanks for everything. John, Harley, Strider. Lalonde. It was worth a shot, right?" Not knowing what kind of response he wants, Rose nods. "...See you in the hangars," he says, and disappears.

You do indeed have to turn off the computer. If you try to leave, dialogue will appear reminding you of the same. When you reach the computer, the southeast corner will be completely out of your line of sight (and bless the rudimentary lighting of a simple sprite environment). What this means is that when Rose turns off the computer, she is left in darkness. The game enters a scripted sequence.

I'd known for some time that the track I wanted for this section was bLiNd's Redemption, if he'd have allowed it. The sequence, and some of the one to follow, were to include a number of splash pages, traditional fanart stuff, because they go beyond the general complexity of the sprites. As I said in ULS, this represents the ideal, untrimmed vision. If there can be any luxury to this commentary format, it's that we can all sit around and pretend that things had gone their best. Here we go.

0:00: As the computer's light goes off, Rose finds herself in darkness. She turns around and walks towards the centre of the room, and notices that the lights are off in the southeast as well. By 0:10 the others come into view near the transportalizer. Rose stops there, turns back and takes a look (pan) across the north edge of the room, and we note that the room where the story began has been left abandoned in the end.

0:20: Rose crosses over to the others, avoiding the transportalizer. She pauses there, and notes (0:23): "No one even said goodbye." The others shuffle their weight, and Rose turns to leave. But as she goes, Jade (0:29) reaches out to take her hand, and (splash page) hugs her. The splash page is then modified via a fade-in, where John appears to hug them both (he fades in 0:34). The page is then modified again with a jump to the left: this reveals Dave, who is standing pointedly away from the others, arms crossed (0:37). In one final adjustment, Rose reaches out to take his hand as he continues to pretend to ignore her.

But by 0:45 all but Rose fade much like they appeared. Her outstretched hand remains suspended in darkness, and her smile wavers. By 0:47 she has pulled back the hand and her smile is gone, her lower body enshrouded in darkness as well. At 0:48 her head has drooped and the rest of the new splash page appears around her in place of the darkness: we see she is now aboard the Rat Trap, sitting with her knees curled up and arms crossed. She is alone.

We fade out from Rose, and see a shot of the Rat Trap, rising in the Incipisphere. After a few
seconds, we return to the inside, sprite view, and see that the others have gravitated to the walls of
the cylindrical room. John, Dave and Jade are near Rose now, but everyone is on their own, and are
growing tense as the Trap is set in place.

With the exception of Jade and Aradia, who are piloting the trap, everyone is sitting down, and they
are all in particular groups. But they are not interacting with one another. As Rose looks up at the
others (1:06), it is to a set of grim faces waiting for the inevitable. Karkat is not talking to Kanaya,
even though they are sitting next to one another. Vriska and Eridan have rooted themselves near
Aradia but are still trying to act indifferent in Rose's line of sight. Feferi has seated near Sollux
but can't bear to face him, and he does her no favours. Rose sinks back into her own arms and away
from the world.

But at 1:22, she hears a sound: Tavros, who is laughing at one of his own jokes to Gamzee (splash
page), as Gamzee looks on with a stupefied grin. And then there's Equius, who is trying to convince
Nepeta that he is not going to give her a bellyrub. We see Equius and Nepeta in sprites, and pan from
them up and left across the room, seeing some of the others notice these pairs, until we get to the
opposite side of the room (1:32), where Vriska is ever so softly is trying to coax words out of Aradia
while looking as disinterested as possible. As Rose lifts her head out of her funk (a variant of the
previous splash), she takes a closer look around. While some remain on their own, others begin to
pick up in a wide shot with a good deal going on simultaneously. As Gamzee laughs at one of
Tavros' jokes, he jostles Karkat and gets him complaining to Kanaya, who rubs his shoulder in
overwrought condolence and is later seen picking at loose chits on his shirt as she laughs at his
complaints. Aradia starts to talk to Vriska, and Vriska gives up on her façade and turns to face her
just before she is panned back out of shot. When we return to the east side of the room, we find
Nepeta lunging back and forth across Equius' lap to jabber at Sollux and Jade, much to his protest.
Feferi giggles at Nepeta, and looks aside, noticing that Eridan has glanced in her direction (this is
framed with Vriska and Aradia intentionally in-shot). They both look away.

Rose (splash page, 1:43 at the latest) is smiling now, as if surprised, but this interrupted when a
green light begins to shine down from above (1:45). The others look up as well and we see those in
Rose's line of sight (splash page) as they look up with fear back in their eyes. From there, we return
to Rose and see her sad eyes as she looks first forward and then left (to a first-time viewer, she may
appear to be simply looking around the Trap). Setting her lips, Rose stands (1:54) and takes a few
steps forward: past John and Dave, past Gamzee and Tavros, and out to the middle of the platform,
where she looks up in the sky to the great green star that is Jack Noir. Her left hand, clutched up to
her chest before, falls limp beside her, and with one last show of strength (2:05), she carries it out to
the left, where Terezi has been waiting.

Art by Karen0DuLay!

It is a moment, Jack and the final approach, that the others share in their own ways. The other
Humans there, Karkat and Kanaya bundled together with Gamzee and Tavros, Nepeta sitting in her
own spot next to Equius and Sollux, and so on. And as the final shots went by, the following lines
would appear in sidebars or footers line for line.

2:23: "And for the first time, Rose felt a touch of hope. [2:32] Not for the fight to come but for the
world to come after: that they might find some way to live."

[That line against a shot framed on Feferi, looking up at Jack.]

2:44: "Not that it would be perfect, because nothing ever was. [2:50] It was just a hope; a hope that
they might pull together if they could outlast this one last storm."
[At this point, a wide shot of the Trap shows it closing with Jack.]

3:03: "And then all at once, a crack and roar from the skies…"

[A bright flash of green light cuts the trap from view, and we cut back to Rose and Terezi's intertwined hands as they pull apart and draw weapons.]

3:06: "…and their world was swept up on a current that raged in their ears [3:10] and swallowed them all in a deluge [3:13] of green light and windswept chaos."

[Fade to black.]

"— A Hand in Holding Hands, Original Draft, Closing Lines"

[The words fade, and there is a pause, before a hand reappears, in the same place as Rose's: a Dersite's hand. Instead of clutching a weapon, it is pressed up against a carved stone wall.]

AC: :33 < that's it? that's the end, just like that?
SR: Yeah.
AC: :33 < why?
SR: Because the lecture is the worst possible way to convey new ideas.
AC: :33 < …eh?
SR: I don't imagine it's something that would interest you.
SR: You write for your own entertainment, any readers you attract are people who so happen to already share your precise interests and likes.
SR: Which I imagine doesn't happen much in a cave.
AC: :33 < *ac winks*
SR: It's just about meta-narrative.
AC: :33 < *ac shrugs?*
SR: Well…
SR: The lecture is the absolute worst form of conveying ideas because the only people who are listening are the people who already care.
SR: Information isn't appreciably absorbed until you've had the chance to roll something over in your mind, look at it from multiple angles.
SR: So I was going to end with ambiguity, encourage discussion. If people talked about it they would think about it.
SR: But I scuffed it. Too many mistakes on my part, too many miscommunications. Feferi's storyline, arguments over the nature of auspistice. If I couldn't convey my central premise there was no hope in believing anyone would look over and absorb the actual point.
SR: So I changed my angle to the style of communication I actually understand.
AC: :33 < the games?
SR: Yeah. Even the most heavily railroaded game explores its concept from angles of success and failure. It could have had a broader scope, but you have to be realistic.
SR: If the player was forced to think about the premise to win the game, then the thinking is done. They've thought about something they might have otherwise never done in situations they might have never considered. And I don't mean "combat."
SR: Stick in the Secret Strifes to counterpoint the main body of the flash thematically
and mechanically and I make up for some of the railroading.
SR: It could have worked. More fun, no lecture.
AC: :33 < instead, you've done nothing but lecture since the story stopped!
SR: Heh. But you're right. Wish it could have been otherwise.
AC: :33 < for like four hundred fifty pages!
SR: [smirks] Straight into the goddamn ground.

They look up at the wall for a while longer, before SR turns to leave.

SR: C'mon.
SR: There's nothing more we can do here.

One of the nice things about this last stage of the project is that it involves so few coding upgrades (assuming ULS even approached its ambitious plan in terms of coding) and would not have required as many art assets as ULS did post-CYQ (even a sparse version of ULS). It would have needed any characters missing from ULS, which means most of the work would be dedicated to Jack himself, though we would at least have required Sollux and Feferi (on a related note, I can now explain that Sollux wasn't included in ULS because his feeling for Nepeta were unclear and I didn't know what kind of Chain to give them. No, really). Overall, I don't think the combat portions would have been all that stressful: the real work was for conversation sprites and art for the scripted sequences. Any art volunteers would have eaten me alive for all these requests for nuanced one-use animations. It would have been great. I'm already disappointed in myself for missing out on this.

Let's get down to it.

> STRIFE

For Music's sake we're still in the realm of I Have No Idea I'm Just Trying To Entertain You People With My Copious Notes so let's all greet the Universe Cancer with a song from Trauma Team: The Bloody Rose, a song that segues surprisingly well off of bLiNd's Redemption.

The screen fades back in to the "winds" of Jack's power flooding the Rat Trap, swirling about and having apparently "captured" the cast, who flicker in and out of time as Jack desynchs with them, just as predicted. Characters not currently "available" appear in silhouette behind a semitransparent "storm" layer. In time with the music (as appropriate), Jack appears in the middle, accompanied by the "STRIFE" banner, and begins cycling through opponents. The characters are swapped through, appearing in and out of silhouette in turn, in a manner not dissimilar to flipping through the character select screen of a fighting game (indeed, I may have even had the game make the same electronic slot machine "blip" sound effect just to drive home the comparison). Once selected, the Strife begins: it is just that character and Jack for the next few rounds. After a few rounds, Jack will fade out and the character select will begin again, picking a fresh duel.

Jack will never select Jade from this randomization and indeed will not attack her with anything but group attacks for the entire fight. Meanwhile, the game has good odds for selecting Dave and Aradia as a pair. This isn't something Jack is doing, mind: they will appear to "interrupt" Jack's character select to engage him on purpose. If they are in bad physical shape, however, those odds will be
reduced to "normal," 2 in 16. Unfortunately, their recent disagreements has fractured their Chain level to 2 where it was assuredly higher (see below), but you'll just have to learn to deal with that.

The key mechanic to this section is Chaining, but not just in the usual fashion. While Jack has separated the others, they can be brought back into synch, at least temporarily. If you attempt to Chain In new characters, they will "break through" the storm and temporarily join you. Ideally, this would have been shown to the player via a brief sequence in Standard difficulty if they have not noticed it themselves. Through this mechanic, a skilled player knowledgeable of the characters' relationships can rally in the characters they need to overcome Jack or simply keep alive as situation dictates, no matter which character has been randomly selected at any given moment, by following through the relationship lines that interconnect the cast. A player who hasn't been paying attention to the story will be out in the cold. However, any characters the player has gathered will be lost as soon as Jack goes back to the "character selection."

In Standard Mode, Jack will desynch to the character select in about 2-5 rounds, but in Hard Mode, Jack is more intelligent. He is more likely to desynch if you have gathered a large force, and more likely to stick around if you're biting the steel floor with Distactions and Debuffs. A strong Hard Mode player is only really likely to run into the former, so the fight quickly becomes a matter of gathering your best emergency party and trying to heal combatants before Jack up and leaves again.

In Reader mode, the storm is just a nuisance. I didn't want to force Reader Mode players into a dexterity challenge like Chaining, so a few scripted elements have been prepared to clear the storm entirely. After three rounds, Dave and Aradia will interrupt Jack's character selection and Aradia will say "I think I've got a hold of it!" as her Time powers flash. They will then call to the others to Chain to "their timeline." The player will be able to link in characters freely, or perhaps they would simply all appear. Does that contradict the story so far? Yeah, pretty much, but I can't make a sleep-through-it-Easy mode boss without sacrificing a little plot here and there. If I had managed to get across that everyone was joining Dave and Aradia's timeline through Chains, that would have at least captured the major narrative purpose of this section, and that's all that really matters here. So long as the party is being united through the motherfucking power of friendship, I'll survive in the end.

Since we're talking about Chains, some discussion of the story's rocky relationships is probably in order. Despite stuffing their ears with cotton and lies, Rose, Eridan and Vriska are maintaining their Auspistice Chain (Level 3), and most of the others are in similar shape to ULS. Karkat and Terezi have even progressed to <3< Lv3. Tavros and Eridan's Matespiritship has become a new Friendship (O Lv1) and Feferi and Eridan are now in a "?" that is indeed functionally distinct from the others, not that anyone would ever notice but me. Sollux and Feferi's matespiritship, however, will break the Chain the first time you use it and collapse from <3 Lv4 to <3 Lv3. This will bring the other party past the storm before the Chain breaks, but it's something to keep in mind all the same. Dave and Aradia have been a bit more up front about their relationship woes and are already at <3 Lv2 where they were probably 3, but at least they won't have a sloppy collapse mid-fight. What a mess.

