Summary

John is one of eight mech pilots heroically protecting Earth from an alien invasion. Pretty easy on the moral choices. See evil monster from space, kill evil monster from space.

Only then he actually meets one of them face to face.

Notes

Based upon a kink meme prompt:

"Super Robot Stuck"

*Neon Genesis Evangelion does weird stuff to your brain and this won't leave my head. Homestuck as a Super robot show. The kids pilot giant robots to fight the invading Alien Empire of Alternia, (and maybe the robots combine?) The Trolls are the enemy (but are not really bad guys and have tragic reasons for fighting because that's how it goes in these shows). And they fight using giant robots based off their
"lusii."
Alas I am not huge on combining robots, so in the end this is pretty much Evalternia VS GundamEarth. Maybe the carapaces combine, who knows. XD

Mentions of possible non-con (no actual non-con.)

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

He'd fought the red one before. Well, technically they were all black as space, star-blotting monster-shaped holes; only in between armored, superhard chitin segments sometimes there would be a flash of color. Tendons maybe, who knew. Whatever. It made it easier on John, identifying them like that. If he had to check out the shape of their armors and their weapon arms and then match it to whatever random-ass legend Rose had chosen to stick on it, seriously who cared about those, they made him so sleepy...

He'd fought the red one before. It wasn't the best fighter, but it was cautious and smart, and it could hit both with the outer curve of its pincers like a club, and with the inside, serrated, metal-tearing blade on the inner curve. Hence why he'd never managed to smash it to death in one hit and why Roxy kept stealing the highest kill record from him; he wasn't fond of hard vacuum and explosive decompression, and after the last time it blocked his weapon in mid-swing and slipped under his guard to shred up his cockpit he was in no hurry to rush it again. Vacuum was pretty unnerving when all you had left between it and you was one piddly helmet with fifteen minutes of oxygen.

"Warhammer to Base, Cancer broke through, in pursuit!"

It had never, ever rushed him before.

Never thrown itself straight at his raised hammers, like it didn't care it'd be crushed through in one single blow, so long as its corpse could tackle the shit out of John's mech. He'd been frozen stupid a half-second too long and it had slipped underneath his hammer head, even though it left a gouge down its back. The impact threw them ass over head and whirling in a ball as John's head rattled inside his helmet, shock-foam hardening along his spine and his security harness leaving friction burns right through his flight suit.

And then here he was, letting his hammer go and tearing at its shoulder-blade plates to peel it off him, and it planted its clawed mantis legs in his mech's crotch and kicked off, like John was a mere stepping stone to...

... to, fuck, fuck.

"Base to Warhammer, was Cancer alone?"

John checked his instruments at a glance and throttled more speed out of his engines. "As far as I could see, but --"

"I'm sending out Excalibur to fill your position. I can't spare you any backup for the hunt -- it's imperative that you catch it!"

Too far before him, the giant, insectoid space monster kept building up speed, plasma blooming fire engine red at its back like butterfly wings.

Earth kept growing in their sight. John ignored it, seeing only the trailing afterimages on his heat camera like the taillights of a truck. He was gaining, he was, but too slow, they were already screaming through the thermosphere. He could see nothing but those serrated pincers, those clawed second-arms, the monster-feet. It was tall like a ten-stories building and it shed nuclear radiation like Bec shed white hairs on black couches. No one knew how the species managed oxygen issues or if they ever needed it but they were organic, John knew, he'd brought back enough fragments of alien encrusted in his hammers for copious amounts of analysis, and organic beings had to eat.
"Base, communication breakdown in two minutes. I won't catch up before the stratosphere."

Warhammer wasn't optimized for atmosphere operations. It could manage, though. He would manage.

"Acknowledged." A pause. "See you at dinner, John."

He let her hear a smile in his voice and lied to her. "Sure, Rose."

He clicked off his radio.

They fell into the Earth's gravity well, caught and speeding up, tearing the air into howling fire. John's mech rattled all around him, viewscreens sparking with static and sudden flames, instruments beeping to turn him deaf; he clicked them off, one by one, security warnings, low on fuel, G-forces too high, slow down, slow down.

Cancer wasn't slowing down either, even though he could see the chitinous armor curl and smoke, dulled at the edges -- weak to fire, fat lot of good it did all of them fighting up in space. John had a burst of inappropriate laughter thinking about General Harley's face if he recommended they invite the aliens down home for a barbecue.

Maybe the old man would even laugh and say why not.

The Pacific sprawled under them, the insectoid shape like a black hole going right through gorgeous green-blue waters from that angle. John bypassed a last security lock and put the last of his fuel into a burst of speed, bet it all into catching up before it touched down.

He bet the monster didn't expect that.

He rammed it straight in the spine, right between its plasma wings. He couldn't tell if the wings went out on impact, or if he was just losing consciousness. Probably both.

His cockpit was filled black as alien armor, light-devouring, an endless hole. They fell.

--


"Oh, shaddup."


"Dave, gotaheadache, alarm, turnidoff."


"Dirk? Pretty please? Cherry on top? Your Majesty?"

Beep. Beep. Beep. Why was he sleeping in a ... uh. Pillow fort? This felt like a padded chair, but sideways. And if he moved --

"Ow! Ow, ow, crap, darn-danged -- fucktarded excuse for a -- ow!"

A faint red glow blinked on and off through layers and layers of shock-absorbing foam. The harness was snug across his chest. When he shuffled his weight a bit it dug into one of his shoulders; he could feel that arm as nothing but muted tingles, like someone had anesthetized him and then
dropped him in fire ants. (And now they were sitting back going hehehe to themselves waiting for feeling to come back. Asshole.)

His face was covered in dry blood. Urgh. He worked some out from between his teeth and spat it out with a grimace, fumbling for the harness release, which predictably dumped him on his right-side instrument board, which was now more or less underneath. The foam helped some, but most bubbles were already popped flat and there was very little bounce left in them.

Okay. Yeah. Fairly good bet he’d crashed.

Also fairly good bet he wasn't dead. Awesome. Unexpected, but awesome. Concussion... nah. Well, more probably he'd had one, for a while. Whee for nanite healing. Good nanites, best friends. He'd have to thank Doc Lalonde. Not that he wasn't still dizzy and exhausted, on account of they had to take energy from somewhere, but that was better than bleeding in your brain by just about three miles.

He pushed his hand through the foam, sliced it open and parted the edges like they were a curtain made of pillows, which strained his arm but whatever. The screens were almost all shorted out; the instruments, as expected, answered what amounted to a 'ahaha shyeah right' when he tried to move his mech. He patted the front console, a little sad. "Sorry, Hammer-buddy. If it helps you went out in a blaze of awesome."

--unless.

Unless, oh, fuck, fuckity fuck fuck, he hadn't killed it, usually he hit them from the front, who knew how deep he'd crushed it from the back, what if it wasn't dead! He yanked open the weapon compartment overhead -- the big blaster gun almost brained him when it fell free -- and squirmed his way to the emergency release.

The thought came to him a bit late that it was exceedingly likely he'd landed into the ocean and was now thirty meters deep and sinking fast. Water was already rushing in to slap him in the face by then.