Back to mechanics. Jack's attacks are varied enough to cause trouble, while not being to the level of unorthodox variety of the Secret Strifes, because this is a time to be hard, not unfair. He has a few combos, with both ground and air variations, and randomly chooses to fly or stand during the character select – this forces the player to use their Air and Ground attacks, as well. He also has special attacks, which are accompanied by a visual effect of the Bec, Jaspersprite and Seppucrow symbol appearing behind him, in the exact same way elemental and class symbols appear for the players (indeed, those prototype symbols should have been borrowed by the Underlings in ULS, but since I forgot it in the write up, we can probably assume I would have flubbed it in the game too. Whoops!). The Seppucrow appears when he is using Time powers as well (like the desync) and so on. As promised, Jade has blocked Jack's Space attacks (Bec's powers are still in play) and Jack is holding John and the Harlequin's powers in reserve, so you will only see Jack use Light and Time
spells borrowed from Rose and Dave. Easier on my AI programming.

When Jack is reduced below 2/3rds HP, Jack realizes he is losing the hit-and-run game, and releases the "storm." But when he does so, he reveals a surprise that even he wasn't ready for: Mirann (Hindsight) is leaning against the Trap's wall, left of centre. She is surrounded by a billowing cloud of Shade.

**ROSE:** You!

**HINDSIGHT:** [steps forward, spinning her harpoon to the ready] Oh, like she's surprised!

In Hard difficulty, this encounter leads to an entirely separate combat sequence.

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> **STRIFE:** Round 2

The **Music** changes, preferably to an up-tempo version of the original tune.

**KARKAT:** [continuing off of the previous] She's just telling the rest of us who you are, sister!

Unfortunately, Rose has also filled in Jack, who clues in that this is an ally and fights with her. The fight ends after you have lopped off another block of Jack's HP, equal to a quarter of his starting. This makes this section shorter than the last, doubly so with a full party. Mirann's health is irrelevant. The combat is mostly designed as a rude surprise to Hard mode players, and to get them used to a few more attacks from Jack that will carry over to the next round, even though they weren't there in Standard. This section doesn't have much thematic purpose even in terms of mechanics-as-theme. Sometimes you've just got to give the player a chance to learn the new dance.

Despite Mirann's arrival, she is only an ancillary threat in this round. You don't have to so much as tickle her to win, but if you try, it won't take long to drop her HP to zero. Sure, Hindsight is emblematic of both a Horrorterror and a Denizen, but "Mirann" is only the Mask, and following loosely in the tradition of the Call of Cthulhu RPG, Humans are Humans no matter how much magic they're packing. As a result, Mirann is less a Horrorterror and Denizen and is more Just Some Middle-Aged Troll Lady. Still, she will make herself irritating, casting Shade spells with impunity: Debuffs and direct attacks that all deal counter-element damage to Rose and Vriska. If Mirann is eliminated, she will collapse to her knees, breathing slow ("to her knees," that is, if such a pose was part of her collapsing animation. Lacking such a pose, she will simply appear hunched while standing). The Symbol will flash and the Hindsight line will crack along the bottom, below the crack in the middle made after the first Secret Strife. If Mirann is not defeated during the course of the Strife, things will play out exactly as written in the Standard/Reader plotline, below.

Meanwhile, Jack introduces a few new attacks that will be entirely new to Hard Mode, as explained above. No longer distracted by keeping everyone out of synch, Jack starts using his tentacles and his energy blasts in addition to his normal combos (essentially giving him two attacks a turn, once on the front line and once with the others). The tentacles are stronger than the blasts and can hit the front or second row, while the energy blasts can hit anywhere. These attacks discourage the player from focusing buffs and healing on front-rankers, and may indeed put the player at risk of losing a low HP back-ranker like Eridan and Vriska. Still, this whole sequence isn't likely to last all that long against a smart player – it is just an "easing process." The quicker we get back to the meat of the flash, the better.
By and large I'll admit to not being fond of this section, as I feel it pushes the whole combat on too long. You know those multi-part final bosses everyone complains about? I've tried to give this combat variety and a quick run-through but this round seems like a step too far. The reason this round even exists is rooted in an issue with the second draft I call "The Problem of Hindsight," which I'll discuss during the final writeup. It's got a lot to do with Rose's interactions with the HTs and dropped plotlines, but long story short: the fight against Hindsight's Mask was originally part of the narrative, not a flash, and so it didn't have a home after those plots were dropped. I'm afraid I've been freestyling ever since.

Let's just move out of Hard Mode exclusivity and back to the common plotline.

**HINDSIGHT**: [cloud of Shade flares up] Not bad, Heroes, but if you think this is all I've got--!

> Intermission 1

This is where the sequences match up. While everyone else is focusing on Mirann, either due to her sudden arrival or her resurgence at the end of the Hard Mode fight, Gamzee will flash-step behind her and crack her over the head. If she was not previously beaten during Hard Mode, the Hindsight line will snap at this point, first once and then again as Gamzee lands a total of three blows, and the third completely unnecessary.

**GAMZEE**: oh, i'm sorry. was i supposed to be fucking spooked by you or something?

[He teleports back. Hindsight shakes her head, rubs her neck.]

**HINDSIGHT**: Calm players. I help Presence and I get beaten over the head by Calm players.

**ROSE**: I expected my doppelganger. Are all three of you going to show up in time?

[Hindsight shifts her weight on the floor.]

**HINDSIGHT**: [smiles] What can I say, Rose? This is much... [She shifts her right hand] much bigger than you and I.

**JADE**: ...[exclaims, calls out the name of the nearest meat-shield] She's--!

[Hindsight's aura of Shade flares again, and she slams her hand down into the centre of the Trap. Shade suddenly fills all of the seams in the Trap's metalwork, and begins to flood and block out the main lights. Soon, Hindsight herself has has turned to Shade and flooded into the systems.]

**JADE**: Oh no... oh no...

But Jack has already realized what this means. He kicks into the air, his powers going wild, and displaced images of his body begin to appear around him as his Space powers restore (and the Space symbol begins to wildly flash). Cutting past Hindsight's slime, the emergency lights begin to flare. Jack raises his hand and the special attack name bar appears at the top of the screen with Red Miles. Like all special attacks in this engine, the attack name is preceded with its elemental Symbol, in this case Doom. Feferi begins to shriek and lose HP from the counter-elements, and the screen goes white. Several characters are seen moving into action just before the cut-off, but it's too late. There is
the sound of an explosion, and a floating text box from Jade's position saying "GOD DAMMIT KARKAT!"

When the scene clears, the Rat Trap has been sundered, the walls flattened and debris floating out in the sky beyond. The Rat Trap has been reduced to an asteroid with a vague flat semblance of a metal floor in the middle. Nepeta is tending to Feferi's health as Feferi casts some Witch spell in Jack's direction, and in the middle of the screen, Sollux is boiling like a hothouse from use of his powers. Their elemental symbols flash and a red, blue and pink ring appears around Jack's hand and snaps around the ring. Jack jerks his hand as if in pain.

**SOLLUX:** you ju2t try that again, a22hole!

**FEFERI:** [to Nepeta, floater] I'm okay, we got it.

**JOHN:** [looks around] Everybody up!

> STRIFE: Round 2 / 3

For the curious, the bookmark adjusts based on the player's situation in game. Like in CYQ and ULS, the bookmarks are collected on the main menu: if you've beaten the Jack and Hindsight fight, this fight will appear on the menu as "3" regardless of difficulty.

For the first few rounds, the **Music** is the same track from the Hard Mode-only Round 2. During these rounds, the players of all modes get several rounds to adapt to Jack's restored Space powers. He can now teleport, letting him attack anyone in the party (except Jade) with impunity, and he will randomly dodge less than perfect timed hits in Standard and Hard. Luckily for the player, his combos will be shorter when he teleport-attacks, which is sure to be of limited relief, especially to Hard mode players now having to deal with this and tentacle/energy blast attacks hitting their back rows. Jack has also gained a few Space spells copied over directly from Jade's list, which are fairly unremarkable. After a few rounds of combat, however, Jack changes things up for real.

Firstly, the music shifts to a "crawling" or "advancing" theme: I like **Master of Tartarus** from Persona 3 for inspiration, since it keeps us with Atlus why not. Jack takes back to the air, and raises his hand (as per Red Miles, to save on sprites). The Bec symbol appears behind him, and the infamous Net attack begins to spread from his hand. The command box refers to this as "Reach Through Space." The lines reach toward the player characters, but as they do so, the lines runs into a red force field, then another, first Dave's red, then Aradia's maroon, then Vriska's blue. The plan is working.

In fact, it gets better. Jack attempts to use the Net's Seppucrow-derived upgrade, "Reach Through Time," and continues to run into blockades en route to panels borrowed from Hivebent. Some of these are a bit more ramshackle (piles of clocks) while others have notes pinned to them ("Fuuuuuuuuuck yooooother :::::"). Angry now, Jack uses his most recent upgrade, from the Cat-Princess prototype, "Reach Beyond Time and Space." This is equally fruitless, and we watch Jack his more barriers as Nyaralthotep's eye-tendrils watch the Net stopped as they try to get past them.

Finally, we refocus on Jack, who is tense and frustrated as a sprite can look. The background fades out to black, however, and suddenly fills with code as he interacts with the Sburb command line. For those that can understand it, the code speeding by implies that Jack has chosen to use his Level 99 upgrade to access Harlequin Powers. Against Vriska's predictions, he immediately puts these powers
back into the Net.

We return to normal zoom, and the ruins of the Rat Trap, but as Jack puts Harlequin power into the Net, the image shifts, and the command box announces: "Reach Beyond The Joke": when the blur clears, we find ourselves in the Roxyverse.

The Roxyverse teens are fighting some ill-defined glowy thing in Jack's place, and we get close-ups as Jack snags the four Humans, and in wide shot on Standard and Hard, several of the Trolls. Jack lands to the ground in a Hero Mode shot of him loaded down with a rifle, twin pistols, anime sword and a battle spork (Jack's actual sprite is not adjusted, however). He also has a full Prankster's Gambit bar.

[Everyone is wearing the most dumbfounded-looking sprite in their set.]

Terezi: Did everybody else just see--

Tavros: Uh-huh.

The player must now contend with a massive power-boost on Jack's part, and the real final fight begins. As described above, Jack has gained the powers of Roxy, Jane, Jake and Dirk. In Standard mode he has also grabbed Meenah, Aranea, Rufioh and one or more others depending on game balance, while in Hard he has grabbed the full set. Like in the chapters, Jack's powers are still tied to him by the "lines" of the net. Any player can target and attempt to sever these lines, but Jack will intercept any such attempt. To get past him, the player would have had to land a minimum number of hits in one Chain to dodge past Jack, which would increase in difficulty depending on the number of lines you've previously severed (because of the way this would have been calculated, it would have been easier to sever the first three or four of the sixteen lines in Hard than it would to sever the any of the eight in Standard, but the last of the sixteen would require so many hits as to be prohibative). Spells, which only land a single hit, are useless against the Lines as a result and so aren't even allowed to target them. Lines eliminated cause the glowing "power" to float just above the arena – you'd be able to just catch sight of them in wide shots as they float in place.

Jack gains a few benefits from his new powers, until you cut them off. He gains a single new attack from each of the four Human dancecestors which he will use instead of his normal attack each turn, making the lines anchored to the Humans priority targets. He has also gained Skills and Spells from any Trolls wrangled in Standard and Hard, which are generally just direct copies of Skills and Spells borrowed from the playable cast, as I'm not trying to create work for anyone here, least of all myself. Unfortunately for the player, Jack also gains the Roxyverse characters' relationship Chains, which he will turn against the player after all these rounds of Chains being used against him. And I should remind that the Roxyverse relationships are intentionally overcomplicated as part of the gag! Not only would you have to contend with Roxy's "Human Quadrant" relationships you know nothing about in terms of mechanics, but on Standard and Hard, you would have to deal with Roxy's interconnected matesprites (Meenah, Aranea, Rufioh, who unlike the main cast are in great shape in terms of their relationship!) alongside everyone else's, less... explained gag connections. Why are Horuss and Kankri dating? We just don't know!

Because there are a few player powers I don't want Jack using (like healing), Jack will often use his Harlequin powers to "create" new reversed spells, healing becoming harming, etc... "create" in the sense that they simply re-use existing programming and art assets. Not only will these reversed spells automatically trigger counter-element damage (so Heart spells from Meulin and Dirk might be inverted to some mystery element that hurts Nepeta, and so on), but it adds some surprise and variety without taxing the content pipeline. Generally all I'd have to do is swap the plus signs for minus in the code and slap on a new name and Jack immediately becomes one step more irritating!
Does that seem rough enough for a boss like Jack? Eh, we can make it worse for Hard mode. On Hard, Jack will often invert Kurloz's Rage powers to gain Calm spells that cure Debuffs and Distaction. Of course he'll use this power to abuse the Roxyverse characters' Ultimates, though thankfully he doesn't gain Ultimates from everyone. This makes the net lines that do have Ultimates priority targets, or you could just take out Kurloz's line, for that matter. But remember that every line you sever makes the ones that follow harder to sever. If you take out Kurloz, you'll have a harder time taking out Dirk later on. That's the point. You want access to the Secret Strife, earn it.

The player does not actually have to sever a single power line to win, however. Hell, with sixteen lines in Hard, the player is realistically better off just severing a few of the more problematic powers and dealing with the rest as a matter of course. The fight ends when Jack's heath bar is exhausted past a certain point: in Standard mode, the round ends when he reaches 1/4th health and backs off like an intelligent person. You'll notice this quarter is the amount lost by Jack in Hard Mode's round 2! As a result, in Hard mode, Jack will fight until he is reduced zero, or thereabouts. The game freeze things at 1 HP if need be – we've all seen that miracle in other games before. One way or the other, Jack steps back when it is prudent to do so, and the script continues as-written.

(By the way, you might be wondering what the plan was for this fight before Andrew introduced the concept of the Scratch to canon. Short answer: "Reach Beyond the Joke," never happened: unfortunately, Doc Scratch left the Felt behind when he abandoned the universe, and since Dave, Vriska and Aradia never knew about the Felt or the Midnight Crew, they never blocked them off! One of the best parts of that old draft was that if Jack ever called on Biscuits' power, it would do nothing whatsoever and Jack would miss his turn… and cut the line himself!).

> Intermission 2

When Jack is defeated, he falls back somewhat into the background of the combat area and his remaining powers are released into the air above him. But as this is happening, everything starts to go black, except for Rose (the camera cuts to her half of the field). After a moment, the darkness turns everyone to greyscale, which is already used by the game engine to indicate characters that are not currently "in-play."

**ROSE:** [exclaims. Beat. Scowls when she realizes what is going on.] We had a deal! We beat your dream challenges, and you said we could pass to beat the final boss!

[Hindsight congeals out of the remaining seams in the metalwork in front of collapsed Jack. The camera focuses on the two of them.]

**HINDSIGHT:** Of course, Rose, darling. You and your friends have proven you can beat the game. You can pass.

**ROSE:** Then what do you call this--!

**HINDSIGHT:** Rose, have you really been so upset lately that you forgot to police the things we've said for simple word games?

**ROSE:** [exclaims, anger]

**HINDSIGHT:** I'm… honestly disappointed with you. Hm! [taps her chest] Hurts a little.
VRISKA: [offscreen, floater] Don't worry.

[Rose exclaims, though the camera adjusts to show the right flank, which includes Vriska, who has been released from time-freeze. Rose questions.]

VRISKA: [floater. Tossing dice.] I get it, at least. "You and your friends," doesn't mean us Trolls. [catches dice] You're not from my session. You don't control access to our final boss, so you can't actually let us through.

HINDSIGHT: Really, you can see why I'm so hurt, Rose darling.

VRISKA: …Exceeeeeeept… this final boss isn't "our" final boss. It's theirs.

[Hindsight turns. If possible, the cloud of Shade around her flares into the great shadow of a multi-tailed scorpion, casting over the frozen cloud of lights still hovering over Jack's head.]

SCORPIO?: Ch8ting ch8ld, your team has not proven yourselves ready to face any challenge! I will b8n you all from the ar8na!

ROSE: Oh, you cheating shit.

VRISKA: Holding all this information till the end so we don't get a chance to plan it through. I liiiiiiiike this! Lemme see if I get this straight: you're going to ban us from the final boss as punishment for strong-arming our way past all of our Denizens?

SCORPIO?: None of you passed your tri8ls, not one of you proved yourselves worthy of the Ultimate Reward.

VRISKA: [smug, checking her fingernails] Mm. Didn't even make my Choice.

ROSE: Eh?

VRISKA: How about I do that, eh? You wouldn't stand in the way of personal growth, would you? You can stand in for my Denizen. How this for a d8l: I make a [tosses her dice] "Choice" that would prove I'm worthy and will take you out, even though no Troll will strong-arm you in the process?

[Beat.]

VRISKA: C'mon, lady, you're corrupted but you're a Luck Denizen, you know you want a piece of this action.

HINDSIGHT: [normal font] …Terms?

ROSE: Vriska, you realize the only reason you're up and standing is because she wants to make a deal with you.

VRISKA: Yup. But does she want to make a deal with me as a Horrorterror… or a Denizen? What's more important to you, lady?

HINDSIGHT: …

VRISKA: Because if she's a Denizen, that means the only thing she cares about is one person's personal growth: mine. [zooms on her, she shrugs] Here's my terms: I trust the Humans to take you out for us. [beat] Wait!
The camera zooms out. If we have included the Scorpio-shadow, Vriska will point upwards. She is not actually pointing at Scorpio but without it we lack a fake-out.

VRISKA: I trust every Human here to take you out even if I'm out of the game! Whether we're time-locked or watching from the stands!

[Rose exclaims. Hindsight chuckles, and reaches for her Mask.]

HINDSIGHT: Agreed!

[She removes her Mask and spreads her arms wide, with a brief Music track bells-dominant to reflect Earthsea Borealis. Shade billows out in a great cloud and then rushes to the sides of the screen, essentially blacking us out. Just before they cover her, Vriska salutes in Rose's direction.

When the smoke clears, the background's greyscale has cleared and Rose, John, Jade and Dave remain in their original positions, with Cetus in the middle of the arena, still wreathed in Shade. The Trolls are all frozen.]

Brief pause, after which the battle music cues (a new track, preferably a Rose track, ala Dance of Thorns). The camera suddenly rises, and we see the cloud of lights representing powers from the Roxyverse, circling around Cetus' head. Most of them burn out in the Shade, but four of them descend from the area, and settle on Feferi, Eridan, Equius and Nepeta's heads. They shrink away, with the spell symbols for Life, Hope, Void and Heart appearing behind each character as they shake themselves awake.

NEPETA: What's going on?

ROSE: [combat stance] Looph8les!

The camera zooms back out, and displays the BOSS STRIFE banner from ULS.

> Thief: Make the Choice

[This is not the ideal bookmark-title for this section. The ideal would be to call it after Cetus' in-canon mythological title, ie if this were a fight with Typhus, the bookmark would be "> The Slumbering One", Echidna: "> The Mother of Monsters", Yaldaboath: "> The God of Monsters." We don't know Cetus' title, however, so until Andrew reveals hers, this section will remain with this placeholder.]

All things considered, Cetus' fight is not actually that complicated compared to Jack. She has a wide variety of attacks, and all of her spells hurt Rose by proxy, and while that isn't exactly delightful, it's still pretty rudimentary in a 1980s, randomized AI sort of way. She has several flank-wide group attacks, which makes it a good time for me to point out that the party is evenly split between the flanks, with one healer on each.

Thematically, this section is designed to force the Humans and the two most anti-Human Trolls into a fight using the connections that have nevertheless formed between them through others, bringing us back to theme of interconnected web of relationships at the base of society. Now let's chain that in the face of a giant grimdark fish, eh?
Chains aside, the player can use Light spells to hurt Cetus even if they're buffs (and most of them are), allowing you to use Rose to your advantage here. However, using Pinnacle is probably a bad idea, since Cetus has more than enough Debuffs in her Shade set to tear the party apart if Rose leaves herself essentially out of play by casting her Ultimate. Jade's buffs and invincibility-tied Ultimate are probably better ideas.

I considered letting the Roxyverse characters piggybacking on the Trolls influence the fight from time to time, but I never came up with a system I actually liked, as it always seemed like they were interrupting the fight for no good reason rather than truly helping. Ah well, easier on everyone involved.

All in all there's not much to this in terms of complexity. It's a giant monster, she's got high stats, and she often counters when you aren't expecting it. It's not unlike the Jormungander fight with a smaller party and Chains that are more of a pain in the ass because most of everyone dislikes each other. It's even like the Jormungander fight in how the previous fight makes this one seem harder in Standard than it does in Hard. While Cetus is definitely harder than the previous round on Standard, Hard players just fought a whole army of fellow-PC-based power boosts tied to a douchewhip spamming Ultimates. Which fight honestly makes more sense as the hard and complicated one?

When defeated, the Symbol flashes and the Hindsight line cracks in its upper half, three cracks in all. A long pulse of Shade gives us a convenient fade to black to divide this scene from the next.

As the pulse of Shade clears, Cetus has reverted to her Mask form. The remaining Trolls have been revived from time-lock and are in their original positions, with the possible exception of Rose, who may be given a slight artistic gap in the ranks to give her "centre stage." In terms of the ruined Rat Trap, Hindsight/Mirann has collapsed just left of center, to allow the camera to frame her and Rose, with Hindsight on the right of the shot and Rose on the left.

ROSE: Satisfied?

[Hindsight attempts to stand, shakily, and gets to her knees.]

HINDSIGHT: [box shakes slow] I'll do.

KANAYA: God knows you needed the hit to the face.

ROSE: I agree, but what's your angle, Hindsight?

HINDSIGHT: [struggles to stand fully, succeeds] Nothing that matters any more. My time is up, Rose, darling.

[The Symbol pulses. In the pulse, and those that follow, the Hindsight line is draining of strength and the Presence growing.]

HINDSIGHT: You've all passed! You can move on to the final boss. You have my word as a key antagonist. I'm... [Symbol pulse. Hindsight begins to waver in place, as if dizzy and drained] I'm satisfied.

ROSE: ...And what happens once you step aside? When we reach Presence's Critical Moment?

HINDSIGHT: ...Aha--[coughs, box shakes]*hack*--hahahaha... Then we crush you like ants.

JOHN: Then... w-what was the point? All we've done is put one off to deal with another!
ROSE: Life's not fair.

HINDSIGHT: This isn't a life lesson, Rose. Life lessons were from my time and my time has past. Presence lacks my particular… [Symbol pulse. Hindsight's enthusiasm drains, as is her cloud of Shade] modus operandi.

ROSE: …What does Foresight gain from killing us?

HINDSIGHT: Hm?

ROSE: He said he would "vote with you." Presence wants us dead, you don't care…

HINDSIGHT: Which is why I abstain.

ROSE: [exclaims] Oh… f—

HINDSIGHT: The Triumvirate proceeds [symbol flash. The cloud of Shade begins to fade with each subsequent pulse] with one vote!

[The camera pans quickly to the right flank.]

KARKAT: Man, what the fuck? Why are you even letting psycho-Rose even have a vote?

[Pan quickly back to left flank + Hindsight.]

HINDSIGHT: Because she can keep us alive. The Prime body gets to survive. Everyone gets to survive.

[The background fade to another storytelling shadow puppet set, as per Downfall's text descriptions. Puppets of Horrorterrors move by as if we were zooming past.]

HINDSIGHT: Every Horrorterror. Every Smaller and Middling God. The echoing voices of grand eternity will get to live on, in everlasting stagnation. [Fade back in. Pause. New box.] I can get behind that.

ROSE: But you have to try to kill us, first.

HINDSIGHT: That was her deal.

ROSE: What is she doing to help you that you can't get anywhere else?

HINDSIGHT: [pulse. Her cloud of Shade is nearly gone.] …Lord. English.

[The shadow puppets return, except this time the Cairo Overcoat sarcophagus is in the middle of the zoom. The shot is now easily recognizable as a shadow puppet modification of shots from Caliborn: Enter.]

HINDSIGHT: [left-bound floaters] He's killing them. Been killing them, for eons or more. So we've waited…

FORESIGHT: [right-bound floaters] …and prepared. For eons and more. For the Critical Moment. To get her on our side…

[Music change: if at all possible, Checkmate. We return to the scene (0:09), focused on the right
flank to include Foresight, who teleports in to face the characters on the right flank. He forms his scythe of Shade from nowhere, and also has an aura of Shade.

**FORESIGHT:** …and fight back against the Lord of Time. And all we have to do is take a shot at all of you.

[Pan right quick.]

**KARKAT:** [0:15 into *Checkmate*] …THIS IS HORSESHT! Who the hell do you have sitting around who's only going to help you if you kill a bunch of kids?

[0:21: In response, Hindsight and Foresight drop their auras of Shade. The camera pans to centre arena, where between Hindsight and Foresight, Jack lays forgotten. He stands. 0:23 (guitar breakdown), his First Guardian powers flash. A moment later, the same powers flash through Hindsight, and then, Foresight.

The cast reacts with shock. Hindsight breaks down laughing, and has to hold herself up with her Harpoon. 0:26: Text control returns to the user. The three continue to flash with First Guardian powers. As we slip towards the Critical Moment, Hindsight's flash begins to fall behind Jack's.]

**HINDSIGHT:** I'm sorry! I haven't seen this far yet!

[Even their text boxes flash with First Guardian energy when they do.]

**ROSE:** Jack, you don't have to do this. [Seer flash.] They're trying to fight fire with someone else's fire, that's just going to leave everything burned!