He slapped the side of his helmet, spluttering when saltwater got in before the glass slid closed, enclosing his face. Aw heck. It was going to take a little bit to be siphoned out. In the meantime he could still breathe, if awkwardly. He swam through the hatch, paddled up. To his relief Warhammer rested barely three meters deep on its side on a slope, at the end of a gouge in the sea floor. The water was clear, all raised dirt and sand sunk to rest once again, fish unafraid to come right up to one huge metal hand to investigate; he must have been unconscious a while.

John rose to the surface and tapped his communicator as he bobbed in lazy, sun-speckled waves, admiring some sea, and more sea, and a little bit of some more sea. Static.

"Wow. Maybe I ought to have stayed in the cockpit," he muttered to himself, and tried to pull the gun’s strap so it wouldn't make swimming even more awkward than it already was holy wow an island!

He kicked up in excitement, bobbed higher on the waves; it wasn't even that far, maybe five minutes at a leisurely breast-stroke, which considering he'd bruised his shoulders to the bone with the harness didn't sound like a bad idea. Looked like he'd clipped some palm trees or whatever those were on his way down, heh, oops, and...

... looked like something else had crushed through a much bigger number of trees over there.

Okay. Never mind his shoulders. Time to speed up.
The beach was gorgeous, a wide stretch of pink sand, and all he could think was how exposed he was out there. He'd been trained some on grounds tactics, but the bare required minimum; he'd been destined for space even before he was an enthusiastic blastocyst in a test tub, after all. He bent low, holding his gun with both hands. Man he wished Jade were here. She'd taken to General Harley's hobbies like a duck to water.

The plasma gun would make a pretty nice hole in chitin. The trick was finding the right spot to do more than piss it off.

And there it was, the Cancer alien, even more gigantic like this, with him frail and human and without any shell of his own before it. It lay sprawled on its back, one of its grasping hands torn off at the socket, the gaping hole oozing reddish phlegm. The other limbs John could see from there were clearly broken and in a lot of places, though nothing like bone showed through.

It didn't move, not even to breathe. That wasn't proof of jack shit. To survive in hard vacuum they had to have amazingly efficient oxygen processing, or whatever they used instead of oxygen. Maybe it was just napping.

He picked up a rock and flung it, scurried off to another hiding place. No reaction.

Another rock, still no reaction. Okay.

The head was out of reach, propped up on rocks and hidden behind a crapload of crushed trees. Chest shot it was, then. John gritted his teeth and stalked his way to its side. The shell in shadows was cold to the touch, a hint of the void of space still clinging to it, though in the sun it reminded him more of turtle shell.

... It was so, so big. Made it hard to breathe, being in its shadow.

It needed to die. He slung his gun over his back to free his hands and started to climb, fast, not letting himself hesitate. Either it would wake up or it wouldn't; he needed to be in position either way, a shot straight through the chest where his hammers could finish it in one blow, where obviously there were important things to destroy. It'd probably eat people otherwise, make a huge monstrous nest with a queen and killing drones for all John knew, and soon Earth would be overrun, colonized. They couldn't eradicate the monsters on-planet without sterilizing whole continents, making all life impossible there, and he couldn't allow that. He wouldn't.

Even as he strode up its chest, swinging the gun back in his hands, he vaguely wondered why the usually cautious Cancer had even charged him at all. But it didn't matter.

He reached where its sternum should probably be, and...

... there was a crack in the armor, raw flesh oozing behind. Good; he moved closer, peered in. The plasma gun would lose less power if it didn't have to burn through the...

... the...

... oh god.

Lights inside, dim firefly glows through pooled phlegm, a liquid thicker than blood, see-through faint pink but for the clouds of red obscuring the outline of a, no, he was going crazy, oh god he couldn't breathe, this was a person, was this where all their kidnapped fighter pilots and explorers had gone, were they -- those were tentacles worming their way over the person's legs in slow organic pulses, he was going to be sick.
He yanked his helmet off, turned away, threw up. The tentacle went into that guy's leg, like a giant leech, a parasite worm, what the fuck, what the fuck.

The guy was bleeding to death in there. Bleeding out in the dark, with the little firefly glows going out one by one. John wiped his mouth on the back of his glove and crawled his way to the edge of the hole. It was so deep, shit, shit, he wasn't going to be able to reach with just one arm. Maybe with a foot, if he held on to the edge, but what if those worms -- urgh.

Anyway he wasn't going to risk falling headfirst into it and breathing that disgusting pink snot in. He turned around on his knees to pick his helmet back up.

Of course that was when the chitin under his knees cracked in two like a hinged door.

It was like drowning in amniotic fluid. Body-warm on his skin, slick, clinging. He fought to resurface and only sank faster.

A fleshy rope coiled around his ankle. He was screaming before he'd thought better of it.

No, no, no, oh god he needed to be out, he needed to get out of here, this was a trap, he was going to drown he was choking it hurt everywhere he couldn't move needed to move needed to escape keep fighting keep moving couldn't die here, couldn't, couldn't fail his people, loved his people loved them needed to protect them fight escape live, no, no --


... Oh. Yeah. He wasn't passing out yet. The liquid was thick in his lungs, uncomfortable, was an effort to push out and to breathe back in. He didn't feel dizzy at all.

Lights were getting brighter, more of them blooming, orange and yellow, purple sparks, like looking at instrument grids underwater, straight lines all wavy, distorted. It was...

Familiar. Radio here radars there all is well oh no it's really not. Pain, pain, my arm's broken my arm's gone it hurts, can't panic can't--

John kicked a slow-crawling tentacle off him with a shudder of disgust, flipped around to face down. The liquid was clouded with red, the lighting so dim. His eyes didn't sting, wide open to catch every single detail of that short black hair dancing in slow eddies, the line of that so-human jaw, the flashing orange glow on that dark skin, highlighting here a cheekbone, there the curve of an ear. The face was scrunched up in pain.

(despair) going to die on you (friendloveyou own) so sorry, so sorry, so far away, a hundred stars, failed, failed, left you alone, I promised...

It wasn't him. Those feelings. It wasn't him.

The other boy coughed up another cloud of blood and its teeth were a row of serrated knives.

Its eyes opened gold and red and black the second the muzzle of John's gun touched its chest.

--

Nothing. For the longest time there was nothing. And then a trickle of bland, unsurprised resignation, bitter and mourning, failedyou failedyou sosorry, wafting through John's mind and then gone in wind-torn wisps.
John's hand didn't shake. That didn't stop him feeling sick, suddenly, gorge rising with the memory of what he'd felt when he was plunging down to Earth on the alien's tail, not even really thinking of all those strangers he had to protect, but of Rose that he wouldn't see at dinner (they'd both known he was lying) and Jade who would never get to tell him hunting stories again, and Dad and his sister, and the Striders, and everyone.

Well? Get on with it.

He might have shot anyway, only there were tentacles rising and swaying around them like a nest of cobras, their ends tipped with needles long like his hand, and his first reflex was to escape.

His second reflex was to rescue. He couldn't help but glance down, stare at all those veiny, gut-like things pressed flush against the -- the pilot's legs, its -- his back, his spine.

He tried to speak and managed a strangled, muffled croak, but his burst of horrordetermination had the alien boy twitching, startled.

John bared his teeth, mind made, grabbed a handful of disgusting flesh ropes. Yank it out. Hurt you?

The alien boy flashed his alarm at him, nononostupid paralyzemeno!