**DAVE:** You think that's going to convince him it's a bad idea? Rose, your God's still a few seconds ahead of us: Jack's already done it!

**FORESIGHT:** And I think you'll find that he has. Thanks to the sixteen of you, Mr. Noir's been chased around this session for months, nearly choked to death by your power suppressors, beaten to within an inch of his life at beyond full power and then had an enhanced Denizen taken down in front of him.

**KARKAT:** JACK, YOU CONCENTRATED WAD OF INFECTED PUS, DON'T YOU DARE HELP THEM!

**DAVE:** Graceful, man. Win him over with your silver tongue.

**FORESIGHT:** What do you say, Jack? Open the session, and we'll crush this lot and give you the fight of our lives.

[Jack steps forward from the background, and begins to raise his arm.]

**KARKAT:** [floater] TAKE HIM!

[Karkat and Eridan on the right and John and Jade on the left move to engage, but when John and Karkat arrive, the Symbol appears and game beings to slow. As they move, Hindsight and Foresight move to intercept, and the Hindsight line drains completely. With a crack, Hindsight and Foresight's weapons snap into place, along with Jack's arm, all three falling along the lines of the Symbol. The rest of the game stops entirely as power lances up Jack's arm and lights the Presence line strong and bright until everything else has faded to black. As Jack's power fades, the symbol remains, and the Presence line cracks a second time along its upper half.]
> Intermission 3

Music shifts, to something tonally similar to Black Hole/Green Sun, though that particular track doesn’t entirely suit my purposes. The kids that tried to attack the Triumvirate have been blown aside and a great smoking crater is left in the middle of the Rat Trap (leaving most of the old metal gone for good). A green pall glow comes down from above. Some of the others look up, dizzy and horrified. We then get a splash page of them from the front. The camera pans up this shot, showing Terezi as she gets to her feet. Her hand glows and the Command Box appears at the top, showing she is using Mind Brace. The command box conveniently covers up the sky when the camera pans that high, sparing the artist from having to draw the forthcoming detail twice.

Splash page: Nyarlathotep has entered the session. His limbs, eyes and mouths pull in to the sky from above. He fills much of the entire upper dome of the Incipisphere. The power of a First Guardian surges through him intermittently, covering his entire body except for a patch in the middle of the Horrorterror: the Shade emblem, which only appears during such flashes of light. The Green Sun's light shines into the session from behind him, blazing through any cracks not stuffed with monstrous flesh. The shot dwells on him for some time.

The next shot focuses on the Humans. Their weapons are held low and limp as they look up in disbelief. John looks to his friends, but they have no answers. To emphasize this, the shot soon fades to show just Rose (splash page), lost in her thoughts and a void of black. Reminiscent of Karen’s art earlier, she would probably appear in the same pose, alone in this void. But where the Trolls begin similarly shocked, they become furious over a series of transitions (if possible, I wanted Nepeta to slowly mouth “What. The. Fuck.” as she throws her arms and claws wide). Returning to sprites, Karkat reaches over and swats at John, and John confusedly turns to the other Humans.

From there, we return to our earlier shot of Rose lost in her thoughts. In those thoughts, reminiscent of [S] Enter, shots "slide" into the corners, depicting the three dream bubbles/Secret Strifes. The first Dream Bubble is fading, showing shots of Ghost Bro's body and Rose before fading out. The second Dream Bubble has reached the point in Downfall where Presence points out the arrival of the Green Sun (implying this is taking place paradoxically/concurrently with the final moments of Cascade). The final Dream Bubble shows Foresight, as his scythe appears in his hand, Rose visible over his shoulder. The real-world Rose's expression also becomes one of determination, and then anger, and she opens her eyes and looks to Karkat, and he nods and signals to Sollux to take them up.

**KARKAT:** Anybody getting off, do it now.

[Pause. The others look warily at one another. We cut to a wide shot of the ruined Trap, which somewhat resembled a shattered version of the victory platform.]

**ERIDAN:** So do we have a plan?

**KARKAT:** Does this look like the time for a plan to you? Subtlety has just been cracked like a nut and let a giant octopus in!

**FEFERI:** We won't be able to kill him.
ROSE: Cetus is out of power. If we can get him out of the Session, he won't be able to get back in without inside help, and I'm not about to help him.

KANAYA: So we hit it out.

KARKAT: …Right.

JOHN: So let me get this straight. Our plan is to go up there, and hit the immortal, player-powered First Guardian alien supergod, "really hard" so that he's knocked out of the session just like in the animes?

ROSE: Yup.

JOHN: And we have no backup plan?

KARKAT: Then we hit it harder.

JADE: Oh, good then. ...I like this plan! I'm excited to be a part of it! Let's do it!

[We rejoin the cast on the platform, and the music fades out or completes, leaving us in silence. As the platform rises, soon, the first tentacles come into view. Music shift. While it is not entirely appropriate, I love the buildup to this one, and so will temporarily borrow Gaia Queen as a guide for my purposes. The characters take a few deep breaths.

0:11: Jade suddenly breaks ranks to hug Nepeta from behind. This shakes the others from their stupor as well. Several of them turn to their nearest fellow and shake hands. Feferi puts her hand on Sollux's shoulder. We zoom in on Rose and Vriska, as much to avoid having to animate the right flank as anything.]

VRISKA: [0:14, floater, to Rose] Now aren't you glad you have a pack full of angry neighbours to do fun shit?

ROSE: [0:17, floater] Ecstatic. Now we all get to die. [Vriska grins]

0:20, Rose suddenly clutches her head, and the upper half of the screen begins to flood with individual floating text boxes, repeating line from the Horrorterror in both the current and original draft / current and previous universe. Vriska turns at an off-screen prompt (if we could get a female yelp sound effect, that would work too) and we zoom out to see that Feferi is similarly affected, as Nyarlathotep is speaking into their minds in Eldritch. But around 0:25, the text boxes begins to recede, and we zoom on Rose, who is beginning to recover. She takes a breath, and begins to arm. 0:30.

Near the top of the screen, one of the few remaining text boxes from the spam of text boxes is a line from the original draft: Foresight saying "Draw your wands if you want to Live!" It is off-centre to the left. As we zoom out from Rose just before she arms, the box fades with the remaining others, but reveals another box that was hidden directly behind, appearing to "melt away," leaving behind the last bookmark. The entire group arms simultaneously (the most prominent motion in their arming animation occurring at the same time) at the staccato note at 0:32.]
The banner "FINAL STRIFE" waves into existence at the percussion notes at 0:34 and waves back out at the similar notes at 0:38. The camera pans up, and at 0:44 (when we truly lose this song as viable, as Echidna begins to speak), a tentacle emerging from Nyarlathotep's mouth projects a First Guardian beam down the middle of the screen to the platform. Symbol flash: the beam is along the Presence line, and Presence herself appears in the middle of the platform at the end of the beam. When the percussion returns at 0:48, Presence reveals her left hand, which if you read back through the story, has been carefully hidden behind her back at all times. Now visible, we can see that it is severed at the elbow. She moves into a battle stance and reaches toward her chest wound with her hand: a sword forms there out of green light, and when she pulls it out (fourth percussion repeat, 0:52), green-tinted black wings appear at her back and sweep out with a rush of air. She takes to the skies.

DAVE: Love the look, Jack!

PRESENCE: Shove it, Strider, I'm going to rip off your head and... bleed on your neck!

[The GUI appears.]

DAVE: [two successive floaters] She's been working on that for eons! Eons! It was glorious!

The fight with Nyarlathotep consists of two major stages. Like Mirann, Ghost Rose is a Mask, and so is relatively fragile and could easily be ignored by a skilled player on lower difficulties. On the other hand, she's still a Shade-charged Player Character and that's bound to be something of an issue (though her Shade prevents her from using First Guardian powers, including Jack's teleportation just for simplicity's sake). To mix things up after two fights with Jack's trueform, Ghost Rose is packing science wands and has no compunction about attacking Jade. In Hard, she will also use Shade's Ultimate, an area attack spell called Depths, which she will use when she is low on health or when you beat Nyarlathotep's first phase, whichever comes first. This use of Depths will damage the battlefield, which will begin to crack. Beating Ghost Rose causes the Presence line to snap at its base, though if you're really stubborn and ignore her until you beat Nyarlathotep Prime, it will break at that point instead.

("Depths" doesn't fit the naming scheme of the other Ultimates but does work as an opposite of "Pinnacle." I considered making the Void and Doom Ultimates similar but had already missed my chance with Doom when I wrote it into Chapter 6. Whoops.)

Obviously, the real threat here is the First Guardian mollusk trying to juice you from on high. Except on Reader difficulty, Nyarlathotep is anchored in multiple positions, three for Standard and four for Hard. If you destroy these "anchor" tentacles, they will eventually be replaced by new ones, but you get some time, making this whole segment vaguely reminiscent of Final Fantasy Legends II/SaGa II's final boss. Unfortunately, attacking the anchors is a hazard, as Nyarlathotep will counter with his infinite, smaller tentacles, and of course he has his own attacks when your turn is over. These attacks include First Guardian magic that he will use to teleport his tentacles around and generally be a colossal pain in the colossal ass.

Once the anchor tentacles are severed, Nyarlathotep will shoot a beam down onto the field, wounding everyone without threat of killing them. This will also crack the Rat Trap if Ghost Rose has not already done so, which you could say is its real purpose.

At this point, the player must begin phase 2, which is the "hit the immortal, player-powered First Guardian alien supergod, really hard," phase. However, non-Reader players will quickly discover
that Nyarlathotep regenerates his HP, like Demonhead Mobster Kingpin in his final forms (with as many visual callbacks to Problem Sleuth as possible to drive this home). This essentially nullifies any damage you cause… unless you can take out his health bar in a single Chain.

Nyarlathotep's "max health" would be high but nowhere near as high as previous bosses. Instead, it would be based on long of a Chain I feel would be reasonable for the average player to complete with a little practice, while still rewarding the player for picking the right characters, landing perfect timed hits and completing fraymotos. The math's boring, I just clipped the paragraph of it. Teal deer: land that high-damage Chain before the anchors grow back, and you win the game.

Speaking of fraymotos: you may remember the ones from ULS that showed up once you got a lot of the party into the same Chain. They were called "Ninth Hour," "Tenth Hour," etc. The fraymoto for using all twelve elements is not called "Twelfth Hour," however, but "Dawn." The fraymoto for using all sixteen party members is "Evening Dawn," symbolizing the hypothetical unified Troll/Human society starting its days at twilight. This attack is even stronger than Dawn, you can use it against any of the fights against Jack if you please (don't take my only getting around to it now as a sign that you can't use it anywhere else). If you try to use Evening Dawn in Hard to beat Nyarlathotep and end the game, it will net you an achievement ("Golden Dawn"), but the Squid will try to throttle you for it.

Achievements aside, the objective here is to defeat the anchor tentacles and then get Nyarlathotep in the face with an attack that knocking him out of the session outright. As you get near to punting out the bastard, however, he gets even more defensive. If you get near to killing Nyar but fail, he will once again fire that beam of his at the Rat Trap. This will delay your attempts to do a second Chain and may give him the chance to regrow his tentacles. If you do knock him out, however, he will launch another beam attack against the Rat Trap, destroying it as he's pulled away…

[We remain faded in whatever colour was left after Dargon's defeat.]

[Alternia by Beatfox begins to play. (Note that I go into a fair amount of detail and it may not be possible to "play along.")]

[0:00 (initial notes) – First few notes to darkness. A radial gradient mask reveals ROSE (mid-zoom sprites) on the largest chunk of the ruined Rat Trap, which, as we'll see, now better resembles a rock than anything else. She picks herself up and strains to her feet. She's clearly winded. Perhaps rubbing at her eyes, the circle widens, and she begins to shuffle toward screen right.]

[0:15 (strong note, preceding change of phrase) – ROSE catches sight of KARKAT, on left, being helped about by JOHN, on right, as Karkat's leg appears broken. JOHN should not be in exactly in fine shape himself, but for the sake of sprite reuse, he probably looks fine. ROSE heads towards them as they cannot. As she does, we see that the Rat Trap's has been reduced to a large, scorched boulder full of crags.]

[0:20 – The three confer, though we cannot hear them (or rather read them, as there are no text boxes from here to the ending). They appear to be discussing the situation. As this section closes, JOHN bounces a little, obviously hoping they've finished and beaten the bad guy. Between jostles, Karkat
protests ("Shut up! No! Shut up!") and holds out his free hand palm-up. After a brief moment, he
shakes his palm and shouts something to the others. A horizontal overlay is set over the scene,
showing a close-up on the trio's hands: JOHN holds out his free hand, and ROSE two. Between
them, they hold out sixteen fingers, JOHN and KARKAT with five fingers each, ROSE with five
and one.]