Then how! He growled, teeth bared, turned the gun on one of the walls. The tentacles lazily started to drape around the end. He thought very hard about the size of the hole it would make, the way it'd cauterize everything on its path.

Startled apprehension. Disbelief. Yes, I'm serious, damn it.

The... the alien -- the pilot -- the other boy -- felt around him, hand awkward, hurting. John flinched as ghost-wounds crawled in his arms, there and gone. It was like a memory of multiple breaks, some on limbs he didn't even have, and wasn't it weird the mech -- oh shit it was a mech, it wasn't an alien, the alien was here -- the mech had six limbs when the alien had just four?

Eyeing him warily, the boy pushed his hand in the tangle of tentacles, pressed something. John tucked his blaster gun under the boy's chin, just in case he was preparing a bad trick, and the alien bared his teeth at him but all that happened was the tentacles slowly drifting down and coiling onto the bottom of the... he guessed it was a cockpit, of sorts, so creepy. A few of the ones leeched onto his legs released with little plumes of blood; John watched the black bodysuit crawl over the bared skin and plug itself closed with undisguised, weirded-out interest.

One of them didn't want to release. The alien winced and set his teeth and (piece of shit not even surprised) yanked it free. Ow, shit, that hurt.

And if that rush of frustrated feelings wasn't a big huge duh + fuck you combo John didn't know what was. He frowned some more and pursed his lips, and tried not to laugh. Bad time.

Fuck you fuck you argh!

... Yeah, okay, note to self, laughing in placenta snot made lungs very unhappy.

The little lights were dying one by one. John braced his feet on what he guessed were command panels and leaned down to grab onto the alien's arm.

The second he pulled up, there was a burst of painpainpain in his head and then nothing but static.

Aw, hell. He supposed that'd make pulling out the alien boy a bit more difficult, but at least he
wouldn't have to keep his gun on him all the time. He went about climbing back up to the edge to secure a climbing line and pulled the alien on his back. Oof. He was so glad things were more buoyant under there, because the guy felt like nothing but solid muscle. Heavy muscle.

Oh well. John was strong. He'd been made that way. He settled the boy's limp weight on his back, grabbed the line. *Up we go!*

--

A hour later and he was still coughing up pink froth semi-regularly.

The alien boy hadn't awakened. John seriously hoped he hadn't damaged him, carrying him off the Cancer mech and around over bumpy ground like that, but at least the guy breathed pretty normally, if kind of slow. The froth he coughed up was a lot closer to red, though. John busied himself finding them a boulder to prop branches against, make a bit of shelter in case of tropical storm, not that he even knew if it was the season. He'd used the shoulder strap of his gun to secure the boy's arms up over his head to a convenient root, though, because he wasn't stupid and this *was* an alien from a race hell-bent on eradicating his.

(Left you alone failed you)

... Janey and Doc Lalonde would be *all over* the alien. Jane especially, she was always going on and on about what she'd managed to extrapolate of the species' psychology and behaviors and how much she still hadn't and how it made no sense goshdarnit all to heck. They'd be in researcher heaven.

(So sorry)

... His skin was gray, which was the weirdest thing. Not unhealthy gray, but full-out slate. John hadn't really noticed in the dim pseudo-womb, with only orange and red lights to give a hint of color; he'd looked maybe from India or maybe part-Black, not straight out rock-colored.

John propped another branch on his lattice and busied himself threading it in, trying not to ogle too much. The flight suit was... pretty close to John's, actually, molded to a somewhat stocky but humanlike body, padded at the knees, groin, and elbows, only the material was black instead of sky blue and seemed kind of alive (so creepy!) and would close back up if cut. The alien's facial traits were subtly off in proportion, but in the end that snub nose was human enough; he knew Roxy was guaranteed to try to tweak it and coo about how cute it was.

And then the alien would probably bite her fingers off with his bear trap mouth.

John crouched beside him, tapped his cheek. "Hey, buddy?" No reaction. John pulled up an eyelid next, but he had no clue how to interpret it -- the iris itself seemed to change sizes, instead of the pupil, it was freaky as hell. The violent, flashy red of it didn't help.

... With teeth like that he was probably some kind of cannibal. Yep.

Or the unholy result of a mating with a paper shredder. Pff. Heheh.

Man, he wished his friends would lock onto his emergency beacon fast. A few meters of water weren't going to kill the signal, and it'd been *hours* since he'd crashed. Maybe they were busy. Busy with that guy's asshole buddies, trying to kill them all and invade earth like B-movie dick-headed alien assholes, all the cruisers, all the battleships they'd lost out there in space to those insectile horrors. Maybe right at the same time as John was here lazing around on some tropical little atoll paradise Roxy was getting beaten into pieces, Jade hunted and harried so she couldn't gain the distance she needed to snipe, out of ammo.
The guy coughed again, chest rattling so hard John was half expecting to see a lung plop out. He shuffled closer, slid an arm under the guy's shoulders and lifted his upper body up a bit. He couldn't sit him up completely without untying him, and that wasn't happening. He'd seen the claws on those hands, thanks, they were pretty hard to miss.

Whether the guy's friends were busy killing John's friends, that didn't change that John had the first live captive of this war ever (oh man he'd just realized, the best place to smash his hammer through was where the cockpit was on those things, no wonder the science team had never realized, with the way it smashed things into mush) and he wasn't allowing him to die. The end.

It had nothing to do with how he looked about John's age (he could be centuries older!) or that he'd been all trapped in creepy vampire-vines straight through from one of Dirk's X-rated movies only worse. Or that he'd been injured (while trying to get down to Earth) and was in pain, it didn't, John didn't care.

despair, despair, despair

... Aw, crap. The froth was pretty much pure red now. "Hey, man. Alienbuddy? Insectpal? Chuminvader? Wake up and tell me it's spittle, okay, you're just foaming at the mouth smelling the buffet of deliciousness rising from my skin. Aliens wouldn't have red blood, right, you'd have... Dunno, transparent ichors or whatever? Yeah? Oh man, it's dripping down your chin now, okay this is not on. Wake up. Wake up!"

He shuffled so the alien was propped up on his leg, patted his cheek. Wiped some blood (maybe it wasn't blood? maybe?) off his chin with a thumb. Aw hell, hell. The alien kept coughing all raw and exhausted, trying to curl up only he couldn't because he was tied up, and John patting his face did jack shit to calm him down or wake him up.

The alien's head rolled a bit and a hard round bit dug into his hipbone, hard. Huh. John ruffled his hair aside, exploring. Skull, skull, sku-- huh.

"Oh wow, you have, uh, are they stubby antennas? No, they're too hard. Can't be mandibles, you don't have a mouth on your skull, right, that'd be creepy. Horns then? Why'd insect people have horns? Haha, that's funny." He could hear Rose's lecture about convergent evolution and how insect-like and humanoid-shaped didn't indicate a common origin at all, though he knew she'd never dreamed of such a close degree of likeness between their two species. The alien had five fingered-hands, for Pete's sake. "Okay, fine, horns. They're a pretty bright color, huh, not like the rest of you."

He combed locks of thick hair away from the small, round-ended horns, tipped in pale gold and rooted in rust. They were soft like wood polished to a satin finish, warm.

When John traced his finger along the outer curve of one, the coughing stopped.

He did it again, experimentally. A shudder ran through the alien's frame. He coughed again, but making an attempt to smother it that time, groaned quietly.

"Hey! Are you waking up yet?"

The alien boy's eyes cracked open.

Red on gold, and that pupil constricting in barely a second from a black dime to a dot, or more like the red in his eyes had suddenly doubled in size on both inside and outside edges, so that even the yellow sclera were partly hidden. The effect was really strange.
They stared at each other. The alien had stopped coughing -- stopped breathing entirely, actually, frozen in a solid block of startled, wary fear on John's lap. John grinned down at him.

A 'discreet' tug to his pulled-up wrists confirmed that yep, he sure was tied up. John kept grinning. The alien somehow managed to seem to breathe even less.

"There, there." He patted him between the horns. The guy's eyelids twitched. "I'm sure you're smart enough to figure out that if I haven't killed you yet, I'm probably not gonna. You're more useful as a live prisoner, yeah?"


Wasn't a bad thing if he was a little scared of John, anyway. He didn't want to come across as a soft touch.

"Um, I don't suppose you speak English, though. ... Español? Français? I kinda suck at French though so even if you did, I, uh, yeah. Iyaan, yamete kudasai?"

The alien was still staring at him, eyes open a touch too wide and still as stiff as if he'd been carved out of that cliff there on his other side.

"Okay, I guess Dirk's boyporn anime isn't the best place to learn languages."

He noticed his index and middle fingers were still hooked in the curve of the alien's horn. He gave it a little tug, just to see what might happen.

The alien took in a startled, too-quick breath, and started trying to hack up half his respiratory system, was what happened. John pulled him a little higher against his knee, wincing. He couldn't sit him up any higher without dislocating his shoulders, though. "Whoops. Sorry."

... Okay, this was definitely blood. This wasn't goopy foam anymore, it dripped in big fat drops, made rivulets. Something had burst in there.

John stopped smiling, grabbed the alien's chin, firm and demanding attention as he frowned down at him. "Freeze."

It probably was just the tone, or the body language, but the alien froze, though his chest heaved trying to cough again. John kept holding onto his knee, his other hand pointing down at the alien's throat, nodding to it; "Here?" pointing lower; "Here?"

The alien made a clicking, grating noise that John couldn't read at all, but his face seemed merely wary, disgruntled. In pain, too, strained.

When John reached his lower chest, upper abdomen, he visibly tensed, eyes rolled down to watch John's hand with clear apprehension. He rattled out something that was certainly a chain of words. (Jane was going to explode with happiness, and then with frustration at the amount of work it was going to take to learn.) John decided it meant yeah that's were it hurts oh god don't touch it.

Alright.

Internal bleeding and/or punctured ... breathing apparatus.

The alien's eyes closed almost all the way, exhausted and sour. He shuddered, blinked -- his eyes looked wetter for a second, surely John was imagining it, he was an alien, it must be a coincidence if he looked about to cry -- but he blinked it away and when he looked up at John they were dry. He side-eyed him from behind dark bangs for a couple of seconds, something John couldn't read passing on his face, and then he breathed out slow and careful and let his head roll back on John's knee.

It was so deliberate, the way it made the flight suit collar gape there, the way it exposed the whole length of that throat, vulnerable and hopeless. Understanding was a punch to the stomach.

John's alien boy was asking him to kill him.

He... couldn't even move, at first, could only stare. Red eyes closed slowly, and oh, even his tears were pinkish when they rolled off his temple and onto John's arm, pink and warm. He looked so exhausted. So ashamed.

John keyed his wristcom, caught his chin in hand, and leaned in. He had a half-second to stare at those teeth and think maybe he should have found another way to swap saliva, but he couldn't stand it even that long.

He sealed their mouths together, tasted something metallic and salty that wasn't quite like his own blood, sickeningly raw.

The alien boy went stiff as a strung bow under him and started trying to struggle, snarling in his mouth. John had to press his thumb hard in his jaw muscles to keep him from biting, and then he had to twist to the side and drape a leg over his hips to pin them down before the idiot tore himself up worse inside. He growled in turn, out of frustration and impatience, and broke their ridiculous liplock to glare him down. "I'm trying to help you! Settle the hell down already or I'm sitting on you, and you really won't like that!"

He freed the leg he had stuck under the alien, guided him down flat on the grass, caught his chin again even as the alien shook his head, no, no, no. Aw hell, he felt like some kind of molester, but it was for his own damn good, okay!

Liplock again, and he had to put some tongue into it or it would never be enough, and ow, ow, the alien had just managed to slice the inside of John's lip with a fang. John groaned in frustration and shifted on top of him, kept him pinned with his upper body and ow that managed to make it even worse somehow but he needed a free hand to grab his hair and tug.

He seriously hoped the alien boy didn't have a concussion, because John wasn't really helping.

By the time the wristcom beeped again the alien had stopped fighting, smothered coughs shaking a frame otherwise gone limp, eyes half-open and blank. John sat up slowly, freeing his chin, his hair. The boy turned his face away to hide against his arm. John felt like the creepiest asswipe of all.

Cautiously, he shifted his weight off the other boy's hips, sat at his side. "Um. Hey. It's okay. I'm done. And now let's seriously hope that nanites can even be keyed to an alien and that they won't short out and clog up your arteries or some shit, because I'm sure that little bout of boytussling didn't help."

Another rattling, blood-speckled cough. Otherwise, no reaction. Well duh John, he's captured, mission gloriously failed, he thinks he's dying, and then he gets molested, it wasn't a tone of voice he probably couldn't even parse that was going to communicate that all was well.

... He was pretty sure that weirdass goop was chock full of neurotransmitters, though. Sometimes the
feelings had been so clear they'd almost felt like words. John burst to his feet, snatched up the gun. "You stay here, okay? Fine, that's a pretty dumb order but seriously you're too weak to escape and there's nothing but sea all around so don't even bother, that'd be silly. Right? Right!"

He was gone at a run in the next second, leaping over boulders and racing through high grass, scaring off flocks of birds on his way. The Cancer mech was highly visible, a block of night black crisscrossed by tree trunks and vivid green leaves. John took a little while searching the grass for his fallen helmet, stuck it on his head in case the radio had gone back up -- nope, still static -- and climbed up its side.

And then he was up there. He took off his helmet, and went to scoop a big helping of amniotic goop with it, hoping that the mech hadn't died or whatever happened to severely damaged fleshware and it hadn't gone bad. Getting back down without dropping the thing was an adventure of its own, and he was trotting back, exhausted and thirsty and wishing he could have a sports drink or three to rebalance all the electrolytes that had gone into powering the nanites' fast multiplication. His mouth was so dry, but all his snacks and sodas and things were in his mech, which was at the bottom of the sea, crap and re-crap.

Maybe if the alien boy fell asleep he'd go diving for things to salvage. Later on.

When he trotted back up to their little hut, the alien boy was still tied up with his arms overhead, but he'd pulled up his legs somehow, feet tucked close to his butt and knees up and pressed together despite how many bad things it must do to his abdomen, and the wary glare and the snake-hiss he threw at John made it clear what he expected him to try. John groaned.

"Oh no, your maidenly virtue is safe, I swear. I'm sorry, okay? -- you know what, wait just a sec and we'll just, hm, how to do that..."