[0:33 (music returns from brief transition lull) – KARKAT begins counting survivors, starting with
JOHN and ROSE. As he does this, we get this segment's only speech: speech balloon appear above
Karkat as he counts off individual characters, the balloon showing off those characters' symbols.
KARKAT is initially very slow: he uses his free hand to point to John and says "[Ghost symbol]",
and then meticulously points to his hand in the zoom, and he closes his thumb to count JOHN as
accounted for. He then repeats these steps for ROSE ("[Terror symbol]").

As the music picks up and the sequence continues, ROSE'S spotlight-vision widens, especially when
she looks up with JOHN and KARKAT to see if any other survivors have arrived. As survivors are
counted off, hands are outright removed from the overlay, starting with KARKAT's, then ROSE's
full (right) hand, then JOHN's. Some arrive alone, but over time, the others arrive in unusual pairings
or groups: EQUIUS arrives supporting ERIDAN. SOLLUX and DAVE help one another back. These
unusual groupings make it less easy for the player to identify established patterns and thus
determine who is still missing. Nevertheless, as the others begin to gather in a nervous crowd around
the countdown.]

[1:06 (music briefly begins to lull, heading towards a sad point) – Finally, the count has been
reduced to one: ROSE's sole finger on her left hand. KARKAT looks up for another new face, but
does not seem to find one. The group begins to look around, including the others. JOHN may raise a
hand to count the others, and it should be too busy and chaotic for the player to be sure if everyone is
there. ROSE's free hand begins to climb to her mouth.]

[1:11 (trill in the piano, music begins to rise instead of fall) – JOHN, still counting, comes noticeably
to KARKAT and stalls. He asks "[Cancer symbol]" and when KARKAT replies with confusion,
he points to ROSE's finger in both the sprites and the overlay and repeats his pictoral question: did
Karkat actually count himself? As the music rises, KARKAT is agape at his oversight, points to
himself.]

[1:15 (crescendo) – KARKAT begins to shout out (though all we see is "[Cancer symbol]!") and
begins jumping around himself, smacks himself about the head before being hugged by JOHN. The
entire cast has survived, and KARKAT, JOHN and ROSE and FEFERI begin crying from the stress
while the rest begin spontaneous bursts of celebration. We are allowed to take this in for a moment.
Some seek out loved ones, while JADE and NEPETA grab KANAYA and form a celebration posse
that begins to go around grabbing others and hugging them, dancing with or around them, and the
like. They initially tend to background characters and don't interfere with the scenes to follow until
noted.]

[1:38 (piano note indicating the start of a next movement) – The camera pans, showing us ARADIA,
EQUIUS and DAVE with a relatively wide space away from any background characters. ARADIA
kisses EQUIUS, and DAVE, trying to pretend he hasn't noticed, turns to leave, only for EQUIUS to
grab him. This accidentally pulls DAVE to the ground and EQUIUS starts apologizing. We pan
away from them, past ROSE in the foreground, and see that SOLLUX watching the scene, and
ARADIA, with a half-smug smile. FEFERI watches all them all from just behind SOLLUX. She
reaches out for a moment, as if to touch SOLLUX's shoulder as before, but turns away instead,
synch with the piano trill that carries us to the next scene. FEFERI is soon taken out of shot.]

[1:58 (piano trill, dividing the woodwind segment) – As we pan the shot, we see VRISKA and
ERIDAN hugging and cheering, VRISKA punching him hard in the arm and getting punched back, and so forth. But they both soon stop, as they notice ROSE has recovered enough to catch them mingling, and step apart. Some characters may appear at the corners, but characters any closer should quickly leave so not distract from the scene to follow. ROSE removes the hand from her mouth, her expression neutral, favouring sad. She pauses, and when ERIDAN moves to speak, she raises a hand to stop him. She approaches.

[2:09 (music rises again) – ROSE stands behind between the two, and an overlay slides into place to cover their sprites, once again showing a close-up of their hands. In three frames, we see ROSE set them hand-in-hand, and she gives their interconnected hands a squeeze. The overlay holds for a moment, then retracts.]

[2:15 (new movement) – ROSE steps away, backwards (we may abuse the overlay to get her part-way away from the couple before it closes). She looks anxious.]

[2:20 – ROSE stops.]

[2:22 – She puts on a smile for her charges.]

[2:24 – ROSE raises her palm, the closest she can get to a wave goodbye.]

[2:27 (drumroll)– ROSE's smile breaks momentarily. She replaces it but quickly turns about. The camera follows, taking ERIDAN and VRISKA out of the frame as we watch ROSE…]

[2:29 (crescendo) – …colliding with JADE and NEPETA. The two are too excited to notice ROSE's condition, and quickly bounce past to harass others, probably ERIDAN and VRISKA.]

[2:23 (piano plays scale) – KANAYA, still tailing the rest of Team Green, catches Rose up and spins her about along with the piano, smiling at Rose as she lets her go (2:28 (strong piano notes)). She notices ROSE's tears and her smile fades, and she seems to be asking her what's wrong. ROSE wipes away the tears between shakes of her head, and then lies. KANAYA does not seem to believe her, and cocks her head slightly to the right (to see over ROSE'S shoudler towards VRISKA). ROSE reaches her left (foreground) to pull KANAYA into a kiss as reassurance.]

[2:49 (final piano notes of current motion before transition) – Others return to the shot, and begin to gather in comfortable poses, starting with KARKAT who sits down with JOHN, only for NEPETA to flop down across his good leg and into his lap, where she presumably starts purring. KARKAT shouts and gesticulates at her for a while before giving up and scratching her head. VRISKA and ERIDAN appear, then seem to realize they are holding hands and awkwardly reposition their hands to grab one another's shoulders. FEFERI, trying to disappear to one side, is caught by ARADIA, who pulls her closer and hugs her. FEFERI starts to protest, but then laughs once and holds on to ARADIA'S hands. In the background, EQUIUS and DAVE are having a talk and DAVE seems to have remembered that EQUIUS is easy to frustrate, which is probably a good sign. The camera pans somewhat, leaving ROSE and KANAYA somewhat left of centre as the rest of the cast comes into view for the final shot, possibly necessitating a zoom to make this final group shot look less busy than the opening shots.]

[3:03 (the false end of the song) – The rest of the cast appears to be continuing as normal (TEREZI settling in behind KARKAT to play with NEPETA over his shoulder, much to his consternation). Our spotlight focuses on JADE, however. She is more sedate than before but still smiling, but as she moves towards the centre of the screen, she notices something in the sky and begins to look up. In the final notes, KANAYA also notices, and heads to stand beside JADE, her one hand still in ROSE's.]
[3:11] (relative silence) – The others notice either the sight itself or their friends behaving strangely and then they too look to the sky. We cut to a splash screen of a GENESIS TADPOLE in fishbowl descending with a trail of stars. This splash page fades to a similar page where JADE and KANAYA reach out towards the TADPOLE.

[3:16] (final repetition of Theme) – Splash Page, final group shot. JADE and KANAYA hold the GENESIS TADPOLE as the others look on in confusion. Just before the image cuts out, it transitions to another with a few minor variations to imply a few moments' pause: the most critical variation will not be obvious to the viewer until they have seen the end of the Secret Strife.

[3:23] – Shot of the sky, where KANAYA, ROSE and some others are still looking. The constellation of CETUS has been branded on the shell of the Incipisphere: the gift is from HINDSIGHT as the first material prize for completing the GAME.

[3:30] – Briefly fade to black, and then return to the close-up image of ROSE squeezing ERIDAN and VRISKA'S hands. As the music fades, the image: consisting of Eridan's arm on the left, Vriska's on the left, meeting in the lower middle where they are joined by Rose's arms, is revealed to be the Symbol, as Rose note in a previous chapter: not a malevolent sign but representative of something else entirely.

[To a different tune: Credits.]

> The Ties That Bind

As you may recall, beating these flashes in Standard or higher earns a bonus ending, and this one begins with a shot of the cast's Incipisphere from the outside. The Sphere now glows with a pale blue light, implying that Hindsight has given the players a place to place their Frog. The Sphere is no longer obstructed by the hunching form of a Horrorterror: Nyarlathotep can now be seen in the distance. The camera follows the Horrorterror (fade-cutting to Nyarlathotep's battle sprite) and then goes further in, to where we see one tentacle in particular: the one that once belonged to Presence, though that role has passed and the eye is no longer marked with a vertical slash-pupil. We zoom into the eye, and see its thoughts, where Jack has envisioned himself (sprite art) as being bound by the Horrorterror in a fashion not unlike the Psiioniic.

Nyarlathotep begins to speak to this one Mind: always using floating text boxes, often more than one. These boxes sometimes speak simultaneously, and not always with the exact same message (not recorded below). Sometimes one voice picks up a line from another. The particulars of where the boxes are placed are not important, so long as they do not block the visuals, with two exceptions. The exceptions are Cetus, role now unclear, whose boxes remain on the left, and Foresight-now-Presence, whose boxes are in the centre.

**CETUS and PRESENCE:** Now, now, Jack.

**CETUS and PRESENCE:** It's not all bad, is it?

**CETUS and then PRESENCE:** Come now. I'll tell you a story to cheer you up.

[Jack is clearly not amused and struggles against his imaginary bonds.]
VOICES: Oh, Jack, it's not that bad.

VOICES: It's lovely story! About a grumpy old man…

[Some of the tentacles in Jack's vision form a knot. A light, come from nowhere, casts a shadow puppet onto the wall behind him, also come from nowhere. While the tentacle casting the shadow just looks like a knot, the shadow is magically that of Skipper Plumbthroat.]

VOICES: …who fell in with royalty.

[Another knot, this one a disproportionate Raspberry/Berryboo, ties up on the right.]

VOICES: And even though these two weren't fond of one another, they both knew they could trust one another to keep things safe.

[Another knot casts the impeccable shadow of a diamond above the scene. Impeccably, this tentacle is not even casting a shadow for the "stem" connected to the knot.]

VOICE [top-right]: Isn't that nice?

VOICE [bottom-centre]: I think that's nice.

PRESENCE: But one day, the man fell under the influence of a horrible demon!

[The Berryboo puppet retreats and quivers in fear.]

VOICES: And it seemed as though they were doomed!

VOICES: Oh, if only someone would come and save him from his mistakes!

VOICE [top-left]: Someone who cared for him!

VOICE [centre-left]: Someone who was willing to tell him he had made a mistake!

[The Berryboo puppet seems to gather her will.]

VOICES: And then?

VOICES: When all seemed lost…

VOICES: And the man seemed doomed, and all he needed was someone to take his hand and show him the way out?

[The tentacle puppeteers seem to prod their shadows in Jack's direction as if demanding an answer. He does not provide.]

VOICES: Do you know what happened, Jack?

VOICES: Of course you do.

VOICES: No one came.

[Plumbthroat puppet moves to centre stage, and the three puppeteers begin to unravel. The Plumbthroat puppet reforms first, having only shifted to look to the right. It is holding an arm behind its back, as if pulling back.]
VOICES: Because you

[The puppets take their new forms.]

PRESENCE: killed her, didn't you Jack?

[Indeed, the puppets have taken the form of Jack Noir the carapacian stabbing the Black Queen under a spade. The queen puppet looks down at the blade before bursting out in all directions: the puppeteer untangling the knot. As if blown away by the "explosion" the Jack puppet flinches and then also detangles, the tentacles flailing away from the queen.]

VOICES: I guess today's moral is to know how to deal with your limits.

VOICES: Even if it means relying on someone else to help you through.

[While it is not entirely in-frame as we have returned to Jack, who is now solemn and sad, the spade puppet transforms into a club.]

PRESENCE: Which is advice we plan on taking well to heart.

VOICES: Wouldn't you say, Jack?

[The tentacles, Jack and the background each flash with First Guardian power.]

PRESENCE: Well? [new box] What are we waiting for?

[The tentacles swarm the scene, covering Jack as they flash with First Guardian power. As he is enveloped, Jack lashes against his imaginary bonds as cacophonic laughter plays, made up from samples I was hoping to beg from the readership. Fade to black.]

Point.

Counterpoint...

Chapter End Notes

Karen's been working on the art above for a while now, and you can see several in-progress drafts at her DeviantArt, including the final lineart and a piece on Rose's outfit
Rose appears in another void, this one backed with misty cloud. To the right stands Foresight, who is still facing away into the future. His animations imply for a time that he is only dreamily connected to the present. Intermittently, a white lightning flash occurs, which is illustrated via an aurora in the distant mist. These strikes light the area below, but for the time being only seems to light small patches of "floor" around the two, as they stood in unseen spotlights in that moment. Every few lightning flashes (fourth, immediate next, third, repeat) the flash is green instead: the same green as the Green Sun.

Music is intended to echo and reflect Black Rose / Green Sun. You know the sort.

ROSE: [arms herself pre-emptively] So. Here we are.

FORESIGHT: Here we are.

ROSE: How soon until this descends to overcomplicated violence?

FORESIGHT: Oh, we have a few moments left, I think.

ROSE: [pause] …Why did you send me the message from Gl'bgolyb? [Foresight looks over his shoulder, into the present.] You voiced Prince Dargon, didn't you? As well as Plumbthroat. It was never credited, but that was because it was a distortion of Plumbthroat's, wasn't it?