He knelt at the alien's side, patted one of his arms in what he hoped was a soothing manner (got teeth snapped at him, goddamn he was going to have to hold him by the hair again) and leaned over him. The boy cringed away from him, hissing and snarling in syncopated rhythms that just had to be words and which John had no hope of untangling.

"Feeling better already, huh?" John said with a grin. The alien flinched like he'd threatened to eat his mother. John sighed and leaned in, smeared a nice big handful of lukewarm goop on that gray forehead, and then closed the distance to press his own against it.

Fear and helpless exhaustion were so weak that for a few heartbeats he didn't even notice them as separate from his own tiredness. Biting his lip in thought, he smeared some more goop, staring in the alien's eyes and willing him to calm down, and pretty sure none of it was getting through.

An image of a pink and sky-blue caricature with bared teeth flashed at him, smiling in smug, friendly contempt as it forced its way between his legs. John flinched back, stomach twisting.

"Oh god. No, okay? No, no, no, just no. That's just not -- nrhg." He cupped his face between goop-nasty hands, pressed their foreheads back together despite the way he bared his teeth. Goddamn it if he would only stop snarling for one second so they could actually communicate...!

Tense. Wary. Waiting. What now?

John breathed out slowly, eyes closing in relief. Awesome. Now, um. Safe. "Yeah, you're safe, it's fine, shh. I won't hurt you. Shh, shh -- why does this feel like every single time we've had to take Jaspers to the vet." Safe, won't hurt you, won't force you.
Sheer incredulity snapped back at him, but the details were lost, fuzzy. Sighing, John applied more goop. It was already starting to dry crusty in his hair, ew.

A big dollop rolled free of his hand, trailed a line through the forest of the alien's hair, glanced off a horn. Tiny, round, adorable horn.

*Oh, fuck you, even the aliens, fuck you very much.*

John exploded into giggles. "What?" They are *cute, buddy, sorry to say.*

The answer he got felt like about ten minutes of fuck you packaged into a ten-second burst. "Whoa. Hehehe. You're a surly bastard, aren't'cha. There, there, shhh."

Okay, now how to explain, uhh...

The alien lost patience before he figured it out. *Wrist caught why? Pinned down why? (has to be sex what else enemy flat on his back what else happens, hurts injured can't even serve can't pilot can't can't (I'm sorry I promised)) mouth on mine forcing me open, forcing--*

*No! "No, that was to help you, that -- aw, damn it, stop being so incredulous at me." Healing, he pushed, head hurt, little blood things fix it, no more pain. He really hoped that was clear. It was too bad the swim through that goop had washed the last of the crusted blood off his own temple, he could have showed off the absence of wound there. Your chest hurts, sharing the healing.*

A moment's thought, blanked away from him, and then resigned understanding. The alien boy tied down on a rack, pink blurry humans prodding and poking him, watching him bleed and making notes on little handheld things that seemed a universal constant of both interrogators and medical doctors. He needed to be kept alive for that.

John felt nauseous once again, mostly because he couldn't swear that'd never happen. Their first live, captive alien. There was no way he'd be left untouched.

... *hah. See.*

John closed his eyes tight, so they'd stop stinging. For all he knew, this same desperate, scared boy had killed his compatriots. Maybe he deserved it, huh, deserved the torture, every single second of it.

*Why do you fight?* he thought, pressing it sharp like a blade, digging deep. If there was a way to think at each other, to be linked that way, brainwaves crossing from one to the other, there was no reason why he had to wait for the answers to come, was there? *Why -- tell me why!*

The alien arched under him, choked on a short scream of pain, but John wasn't letting go, was pushing his way through flashes of a strange *cargo bay and sitting in a cockpit waiting for it to flood (drowning every day) battleship corridors marching down you have your assignment, sergeant, good luck (mockery, die already you filth die die die)*

*But if I succeed*

*If I succeed she*

*Maybe she*

*(ropes of raw flesh piercing through, swallowing whole, mouth open in a permanent, silent scream, twice-too-many horns bare but eyes hooded, blinded, caught and caught and never, he won't, it's his place, filthy traitor, smothered in tentacles burrowing deep under his skin in his flesh in his bones his*
spine inside his chest trapping him, digesting him does he still have legs left under that does he could he still is he still --)

GET OUT!

John choked, tasted his own tears on his lips. Under him the alien had started struggling in earnest, teeth bared to the gums, and he could feel how much it hurt, when the wounds the nanites had barely started on reopened, how much he didn't care.

Get out! I'll kill you, fucking little pink mutant sludge, you have no right!

And it was raw fury spurred by pain, the stark knowledge that it was futile, his whole grand desperate attempt, it had always been futile right from the start, and then he'd gone and failed just as planned, and John was crying and he couldn't stop.

Stop it, stop feeling sorry for me, I hate you!

"It's okay. It's okay if you do. I don't hate you."

He wiped his eyes, stared down into furious red irises, pupils constricted so tight they were almost invisible. He leaned down again.

I have friends to protect too. (DadJaneJadeJakeDaveRoseRoxyDirk, Bro and the General and the Doc, my people mine mine mine.) I'd do anything. Anything to stop this war.

... won't kill me, the alien replied eventually, bleak with anticipation of torture, of lifelong captivity.

No, John agreed, sorry-soft and steel-resolved. There's too much we need to know.

He straightened up, wiped the goop off his captive alien's face, out of the curve of his horn. His eyes still itched with tears. He didn't say he was sorry.

He sat with his back to the rock, the gun tucked against his shoulder, left him alone. Nagging wouldn't bring anyone anything. Empathy didn't matter. They weren't friends. They were enemies. He had a mech to fix back to fighting trim and compatriots of his captive to smash to pieces with his hammers and a war to fight.

After a hour, the alien stopped coughing and fell into a fitful sleep. It was late in the evening when Dave's battle-scarred Excalibur and Rose's Echidna touched down on the beach.


Chapter Notes

aha! Figured out how to make skins. Let's see if this works.

Houston, we have achieved fanart! *squees*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Warhammer was in need of so many repairs when they brought it in, John barely knew where to start. The impact with the alien biomech and then his crash-landing had warped a lot of things out of alignment, quite a few of them load-bearing. For a few days his buddy was in a lot of parts all over the repairs bay, being remade from the inside out.

Luckily they had an exceedingly awesome mechanic crew whose job it was to figure it out once the mech was back on base. There was no way he wasn't going to learn every single trick he could to take care of his buddy himself, in case it was ever necessary, though! Plus, he was pretty good at jumping off from Warhammer's propped-up head to a suspended, waiting-to-be-reattached arm to a nearby gangway to run for toolboxes or much-needed coffee. The mechanics tended to be older and creaky and have a weird distaste for swinging on a hanging chain a dozen feet over the hangar floor.

Also they couldn't lift a half-ton of scrap metal bare-handed.

Long story short he kept himself pretty busy, and learned tons of really neat, important stuff besides. And if that meant he got back to the boys' dorm exhausted every night and immediately crashed for eight hours, and was gone in the mornings before anyone could get started on their 'we hardly see you anymore, John!' prodding...

Blah. He could start socializing again once his buddy was fixed. Right now Rose had shuffled herself from tactical support to active duty to cover for the hole he'd left in her roster, and Jane had been shoved from inactive to standby, and not only did he know how much they both hated it, even if they’d never complain, it really wasn’t the best use of personnel. Rose was scary in a mech, but as a tactician she was terrifying. As for Jane...

Well. Jane was Jane. She wasn't going to shirk her duty.

It hurt, thinking of her in a cockpit, though.

"Hey, kid! Higher-up for you."

John groaned and hooked his legs under a scaffolding support bar, flipping back in the void until he hung upside-down from his knees. Drove the Rear-Echelons Motherfuckers the UNE had saddled them with crazy, in between the 'casual disrespect oh my stars and garters' and the 'ridiculously risky behavior we can not afford to lose you Egbert your life is not your ooown', like perfect hand-eye coordination was a thing they could not wrap their brains around. Not that John never slipped or misjudged a landing and crashed, but only when he wasn't paying attention. Ten meters over a floor littered with sharp metal parts and electric cables was a stupid place to be distracted.

"I really wonder where the monkey genes came from," mused the elegant blonde woman at the door.
"Then again that was the year Hass and I had our first drunk-off."

John broke into a smile despite himself. "Hey, Doc! I thought you were one of those UNE nags, come for another debriefing."

Because of course upon his return he'd had back-to-back debriefing upon debriefing where he had to rehash the whole sequence of events, with everyone from decorated UNE Generals to scientists of all types, xenobiology and xenopsychology and he didn't know what else... And then some more debriefings where he had to repeat everything he'd already said, only this time to politicians.

Not a one of them had wanted anything but a) intel and b) to berate him for everything he'd done wrong, from leaving an opening for the alien to pass him at all, to not putting "it" down straight away, to damaging "it" too much by taking "it" out of "its" cockpit; exposing himself to unknown pathogens, to potential mental influence (like telepathy was a thing anyone thought existed before it happened to him!), taking too many risks, not taking enough risks, and blahblahblah until it came straight out of his nose.

(Not a one of them had shown a half-smidgen of interest in how terrified of letting people down and dying on them the alien boy had been.)

"Nah, no more debriefings for you. They can just watch the tapes."

"Good, can't stand those assholes. I was this close to just straight out making up stuff. It would have been hardcore." He grinned at her upside-down and brandished a wrench. "Tell me when they're gone so I can emerge from my man-cave of repairs and grunts, okay?"

She smiled, as he'd known she would. There was something in her face, though... John twisted his neck and back to the side into a rather painful hook shape to try to see her expression better.

... Aw heck.

"I have a favor to ask of you, kid."

Aw heck no. John felt his stomach sink, and it wasn't because he was upside-down. "Betcha you only call me kid 'cause you can't even tell if I'm John or Jake."

"Don't be silly!" she retorted. "Jake has square glasses." John couldn't help cracking a smile, once again, but it died fast. The joke had been half-hearted.

He swung to grab the bar with his hands and jumped down; the scaffolding under his feet rang with the impact of his boots. He made the rest of the way down via the very normal boring way of the stairs and followed the Doc out of the hangar, worry curling tighter in his guts when she made sure the containment door was locked airtight before turning to him.

"Alright. Shoot. Uh, not literally, please."

"It's about the alien."

For an intense, burning second, John almost turned on his heel and went back to the hangar.

"Oh no. Oh Doc, please, no. I didn't want to think about that mess anymore--"

Her eyes were sympathetic, but he could tell she wasn't going to let him get out of it. "You broke it, you bought it, John. Suck it up."
God no, no, no. Facing him again. He couldn't. "Come on! What am I even needed for? I'm not a scientist and I'm not a, a, I'm a pilot and my job was to bring him in, and I did, and the end!"

He stood before her, hands fisted, shaking. She kept dissecting him with her eyes. "You built a bit of a rapport, didn't you?"

John exploded. "I'm not helping to interrogate him either!"

She bopped him over the head with her clipboard.

Ow.

...Um.

"Don't be ridiculous. You'd suck balls at it." Doctor Lalonde's gaze gentled. "That, and it would break your heart."

John bowed his head, boot tap-tapping at the concrete floor, awkward and flustered. "I just, what's the point? I can't do anything. I shouldn't do anything, even if I could." Her hand patted down his messy hair where the clipboard had hit. John's voice turned into a strangled mumble. "... It sucks being a responsible adult. I want to stop."

Pat, pat. He tilted his head into her hand and wished the Doc was more of the huggy type, because he could kinda do with one right now. She was more of the type to prod you into a tiger pit and yell encouragements all the way down.

"If you refuse to get involved, I won't order you, kid, you know that."

John let out a shuddery breath, and didn't know if he was more relieved or ashamed.

"I'll just go back to poking him with sticks and hoping that stops him being more or less catatonic. Or I could give in and stop vetoing the UNE scientists, since I'm not having any luck on my own. One of them suggested electroshocks."

John choked on his own spit. "I'm going! I'm going, holy hell, you're evil."

"I sure am!" she replied brightly, erasing ten years from her face, and looking more like Roxy than ever. She threw an arm around his shoulders and gave him a sideways hug, and opened the next door. "You're a good boy, John."

"You mean a chump," John grumbled under his breath as he allowed her to herd him along.

"Same difference," she said with a chuckle, and ruffled his hair into a right mess.

Roxy and Rose were scary, but man, what they would become with all those years of experience.

--

The laboratories were clean but not white. Doc Lalonde had them built when the eight of them were toddlers and so there were pastels everywhere (and also terrifying, terrifying clowns because that was apparently what kids liked or something, so sayeth some expert moron who'd never met a kid in his life, and it just so happened Mr. Strider was an enabling asshole.) One of the walls was a mural of kiddie scribbles.

It was also chock full of disapproving strangers in lab coats and armed-to-the-teeth security. John plastered a bright grin on his face and strolled through on the Doc's stilettoed heels, hands in his
"So what do you want me to do anyway?"

"I have no idea! Anything that works. This is pretty much my last ditch attempt before I have to let others try their hand at it."

She guided him down a side corridor, inside a dimly-lit little room. There was a table and computers and some old guys with writing pads and things that he didn't pay attention to, because there was also a full-room one-way window into the next bedroom over.

That room was white. Windowless. There was a hospital bed.

There was his alien boy laid on his back like a corpse still wrapped in scrubs, wrists and ankles cuffed to the bedframe, staring at the ceiling.

A perfusion pumped god knew what into the crook of his elbow. Bright red blood and other body fluids were sucked out of his thigh. He had little sensor disks plastered everywhere -- temples, chest, stomach, throat. Even his horns were wrapped up in some kind of wire that looked like Christmas tinsel, like they were tiny trees and someone had let over-enthusiastic three-year-olds decorate them.

"I don't suppose he's moved," Doc Lalonde asked one of the old guys, who shook his head no. John slowly stepped up to the window. "Well then, that'll be thirteen hours now."

... goddamn it.

"There's nothing wrong with him physically," the Doc explained quietly. "Repairs held, he's been shedding the nanites just fine, we hit on a goop that meets his dietary needs; he really didn't like the EEG machine but he was over it in a half-hour at most. All other bio scans might have been stressful but proceeded without pain. He just... quit."

"Why is he tied up?" John asked, voice reedy, choked-up. "I mean, the door's locked."

The closest old guy gave him a "are you stupid" glare. "It spent the first couple of days trying to claw and bite people to death, and the next four trying to claw itself to death. It would be gagged right now if we could stick anything in its mouth it couldn't bite through and choke on."