FORESIGHT: Yes, that's right. You told Presence that you worked out her message.

ROSE: That's what I meant, yes. [Foresight smiles] The little boy, Milo. He was tempted three times by the demon Dargon. Those temptations are Cetus' little games. You told me the rest of the production team couldn't handle Gl'bgolyb's instructions. If that's the case, I suppose it's not surprising that the message ended up out of order, isn't it? The elements are presented forwards: parents, friends, friends; but the themes are backwards. If I take those temptations backwards we get straight to the heart of it, especially the responses.

FORESIGHT: It was a children's program. We were paid by the moral. We disguised it as one moral for children and left it for you to discover the moral as a young adult.

ROSE: …"Wish your friends back. You won't have to be alone. You won't have to suffer."

FORESIGHT: [smiles] "Once I would have done anything for your approval. But I never needed it." Is that how we're doing this? [Foresight seems to wake to Rose's presence, and seems interested] Throwing all the nuance out the window and cutting straight to the meaning?

ROSE: I don't really intend to speak to any of you after this. You may as well drop the "subtlety."

FORESIGHT: Your friend Vantas will have a few choice words about subtlety going out the window in a few hours from your perspective, but…

ROSE: Don't. I'll deal with the morning in the morning. Leave the future out of this.
FORESIGHT: We can only leave the future out of things for so long if you intend to follow the Dargon arc back to its beginning, Rose darling. But for now, we can talk about the past. We were worried the network would be furious about the closing segment with Milo.

ROSE: Don't start this as though you were really a Human.

FORESIGHT: Humour me.

ROSE: You and I tried that once, and your headmate blew off my friend's arm.

FORESIGHT: [smiles] Long story short, the network wasn't exactly pleased about our little life lesson about grief. Humans, Trolls... we never like it when something we desperately love is... replaceable. When all we can think about is the loss of love and support, the last, possible angle we could think of is that we don't need that thing we love, or if we do, that one day we won't. "Breakable" we can live with. Have to live with. Replacing is selfish.

ROSE: You wouldn't understand the half of it.

FORESIGHT: You'll have to forgive Cetus for dragging your friend's Brother into the mix, but she figured it would be best if you picked up the meaning in your own time. It's a little trick we picked up during production. Respecting the audience set the third season apart from the others, I think.

ROSE: Is that what this is to you personally? Children's entertainment?

FORESIGHT: It is to Cetus, so it is to me. Sburb tries to train teens into young adults capable of cultivate a world. In so doing, they have to lose their own guardians. It's part of the system, and so is grief for any species that grieves. And the Denizens don't like it when someone tries to circumvent the system.

ROSE: Cheaters.

FORESIGHT: Very good, Rose. Look at you, adapting to your new environment.

[Rose flips him off.]

FORESIGHT: Much better than your friends. You've all failed the game, you realize. In the Alpha timeline, there's more game to go, but you've all been forced out and there's no time left. So the way your Alphas complete their personal journeys isn't available to you, and you're paying for it. Jade Harley tried to circumvent that system; to avoid maturity itself. You tried to break it. Dave Strider tried to sleep through it, and your friend John had to be prodded through by the Trolls: who like so many other adults, grew up without absorbing any of life's lessons at all. [box] Don't look at these dreams as hostility, Rose darling. These are your last chances to actually win the game.

ROSE: Gods forbid we grow up on our own.

FORESIGHT: Don't blame the Denizen, Rose. She's a stooge, to be blunt.

ROSE: No, that I gathered. Cetus is trying to herd us through the game's lessons for maturity because she literally has no other means of existence. She's a strip of limited AI ripped from her game, just following her programmed objective. She probably doesn't even realize why she's doing it, except that The Game Demands. I couldn't help but notice you've arranged things so that Presence will lose all power once she's served her purpose. So they're both stooges.
Foresight: That seems unfair. Hindsight will go on forever, wouldn't you say?

Rose: Not likely. Once this is all wrapped up, she's going to be like an NPC that's said its peace. She will sit in her cave, repeating the same final blocks of dialogue even after they've fallen into irrelevance. "You must save the kingdom!" over and over, locked in the past.

Foresight: [laughs] Oh, I don't know about that. She and I have a repartee. We'll see what we can do.

Rose: I'm more concerned about the fact that you seem to be the only truly self-aware Mind in this entire set, and what that means for me.

[Foresight chuckles. Pause.]

Foresight: What was the next, again, from the Dargon arc?

Rose: "Wish your friends to stay. All of you, together, happy forever." Quoting old music?

Foresight: "1M GONN4 ST4ND BY MY 4SSHOL3 WH1L3 H3S ST1LL MY 4SSHOL3 3H?" The founding principle of common decency is that other people are also people. Everyone else is someone else, with their own goals, their own wants, their own shifting needs. Surprising how hard that can be to grasp. That's not just a child's problem to understand, I'd say most aren't really comfortable admitting that other people are out of their control and might not be there to benefit one's personal narrative forever, no matter how well-intended the thought. I was delighted when Presence lost her temper and brought in your friends to her little game.

Rose: Who better to prove that other people have opinions than someone else with their own opinions? Someone able to piecing together a critical clue before you?

Foresight: Quite.

Rose: I don't understand Presence's purpose in your ménage. You say Cetus is trying to train us to cultivate a world, while Presence wants us dead.

Foresight: You really are going to chase down the loose threads, aren't you? All right. Who said I want you alive? If I'm not mistaken, I believe I told you it doesn't matter. Suffice to say, however, you've been living in my past. That leaves you in Cetus' domain, Hindsight. Ergo, the impression that I even want to help you, even now as we reach the last of Cetus' trials—

Rose: Is simply because Cetus wants to help me, even if it is by opposing me. Ergo, Presence's objectives do not have to match hers, and neither does yours. All you have in common is a single, mystery objective shared between the three Minds. …Interesting.

Foresight: How so?

Rose: Because they bring your objectives into stark question. The Triumvirate has one common objective, but if you're the only legitimate Mind, I can't help but wonder if that might also be a bluff to your companions. What do you want from this, in your own right?

Foresight: Oh. You are lovely. Well, why don't we turn to that? I believe the next message from the show pertains to my role.

Rose: Your role in Cetus' mind games, not your role in the real world. It has nothing to do with
anything.

FORESIGHT: But a great deal to do with you.

ROSE: …"Wish to be wanted. Soon this rush will end and everything that makes you exciting will fade and you'll be left alone in the dark." Milo's rush of popularity on being the new kid… that's our fear of Jack, keeping us together, isn't it? Once Jack is out of the way, we have no reason to be friends. You want me to roll over and give a dramatic speech about my confidence in our ability to hold together as a community.

FORESIGHT: I have a feeling that's what Peixes' Lusus was getting at with her script.

ROSE: What, Hindsight didn't give you a script for this encounter of ours? We both know how this is supposed to go.

FORESIGHT: Do we?

ROSE: Yes. You contort some pointless duel into a lesson about how Milo trusted in his own ability to find friends and did just fine, and make that apply to me. Maybe find a few points to torment me over?

FORESIGHT: And at some inopportune moment, your friends will arrive and upset the entire board. That sounds boring to me, does that sound boring to you? Cetus' game seems to have run its course. Still. "The Game Demands." Are you ready to create a new universe, Rose darling?

ROSE: …

FORESIGHT: Hindsight's dream about the past was meant to see if you could face the reality of the past: that your guardians are gone and that you need to mature and fill their role. Presence's dream about the present was to teach you to face the reality of your present: that it's transient, doomed to mortality just like the rest of you, but never invaluable. Looks like all you have left to do is [he slowly arms with his Shadow Scythe over the rest of his text] to face the reality of your future.

[Deep in the background, a silhouette of Mirann transforming into Cetus may be visible. The cloudy background begins to swirl, first slowly and soon to violence.]

ROSE: No more moments left, I see.

FORESIGHT: No, I don't think so.

ROSE: …Who are you? I'm not too stuffed full of pride, I couldn't work it out.

FORESIGHT: That's because you're asking the wrong question. [he faces the future] …Put it this way. Hindsight was our avatar in your society's pasts. She haunted your ancestors and you until the day you entered the Troll session, to the end of Humanity and Trolldom and to the start of something new. You and your friends. Presence haunted that new society, that mish-mash, from its start and until the stroke of twelve.

[Music shifts, see below.]

FORESIGHT: You can't know who I am, because I don't yet exist. I come from the future, drawn from the whole for a new purpose.

FORESIGHT: If we both live through this, I'm the one who will haunt your descendants, child to
child, until the end of time!

[He raises an arm, ready to snap his fingers.]

**FORESIGHT:** Call your friends.

[He snaps his fingers and the lightning flashes brighter than before, clearing the mist and revealing the entire room. Visible in the fading light is a mass of tentacles, jutting bone-spears and a web of tangled sinew: Foresight has chosen to fight this battle atop his own real-world body in timeless space.]

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> Rose: Face Forward

Foresight begins the fight by *cheating, shit!*

**FORESIGHT:** I didn't want to give you the impression that fighting an extradimensional god would be simple, Rose darling.

**ROSE:** Oh, gods forbid.

After coming to grips with the fact that the meta-mind's scruples on cheating don't extend past the players' character arcs, the player is going to have to deal with the fact that Nyarlathotep itself directly attacks their characters not just during his own turn but both during the planning phase and during their own actions, in which case their timed hits are actually knocked back along the line and only take place if they succeed in a dodge! You get the cruelest ideas in the middle of debugging. Like with Ghost Bro, the idea is to train the player to watch the action, not the GUI.

The **Music** is my little helpful friend in this task. After Foresight's little finger snap, the lightning bolts are all timed against a music track that would require regular staccato or percussion elements. For inspiration purposes I've chosen *Birth By Sleep's Enter The Void*. The tentacles will only make their moves when you can see them, i.e. during the lightning strikes, so the music helps prepare the player for visual cues. The music, lightning and timing bar together do a much better job than the timing bar. Plus, it helps that Enter The Void is pounding and dramatic as all hell, which I think is only appropriate. You are standing on a god and fighting a psychopomp, who is cheating. Welcome to the bombastic!

To make matters worse, Nyarlathotep-the-body intercepts attacks and spells meant for Foresight, and isn't taking even negligible damage for its efforts. During the enemy turn, Foresight doesn't even act: this is because we are in his Past and he has no primacy. Your fight is against Nyarlathotep Prime with Foresight as a sitting target. Nyarlathotep Prime will also fully block damage from spells, including direct damage Ultimates (like Rose's), so using them both is a waste of time for the moment. During the enemy turn, Nyarlathotep will swat at the player, doing damage comparable to the final stage of the main fight, necessitating careful action and planning. Worse, because the Horrorterror is still trying to hide his timeless First Guardian powers from Rose, he is caked in Shade and will still belt out Shade spells from time to time (these would appear to come from the tentacle with Foresight's eyemouth, which would appear over the Mask's shoulder to cast the spells). Not a pretty sight, and definitely not an easy start.

Like in the fight against Vriska, he player will not be able to win with Rose alone. This time, they
will have to follow Foresight's advice to win: by calling Rose's friends.

At the start of every few turns, probably every three, the player can call in one of Rose's allies, one at a time (this can be skipped if the player wants to make things hard on themselves, maybe tied to an achievement for winning with a minimum party size). The player can only summon three allies in the first batch (bringing the party to 4), after which they will be delayed until they reach a milestone in the fight, described below. At this point they can summon 4 more over the course of the next milestone. This continues for four milestones until all 16 party members are presumably present. The summoned party can be anyone in the cast, not just someone with a Chain-connection to Rose. The strategy is entirely in the player's hands: call in Equius for a meat shield, call the Humans to form a Chain with Rose, however you please. Unlike Rose's allies in the previous Secret Strifes however, these summoned allies seem to be Dream Vessels like Rose learned to create ages ago (black-eyed, perhaps, to contrast dead characters' white), and not Rose's sleeping friends. Whatever they are, Rose will need a number of them to so much as lay a hand on her opponent.

You see, the player will only be able to hit Foresight in one way: an extended chain combo, just like getting past Jack to cut the lines holding his power balloons. Nyarlathotep blocks every attack meant for Foresight, so the player has to launch attack after attack to knock aside each calamari parry. This is not exactly forgiving, but the game only needs you to land a single hit before breaking the chain and moving the fight to its next stage. The game does not care how hard the hit actually is. Hit him with Smuppets from John's puppetKind for all I care (that should have definitely been a thing, why am I only thinking of this now?). The first block requires only a small chain, 5 hits or so, but each subsequent one will increase the barrier until the final block requires something to the effect of a 20 or 25 hits in total. Sure, the game can go further, but it would have just been a douche move to punish the player for not being perfect, even here in the Secret Strife (even if we assume every character had a 3-hit-combo like Rose, that would still give the player a minimum of 48 possible hits in a perfect chain, and many characters would have had 4 or 5-combos, so 25 is hardly sky-high). Good players might very well be able to end the fight in just a few turns with the right allies, and that's perfectly fine by me.

Good advice would be to start by bring in meat shields (Karkat or Equius), debuffers (Terezi, Gamzee) and Healers as necessary (Feferi, Nepeta), while Rose does defensive buffs, keeping in mind the limits on party progression. After that, characters actually meant for hitting combos (Dave, Sollux, John) and certain offensive buffs (like Eridan's) will help you clear the higher barriers. Heavier-hitting fighters (Tavros, Kanaya, Aradia) and missile troops, who can only use a single shot a turn (Jade and Vriska especially), are much less useful here and might even be a liability.

As you are dealing with the final few tentacles from the final set, Foresight finally looks over his shoulder. Should you hit the button to land the final hit, time slows, and Foresight rounds to face the Present. There, instead of bringing his weapon to bear, he throws aside his mask in the direction of his attacker. The screen suddenly goes black, and we see only the disembodied face bounce along the ground at normal speed. Once it settles, it too fades out, and the Symbol appears in the background. Presence's line is prominent: the Critical Moment is taking place in the session, or so it first seems. Foresight's line cracks along the tip, but after it does, Presence's line begins to fade rapidly, and Foresight's begins to glow with full prominence as Nyarlathotep is expelled from the session and the Strife carries past the epilogue and into the future…

If the player beats Foresight without summoning all fifteen allies, they will simply appear before the start of the next round of combat. Presumably Rose called them instead of gawking at the transformation sequence like every other RPG protagonist. My hero.
In this version, after we cut to black, the Mask disappears and we catch a vision (splash page). In it, we see a trio of prostate figures in cult robes in a dark-lit room inside a thaumaturgic circle, hoods up on the two flanking. A camera pan shows us the face of the central figure: a woman in her sixties, Troll/Human hybrid, with white-blond hair Jade's green eyes (or possibly Nepeta's…) and familiar horns. Her face to the ground, she is terrified. Before her, just outside the circle, is a clawed foot. One toe is bent as if broken, cranked thirty degrees upwards and jutting out into the air. We cut to this creature next, caked in shadow, but not for long. Obfuscated by the darkness, we cut back to the sprites in the Dream Bubble, where the Green Sun flares to life in the distance, revealing Nyarlathotep's avatar to the society yet-to-be.

Prince Dargon appears as a combination of Hindsight's **Bloody Tongue** avatar from Earth, and the Imperial Drones of old, modified with Sollux's horns on the head (astride the tongue-tentacle) and Nepeta's distinctive claws. A pair of smaller arms spout from its waist to hold its old scythe. Music from the cutscene to the fight may have been **Heavenly Horrors** though Heavenly Horrors is just a Corpse Party remix and I would have hesitated to use a non-Homestuck remix in this project (see my Sonic worries in ULS). To conceal his First Guardian powers, he is once again covered in a cloud of Shade.

Prince Dargon opens the fight with simple combos, probably no more impressive than one attack at a time! His true power lies in defence. If you hit Prince Dargon with a Chain, he will take the strongest Chain of the turn (player always acts first) and return it to them with 50% of the hits during his turn using his Scythe, which you quickly discover is actually Death's Scythe from Problem Sleuth, resulting in an esoteric mash of unpredictable counterattacks. His normal attacks continue to be from his claws and bulk, though he will also attack with the odd Shade spell and the odd Prince technique borrowed from Eridan to reflect his name, but his real power is waiting in reserves.

During the fade to black and splash screen transition, something fundamental changed about the battlefield: the player is once again standing on solid black emptiness. Nyarlathotep now appears in the background, having finished its attack on the session. As it does so, its silhouette is slowly but surely moving toward the Green Sun. The player may not realize it, but this is actually a timer. They are essentially just being given an opportunity to learn Dargon's attack pattern.

After a few turns (at least 6), the Horrorterror blocks out the middle of the Green Sun, powering the Prince of Shade with the mother of all eclipses (the Shade symbol, an eclipsed sun, flashes over the affair to drive this home). The fight now starts for real. Dargon gathers back the mists from before, though the Green Sun's corona continues to shine through: indeed, it seems to get brighter as the mists get thicker (though here in the commentary we can admit that this is partially so that it isn't overwhelmed). Dargon now begins to add attacks to his combos and casts spells nearly every turn. But his real power comes from disrupting your allies.

As you begin to wheedle away at Dargon's HP (starting immediately if you did especially well in the first six turns), Dargon will use a special technique in place of his normal actions for the turn. Like his and everyone else's actions, this causes and element or class symbol to flash behind him, but this time the symbol is the Foresight symbol and not "Prince" or "Shade." Dargon will then grab four of your dream-allies at random and, and cause them to revert to his side. The mechanic is no more complicated than that and has been done in dozens of RPGs before, but there is a narrative complication: this spell causes a rough, outlined map to appear on the mists behind as the Green Sun temporarily fades into the background. The map is divided into sixteen territories (with fourteen on land and two territories across the oceans) and four blocks will change to red based on which
characters are grabbed (the territories are pre-set before the game begins but the characters grabbed are random). The meaning is clear: he is foreshadowing a future war between the cast members or their descendants. The fact that this selection is random raises the question of whether or not Dargon is lying about this upcoming war, but that is a discussion best left to the player.

The player's former allies are fully healed when they are forced to defect, and the player is probably better off taking them out before moving on. However, if you defeat two of them, this dialogue occurs:

**ROSE:** I don't get it, this is Presence's game all over again. I don't know my friends, they're violent might not be trustworthy. What's your point?

**DARGON:** The point's not to show you that they might turn on you, Rose, the point's to see if you can [symbol flash favouring right branch] plan to kill them for it!

After Dargon has been dropped down even further in health, he once again calls on his powers and the map floods with more red, taking out several random bordering territories. You will immediately lose those characters as well, but they will not all revert to his side. As "time" goes by as Dargon advances through multiple wars, the other characters begin to die off, presumably of old age: first the Lowbloods, then the Humans, then the Midbloods. Highbloods persist for the entire fight. Characters on your side stay alive until grabbed, at which point they pass on immediately. Feferi being an especially unlucky opponent as she will revive her companions until they die of old age - I might very well have ensured she stayed on your side until a set point.

In the place of dead allies, Dargon produces a Hybrid Descendant when each "era" begins. The Descendants are generic enemies, and all Troll-Human Hybrids: there are only three sprites for them, one male, one female and one gender ambiguous. Sea Hybrids may have been added using the sprite accessory system I mentioned in ULS. While I don't particularly want to assign combat roles based on gender, sprite reuse demands, so I would probably make the males use missile weapons, the females use high-damage melee weapons and the ambiguous characters use high-combo melee weapons. These generic Descendants are much weaker than the player characters (they have no Sburb powers for example), but this is only fair considering the player is losing allies in bulk. It also helps that your loss of allies ensures that Dargon will have shorter scythe counter-combos (to prevent him from overwhelming you on his own), but that's a tarnished silver lining. Once Dargon's allies outnumber your own, the game switches so that he is flanking you instead of the other way around, with Dargon himself on the right flank.

The fight carries on like this for several rounds, though after a while, the player may start to notice odd exceptions to the rules above. Rose is never grabbed by the spell, for example, nor are several others: Kanaya, Terezi, Vriska and Eridan.

When Prince Dargon is defeated, his remaining allies will die, there is a white flash, and the Foresight line cracks down the middle. If you haven't been paying close attention, the three breaks in the line are actually predictable: the topmost break is the Mask line, the middle is the Trueform line and the bottom is the Trial. As best fits Foresight, his Trial, reflecting the future of its participants, lies closest to future itself, and has yet to occur…

> Rose: Memento Mori
After the battle, Rose finds herself among the same allies as before: Terezi, Vriska, Eridan and Kanaya remain from her initial group, now all on the same flank (the left). Their eyes are back to normal and they appear to be her real friends. Dargon has been disrupted into a black cloud and appears harmless, not that anyone involved was that stupid.

**Terezi:** That was fun. Let's do that again.

**Eridan:** That actually was kind of fun.

**Kanaya:** It's not every day you chainsaw a god.

**Rose:** You're all genuinely here, then?

**Vriska:** Looks like. Where'd everyone else go?

**Rose:** Hard to say. Someone's trying to make a point. [She shouts up at the cloud] All right! I've seen your nightmare future! And I get your point. You want me to play up faith in the future, well here's my… [She glances at Vriska and Eridan] my whole motherfucking family.

[Hindsight appears to the left, of the party. Music soft but ominous. The character react with confusion and suspicion. Dargon begins slowly reconstituting as Foresight, appearing in a cloak and without his scythe, finishing when noted.]

**Hindsight:** That's wonderful for you, Rose darling, but we've got things that have to be done. The game has another way about these, and it would have been much tidier, but I'm afraid I may have damaged it.

**Eridan:** Yeah, I had a feeling this game was messed from the start.

**Hindsight:** One of Presence's demands: the Bard of Rage is gone and the God Tiers scourg'd to keep her safe from harm. It took us universes to get your new power right without the God Tiers. But the game doesn't realize they're gone. It still expects you to take the traditional route.

**Vriska:** [Floater] Wait, why did nobody tell me there were god tiers?

**Eridan:** [Floater] Because there aren't, idiot, weren't you listening?

**Rose:** [Floater] Quiet.

**Hindsight:** The game won't entrust its precious Universe to players that would just abandon its reward when the going gets tough. Bad things happen when a Universe isn't tended, isn't able to grow and produce in its ideal conditions.

**Rose:** [The only one who is calm] What kind of things?

**Hindsight:** Where are your Gods, I wonder?

**Rose:** [Floater] Ah…

**Hindsight:** Not guarding your alpha timeline, not guarding this splinter. [Foresight is now nearly reconstituted, he is once again facing the future.] Selfish at best. Weak at worst, for your sakes. Cowards, children, cheaters that cared nothing for their task and understand nothing of their reward at all.
ROSE: [eyes Foresight's shadow cautiously] And what did they have to do to prove they were up to the task?

HINDSIGHT: Things you've been through. Recover a lost loved one, lose a living one. Things you've substituted. There's just the one task left. They had to face their own death.

[Foresight's cloak has formed and begins to billow about his shadowy form, making him more resemble the psychopomp his appearance was meant to belie.]

KANAYA: …To what end?

HINDSIGHT: For what they had. For what they wanted.

TEREZI: How?

HINDSIGHT: A road you can't take, due to our interference. We've arranged a substitution.

ROSE: Is that what this is? [She looks back at Foresight] You want us to fight death?

[The Music softly fades.]

FORESIGHT: [proper text box] Oh Rose. I'm not Death. To use your metaphor, I'm the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come. I will haunt humanity until the end of time. But you were wrong before. The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come isn't eternal. Eventually he has to die, when time dies and Death and Entropy take everything. Even me.

[He raises a hand, which begins to be blown away in pieces by the wind, then looks back over his shoulder.]

FORESIGHT: Even you. You've found your family, Rose, but you're only drawing out a long pain. Your confidence can't protect them, you will die long before, your universe will fall into sins and devils not your own. We must fill our time and your family will soon be left in my hands. You might not believe my "Nightmare," but stretch it over millennia and you'll see my hand. We've ruined your chance to guide your children through immortality and one day you'll leave your children to their murders and their hate until true death takes us all, and I will guide them.

[he has nearly dissipated from feet to shoulders]

FORESIGHT: Face death and take your reward: to be food for worms and your words for snakes that would twist every syllable to fuel their ends for a thousand years. Mother of the New World, I will nurse their crimes and crush your lingering soul!

[With that, he has been blown away, last of all by the lips. Rose is stunned by the weight of this, and Eridan and Vriska begin bickering over the meaning in a few sentence fragments conveyed in floating text boxes. Both Kanaya and Terezi reach toward Rose, but when Kanaya sees Terezi, she steps aside, letting Terezi step forward to speak to Rose. However, Terezi has not so much as taken the step when she looks forward and smells the worst.]

TEREZI: W34PONS!

[The others turn or, in Rose's case, jar awake. Full wide zoom. The Skaia symbol flashes in the background. Then, the camera pans right. There, the camera pans to show a sparkling bead of light, cycling colours as it descends from above. It settles high above eye level for the teens, but is soon darkened as a skull-head forms around it. The eye continues flashing colours as the body appears,
then the body, then the cloak, then the staff. His health vial appears above him, but is empty save for a series of flashing question marks.

**HINDSIGHT and FORESIGHT:** [floaters] Goodbye, Rose, darling.

**ROSE:** [beat, exclaims, looks up in alarm] They're gone.

**VRISKA:** They're what?

**ROSE:** I don't know! They're just...! [she snaps out of her stupor, and turns back to the others as she takes her place beside Kanaya.] All of you, stay behind me!

[Their opponent seems spaced, but at the others' hostile reaction, he focuses somewhat, grinning cockeyed, and raises his staff to an angle. In a flash of light forming the Foresight line, it is transformed into a machine gun, and the symbol forms the final "Secret Strife" banner.]