"I still think plastisteel--"

"No, the toxic byproducts--"

They devolved into some kind of boring fussy argument. Doc Lalonde stood back and leaned against the wall, arms crossed and a vague smile on her painted lips, all 'yep, end of working hours, professionalism ends right here, I don't care you're dying come back tomorrow'. She was making her soon, martini, soon face.

John nodded to himself, said, "Alright, then," and keyed his override code into the heavy, armored communicating door.

Immediately, a big great ohmygodwhatareyoudoing yelling fuss kicked up behind him. John didn't give much of a crap, because the alien boy hadn't even twitched, not even to check who was coming in. He closed the door behind him and keyed it locked, to keep interruptions to a minimum, and made his way to the bed.

"Um. Hey."
No reaction, not even a blink. John wondered, stupidly, if he still did blink sometimes, or if his eyes had gotten so dry he physically couldn't anymore.

John knew what he wanted to do. He didn't know how much of it was fueled by the guilt of being the one who had delivered the alien to this. The Dave in his head told him that was stupid, he'd done his duty and how did he know the alien hadn't asked for this and anyway it was war and sucky stuff happened during wars. The Rose in his head was pondering compromises, reasonable suggestions, ways to be humane without opening himself up, without allowing that guilt to grip him back, to compel him.

The Jade in his heart told him so fucking what if it was. Guilt or whatever, who cared why.

John was barely aware of the smile stretching his lips when he started walking around the bed and pulling out needles and sticky disk things, plop plop plop, dropping them on the floor and then carelessly stepping all over them.

The way he axe-kicked the steel lock off that wrist manacle was all Dirk.

Badass. (His heel kind of hurt now but he resolutely ignored it.)

"Rise and shine, buddy!" He jabbed the alien in the side. Aha! There had been a tiny, reflexive flinch. Not too far gone yet. "Up, up, up! You've lazed about long enough."

"What are you doing it will kill you we cannot spare you--"

"Nanana-nana-naaaa, la-di-da-dadahh, it's a beautiful day, let's play hooky today~" He started unwrapping his horns, careful not to let any metal edges catch on their curves. One of them was a little chipped along the outer side, where a scalpel had no doubt scraped some material off for testing. He wondered if he'd even felt it. Most horned or tusked animals on Earth wouldn't have, but who knew.

He gave the skull between the horns a hair-ruffling scratch, like he would Bec or Mutie. Surely there was a tipping point of annoyance after which the other boy would drag himself awake, if only so he could kick John in the face. Sooty eyelids fluttered, eyes twitching a bare millimeter in John's direction.

Score. John softened his approach as he went back around the bed to his ankles, quieted his voice a bit as he kept up a stream of friendly nonsense.

"At least use the key for the shackles, do you think they grow on trees? I have it right here. Don't be silly."

Shyeah right, John was going to come out of the room right now. Like they didn't have a crapton of security waiting. He resolutely ignored the urge to make grimaces into the mirror, too, foot rising high before scything down, heel first. Second axe kick of the day!

"--Ow! Crap." Wrong angle meant his foot had glanced off ineffectually and it hurt where he'd smacked his ankle-bone. Glowering, he tried it again. Goddamn but this would bruise nice.

The alien was watching him when he finished, faintly incredulous at the edges, like he was half-asleep and still wondering if this was some kind of stupid dream he could hopefully forget before he had to take it seriously. John grinned back, and tried not to bounce as he made his way back to the head of the bed.

"Hi!"
He sat on his haunches; his chin was about level with the mattress. He didn't want to sit on the bed and be all loomy and accidentally threatening, give the poor guy flashbacks of when he thought John was all about the gray-and-bleeding-dudes molestation. He even hammed it up propping his hand on the edge of the bed and his chin on the back of his hand and looking up all soulful and cute like a hopeful puppy, the way he hadn't tried since he turned eight.

Bafflement flashed briefly in red eyes, and then the alien broke eye contact and turned his face away, a couple inches. John whined and bounced the mattress under his hand. Bounce, bounce.

Half-hearted raspy hiss. Probably go away. Oh man. John had been shooed away by masters before. This didn't even rate.

Still, the longer he was here and the longer they had to prepare a plan to get him out and the poor guy tied back down. Time to speed things up. "Oh well. Warned you, bro."

He pushed himself up, grabbed his upper arm, and pulled him off the bed.

He hadn't quite counted on how limp and unresponsive the guy was going to be -- pretty much a dense, really heavy lump of jelly, and then it was either fall on his ass or drop him on the floor -- so for the second time John ended up sitting with the alien in his lap. He started laughing. "Ow. We have to quit meeting like this."

Gray eyelids blinked slowly. His eyes looked a little more focused when John stared down into them. Not a lot, though; he'd been better put together back when he was gushing blood from the mouth, half-unconscious and begging for a mercy kill. John tried to smother his worry; apparently he'd already gotten him to respond more in ten minutes than the assholes out there in thirteen hours. Nothing to fret about!

John wrapped his arm around the alien's back, guided a gray arm dotted with needle tracks around his shoulders, and struggled back to his feet. He tried to see if the alien could stand... Okay, wobbly, head hanging, and he wouldn't keep his balance on his own, but when John took a step his feet stumbled to follow. Good enough.

"Onwards! Adventure awaits."

When he keyed the door open, the old fussy guys were gone. Doc Lalonde was still there, a mysterious smile on her painted lips. She mimed lifting a glass in salute. John bobbed his head in an aborted bow.

When he reached the end of the little side corridor where it met the big main one, he was faced with two rows of armored soldiers with weapons raised, one on each branch of the T. Urgh. He made a face, and was about to grump, or find something glib to say and bullshit his way through, only then the gray arm around his neck tightened minutely, startling him. Claws prickled through his t-shirt.

The alien's chin was lifted off his chest, just a couple inches, just enough to see those rows of booted feet. John tilted his head to peer at his face. Apprehension flickered there, heavy brows attempting to furrow.

"Hey, are you awake?"

A couple of blasters powered up with a quiet whine. John rolled his eyes at the closest military guy. "Seriously, dude, if you're that twitchy maybe you shouldn't be on security detail, huh? It's fine, he can't even stand up on his own."

"Its jaws are maybe fifteen centimeters away from your throat, you little twerp." The guy in charge --
John could never remember ranks -- shouldered his way through, all dark brooding eyes and radiating pissiness. "It could chomp through your carotid in a flash. Not that you wouldn't deserve it."

John rolled his eyes and bullshitted through his teeth. "Um. Yeah. And then, oh, what was it again... Oh, right! Nanites. Okay I'd gush blood like crazy for the first two seconds, and I'd be seriously woozy afterwards from blood loss, but that's about it. You know what'd really damage me here, dickface? If you shot him, because at this distance it'd char a nice big hole right through me too."

The man gave a curt shrug. "S'why God gave us tasers."

"Why was he trying to out-threaten Jack Noir. No, wait, now that he's started he absolutely couldn't stop, it was all going to come down to sheer balls. John worked on not looking like his heartbeat had sped up, because who on Earth or anywhere else in the whole universe enjoyed getting tasered? That crap hurt."

"Uh huh." He started walking -- toward the side Jack stood with, because turning his back on him and appearing to run away seemed even worse somehow. "Have fun ruining the accords and getting all your people barred from the island entirely. I'm sure your leaders will be all fine and dandy with that, maybe they'll give you a medal!"