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> Die

(The bookmark jolts as if glitched, suddenly being replaced with "> Live" from the main body of the flash before lurching to "> Face Death" which is the title as it appears in the list of bookmarks.)

**ERIDAN:** Let's hit him, Roz!

Lord English was the final boss of the fic's games long before he was the final boss in the actual comic. Earlier on, the only thing we could be absolutely sure about him was that he was a threat to the Horrorterrors, and beyond that he didn't seem to be any more than some sort of worldbuilding background note. My notes make reference to drawing him in shadows if he was never truly revealed, with the odd little detail that I would draw him with frog's toes! Can't always be right!

Lord English opens the fight by using a technique called the "Vast Crunch." This begins to collapse the Dream Bubble the way we've since seen Lord English do so well. This starts a timer, warning the player that they will automatically suffer Game Over after a certain number of turns as the Dream Bubble falls to pieces. This is meant partially to prevent the player from turtling, but is mostly just to scare them: English is perfectly capable of routing the party faster than that. And no, dying is not the correct course of action and will only result in Game Over, as normal. On top of this timer, Vriska cannot reduce English' luck with Steal Luck, though she will still gain Luck for the attempt (indicators that appear during Steal Luck would indicate that she is stealing from "Infinite," so Vriska's luck might say "50 + 36" while his would say "Infinite – 36"). You also can't Distact him. Frankly, LE seems plenty Distacted as it is.

And we haven't even talked about his attacks. Like the machine gun. This is the single fastest attack in the game, meaning no offence to Bro, and a group attack. And the mouth laser. And his spells: which involve him using Felt attacks left over from my early draft of attacks for Jack. Doze makes him invincible for the turn (he uses this at set points in his HP bar and they serve as an inconvenient way of gauging his condition), Trace causes him to automatically counter every enemy attack for a turn with that cane of his, Clover minimizes enemy damage, Stitch heals (also at set HP marks) and of course, Biscuits, which does nothing but produce a question mark and costs LE a turn.

Those restrictions in place, Lord English is not invincible: his health vial is actually hidden and much
lower than even Cetus and the Jormungandr, for reasons you'll see in a moment. That brings me to the other reason behind the Vast Crunch: to encourage the player to win as fast as possible. It's really the best possible course of action. And that means Chains. That means the best, most desperate chaining the player's ever used in the course of the three game. To this end, Rose and her friends gain a special, hidden Fraymotif, *Play the Rain* during this segment if you Chaining together all five (winning the Secret Strife will also unlock it during the main flash). This Fraymotif causes Rose to do a combo with the other members while the Symbol flashes in her favour instead of the Horrorterror's: Terezi for Hindsight (Rose taking responsibility for herself as she moves into adulthood by taking on a partner), Vriska and Eridan for Presence (Rose living the moment ideally, realizing she has to and will shortly break up with them), and Kanaya for Foresight (and hope in the future).

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**<E3: LE at 80% Health>**

**VRISKA:** Anyone noticed if we're hurting it yet? Kanaya? Chainsaw working: yes, no?

**KANAYA:** Nothing on my end.

**ERIDAN:** Here neither.

**TEREZI:** You got any friends from the future about to jump out and save us, Rose?

**ROSE:** I don't understand. The other two had health bars. Hindsight's ghost, Presence's Gamzee…

**TEREZI:** [*Mind symbol flash behind her as if using a spell*] But what if those were real?

**ROSE:** [*exclaims*] You think this one is a. Dream Puppet?

**TEREZI:** That means this thing isn't invincible, it's just an subconscious impulse given form.

**ROSE:** Or a primal fear. The Horrorterrors don't have a concept of death normally, the idea would be terrifying to them.

**KANAYA:** …Does this mean anything to the rest of us?

**ROSE:** It means we are hurting it. They want us to beat it so they so they'll believe they can.

**ERIDAN:** [*exclaims*] It means we can give the squid a full-frontal lobotomy, is what it means!

**VRISKA:** Now that I can get behind! [*arms*] Get the chainsaw, Kanaya, we're doing some good old fashioned brain surgery!

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Now this all said, this encounter with LE described so far lacks the traditional secret strife surprise twist. Unfortunately the central mechanic that made this superboss unique was tied to a game mechanic I dropped after testing. The same mechanic was also tied the Subjugglator Makara form of Canon Gamzee from ULS, but I at least thought of a replacement for that, this one’s going to have to go without. Now that doesn't mean much to you, I could honestly babble here all day about the dead mechanic, but consider it a gesture of good faith that, even here, at the end of all things, I'd rather throw up my hands and tell you the truth than bullshit that broken mechanics would have made any
When Lord English's health is depleted, Rose automatically attacks him another time, engaging *Play The Rain*. But her partners in this are different from before: the partner for Hindsight is her Mom (or more possibly Roxy, if her sprite was used in the main flash), her partners for Presence are John, Jade and Dave, and her partner for Foresight is someone new entirely: like Foresight himself, someone who has yet to be. This person is a young Troll girl, one of the clones, who signals to Rose and attacks with a Mentorship Chain from the Roxyverse, and it extends further than any of the connections Rose has had or has now. Their attack finishes English entirely, and the scene fades.

**FORESIGHT**: …I suppose, even Gods can hope.

*Epilogue*

[The final shots of the main flash re-occur. Jade is looking up at the sky in surprise, stepping forward toward the Genesis Tadpole, just off-screen. Rose too locks eyes on the sky, and approaches Kanaya. But as she goes to take the final step, the others freeze in place. She stops in surprise, then frowns and takes Kanaya's hand all the same. This "glitch" in motion is hidden in the main flash by the cut from sprites to splash page. Rose takes a deep breath, and waits. The camera pans left, behind the group.]

**ROSE**: I thought Foresight's lesson was that I had to have hope for the future. Like in the cartoon. But his lesson wasn't even in the dream, was it? I wouldn't have… wouldn't have understood.

**HINDSIGHT**: No. The lesson was in your future. Just like Sburb forces the player to face death before they're mature enough to understand why, you had to prove you would give the right answer without knowing why as well.

**ROSE**: …"I trust every Human here to take you out without me." From someone from my future. From someone whose relationship with me is [she chokes briefly, the viewer may not notice] just beginning to start.

**HINDSIGHT**: …[she drums her fingers, between impatience and nervousness, on the haft of her harpoon]

**ROSE**: The game never did care about us risking our lives to prove we deserve the new world, did it? It was just… symbolic.

**HINDSIGHT**: The game cares very much. It's a mechanical system. Its designers had to create a mechanical way of testing if you had succeeded. You could still cheat. But you didn't, not this time.

**ROSE**: And that symbol of yours, and these lessons, they're not about me, or my well-ordered mind. It's like what Foresight said: the lessons were for children, but when I looked back at them as a teenager, they had new meaning. But the third lesson could only be understood from the future… another meaning, as an adult. The symbol's the same.

**HINDSIGHT**: Hindsight, Presence, Foresight. A well-ordered mind.

**ROSE**: To a teenager. But as an adult… I'm seeing the bigger picture. The dot becomes the well-
ordered mind. The lines connect the mind out into the world, to other minds. Society. The symbol means "Society."

HINDSIGHT: …

ROSE: So where do I fit in the metaphor? Am I the dot? Am I the orphan boy who lost his family, his hope, his friends, and the rest? … I trust every Human here to take you out without me. No. This isn't about the orphan boy any more. This isn't about the children's lessons, or the teenager's. Foresight's lesson wasn't some feel-good schlock about holding out hope for an uncertain future. It's about the lessons… coming back, when I'm in new roles. Because the future becomes the present becomes the past. Because the world is full of every problem you've shoved in my face and more. One day I'm not going to be the orphan boy lost on his own. I'm going to be the parents in traction. Because one day I'm going to die.

[She faces over her shoulder, turning, ultimately, between the screen and Hindsight, not letting go of Kanaya's hand.]

ROSE: Well I trust them! I trust Dave, and John, and Jade, and Terezi, and Kanaya and Eridan and Vriska! [Her anger dies and she looks down.] And I trust them to get over me the way the people I trusted… trusted me to live without them. And I trust them to know what they're doing every day, even when things are at their worst. I trust them to have grown from me. And I trust them to have hope for the future even when I'm not there to give it to them.

[Hindsight once again drums her fingers on her harpoon. She points her harpoon toward the constellation and tadpole, and behind her the Shade emblem appears, slowly spinning.]

HINDSIGHT: That is a gift for you.

[The Shade emblem slowly fills from one side, the eclipse it symbolizes coming to an end as it returns to the Light symbol. As it completes, Hindsight fades away, its symbol following.

In its wake lurks Presence, formerly Foresight. He stands stronger and taller than before. Rose glares at him, and turns back to the sky, much as he did to her at the start of the Secret Strife.]

ROSE: I don't believe in your nightmare scenario.

PRESENCE (Dargon): So I gathered!

ROSE: You know, it's hard.

PRESENCE (Dargon): What's that?

ROSE: Growing up. And realizing that one day, there's no more time to grow.

PRESENCE (Dargon): I suppose you could say I wouldn't know.

ROSE: …Tell me something.

PRESENCE (Dargon): Of course.

ROSE: You've spent all this time planning for right now. This is your time. Time for your plan. To find Lord English, and stop him from killing your people with Jack's powers and your own.

PRESENCE (Dargon): That is the hope.
**ROSE:** Then tell me: let's say I spend the rest of my life studying the universe. Every clue I can find, every scrap of the true reality… Tell me why I have the feeling that if I did all that, I don't think I would find your name next written down as the glorious killer of Lord English? And when I see that, what should I assume happened to you? Because I think you're lying. I think, no matter how you started, you lost interest in Lord English. I think you used him as a lie to convince the others to build you one last permanent dollhouse that would last, Sburb free until the end of time.

**PRESENCE (Dargon):** [looking discouraged] …May I ask you a question to answer yours?

**ROSE:** Of course.

**PRESENCE (Dargon):** It may take you all those years of study to answer. Like your friend Makara, sometimes revelations have to wait for the proper moment. For the time being, I'll give you something to think about. One last word of advice from Foresight come-and-gone.

**ROSE:** Agreed.

**PRESENCE (Dargon):** If I was watching your universe, as a survivor or a cheater, I would know your future at this very moment. Agreed?

**ROSE:** Yes.

**PRESENCE (Dargon):** Are you happy with Kanaya?

**ROSE:** Yes. I think we're going to be all right.

**PRESENCE (Dargon):** Would you be all right without her?

**ROSE:** I… think so. I owe her a lot. But to continue a theme, I believe in me without her, and her without me near as much as I believe in us together. So I guess the choice is ours.

**PRESENCE (Dargon):** Then are you going to stay with her?

**ROSE:** Yes, I think so. So long as we're both happy. So long as we're both all right.

**PRESENCE (Dargon):** Of course. Very happy. Very safe, locked away in her precious breeding caves, [Rose frowns] life lived by dim light among slime and infant grubs, no chance to live. But happy with your wife.

**ROSE:** [a smile breaks through] Heh. "Wife." I can't really see Kanaya going for a Human label like that.

**PRESENCE (Dargon):** Why not? You don't think Kanaya would notice you stifling? She's not so unobservant. [Rose's frown retursn] I don't think she'd let a trifle like a label stand between you and what happiness you can scrape; in exchange for continued affection. Devotion.

**ROSE:** …

**PRESENCE (Dargon):** During your dream with me, you did… a curious thing. You called your Guardians from the Past, your friends from the Present… and hope from the Future. That future: a student of yours?

**ROSE:** Yes, I think so. Someone who trusted me. A friend? Someone I could trust with all of my knowledge and experience. Someone who could take all that experience and turn into some newer
and greater than I could do before I die.

**PRESENCE (Dargon):** That sounds lovely.

**ROSE:** It was a possibility.

**PRESENCE (Dargon):** Was she jadeblooded?

**Rose:** [surprise, but not full alarm (or exclamation effect). *On some level, she already knew where her mind lay.*]

**PRESENCE (Dargon):** Goodbye, Rose darling.

[Presence teleports out, and the camera pans back to Rose as this begins to sink in. Suddenly, the others return to motion, and Jade and Kanaya reach toward the tadpole, the final notes of Alternia repeat, and it is now clear with our new knowledge that Rose is looking at Kanaya, not the bowl or the constellation. By focusing only on the two of them, we notice Rose's hand squeezing Kanaya's, and brings our story to a close.]

Chapter End Notes

That's the end. I will be following up with a postmortem to be posted here on AO3 (what with its new policy on Fandom Meta), which will follow not long from now, though I figured I should account for any final thoughts from the readers, especially before the postmortem steps in all brash and authoritative about What Things Meant What Things and so on. For those interested in the postmortem, I will post one final chapter linking to it later on.

For those not interested in the postmortem: thank you for reading, there was absolutely nothing to keep you around for this helter-skelter of commentary and noise and I thank you for that immensely. Good luck in all you go out to do, I will miss you all.

October 29, 2010 — June 8, 2013
Postmortem & Analysis

As promised, the postmortem is now up.

One final time: thank you all. I will see you if I see you around.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!