The alien's claws were caught deep in cotton; they hadn't broken skin, but they dug at him just short of that, clench-release-clench-ohgodohgodwhatareyoudoing, like a nervous kitten kneading away to settle his nerves. John could feel his breathing kick up.

The poor guy who broke first and took a half-step back when John and his alien buddy stalked within arm's reach was going to get reamed to within an inch of his life. Jack would probably keelhaul him somehow, even if he had to build himself a boat first. But once someone had given way, even just a tiny bit, it was easy to keep striding forward (like a boss, John, because that's what striding means.) He just went ahead and pretended he was some unholy merge of Dirk and Dave, unimpressed gaze and set chin and devastating confidence in his mad ninja skills and all.

The alien pressed against his side maybe a bit closer than strictly keep-from-falling accidental. John patted his side. "There, there. S'all good."

"Uh huh. Stop right the fuck there. Last warning."

John swallowed and kept walking, bracing for the pain that was sure to follow, because Noir just didn't make empty threats. Oh man, his dad was going to be so ticked off.

The click of a primed gun. Nghgh.

The hollow boom and sudden shadow of a mech touching down right before the window was the best sound John'd ever heard. Windows, actually. It was that big.

"Hi, John! Need a lift?"

Jade's gun was so much bigger than Noir's. Grinning to strain his cheeks, John shouldered a soldier aside, hauled the alien to the window, shoved it open. (It was such a relief to see a gray hand lifted awkwardly to help push it open, even if a beat too late and too slowly to matter.) Noir swore and shoved aside the same guy John had bumped into, but by then John was already seated on the windowsill and letting himself tip out and fall, right onto Remington's open palm.

The fall wasn't that far, but he landed flat on his back on hard metal and then had dense alien matter flop on his ribs and stomach, so while he was glad he'd cushioned the alien's fall he was still
wheezing when Jade pulled up her mech's hand. He went "Whoa!" and wrapped his arms tight around the alien to keep him steady. He'd been riding around on his friends' mechs since forever but it helped with the splat-risk if you weren't too woozy to keep your balance, and all the guy was going to accomplish screeking his claws against metal in an awkward bid to grab a hold was break them.

"Jeez, just calm down, okay," Jade was telling the soldiers at the windows, though John couldn't see because she'd curled her mech's other hand over them as a shield. "It's not like he's being taken off the island."

The trip was pretty short; Remington only had to turn around and take three steps through the courtyard before it could lower them onto a roof terrace. Still enough time for the alien to squeeze his eyes closed and burrow his face in John's neck. John's wheezing hoots of triumph softened into chuckles, and he patted the back of his head; the thought of those teeth barely brushed the back of his mind and then was gone. "Aheh, sorry if you're scared of heights, buddy. ... Pff, space pilot, afraid of falling -- um. Yeah. Shh, shh, you're safe."

Jade apparently got bored of waiting for them to get up and off Rem's hand, and tipped them onto the tiles. They tumbled together, John landing across the alien's stomach, making him huff out a breath, and of course John couldn't stop himself cracking up again.

"I'll get you for that, Harley!" he yelled, shaking his fist, though he couldn't stop grinning. Remington's other hand flipped him a two meter-long bird. (Neatest bit of operating system programming Dirk had ever done, for serious.)

"Not if I see you first, buttface!" she called back.

When he looked back the alien was sprawled on his back and staring sightlessly at the sky, which would have worried John more if his black lips weren't also quietly shaping a litany of what John was convinced were curses upon his lineage and everything he had ever touched.

He pushed himself up on hands and knees and peered down at the alien, quite deliberately blocking his view of the sky with his face. "Hey there! Awake yet? I don't suppose you want to sit up and do things on your own. Like carry around your own personal black hole in there." He poked his stomach through the hospital gown, ready to tease a little more.

... Hospital gowns were really flimsy. Okay, this one wasn't the kind that opened in the back so you could moon people all night long, more like a bathrobe really, but it still opened all the way in front and ended at mid-thigh, and tumbling down had ruffled it up some. Flashing was not happening yet, but it would only take a little breeze. Eep.

"Haha um. It's kind of cold out here, huh? Let's get inside." John got up, held out a hand. The alien boy's eyes slowly tracked down from his face down his arm; before he'd gotten to the end his eyes had closed again.

He looked so exhausted. Hopeless. It still bugged the shit out of John, made him itchy inside, crazy with the need to just fix this somehow except he had no clue where to even start.

Also he'd like to see what the heck the guy looked like when he wasn't flat on his back and despairing himself to death! Growling, he leaned down. "Okay, fine, princess. I'm carrying you now, don't think I won't." No reaction. "... Okay, you asked for this."

He slipped his arms under the alien's back and his knees, straightened up. Doc Lalonde had said his injuries were fixed, right? There was nothing physically wrong with him. John bounced him to settle his weight, a bit too abrupt to be comfortable.
... oh god the gown. Oh god. He was torn between blowing on the little flippy corner to settle it back down over bare thighs before it finished fluttering down on the wrong side, or just staring straight ahead and ignoring it like ignoring things was an Olympic sport and he was running for the gold. (Not that some part of him wasn't morbidly curious to see what alien junk looked like, but he looked mostly human everywhere else, there was no reason it'd be that different. Oh hey maybe he had a claw on his aaaaugh.)

A claw-tipped hand flopped limply across the guy's lap. The alien was watching him through his lashes, face turned away like he was nervous. John winced. "Ookay, gonna have the 'not about to molest you' talk again, I think."

Though John wasn't sure if the nerves were even sex-related at all, or if he'd spent the last days having just about every doctor on base run their cold, impersonal eyes and grabby fingers all up every inch of him. It'd be violating either way.

There were stairs, so John didn't try to let him stand when he'd just have to pick him back up. He went straight to the staircase and tried to be prompt and professional as he made his way down and through the scanner-locked door.

The rec room was empty, which was a bit strange at this hour. Usually Rose at least would be sitting at the table -- oh right, she was probably up in space, filling in for him. So then that meant Jake and Jane would be asleep, and Jade had probably been on her way up to switch with Dirk, and he had no idea where Dave would be.

John stood like an idiot watching the empty room, until the alien shifted, glancing away from the room and to his face, à la what the hell dude. John gave a nervous laugh and went to dump him on one of the couches in the TV corner "There you are! Hope you're comfortable."

The alien was making eye contact now. Progress, right? Yeah!

"Okay. Uh."

Did absolutely nothing else, though. Just kind of... Stared.

"... What do I do with you now."

He was kind of muscled, and not that much smaller than John in height, but right now he looked small. Defenseless, even despite the claws and fangs. It was the scrubs, and how out of place he was in this familiar room, how he sat on a four-people couch in a way that felt like he was a little kid on an adult chair for the first time in his life. John borderline expected his legs to dangle over the floor.

The room was just too big for him, was what John felt, full of bookcases and posters and potted plants and robot parts and knickknacks. It'd probably help to block some of that out.

Alas the folding screen had suffered a mysterious and purely accidental accident the last time he and Jake roughhoused. John would have to improvise.

His glasses went beep as he was dragging a couple of high-backed chairs to the couch. He tapped the frame to accept the chat invite as he started setting up the chairs along the arm of the couch.

RS: My delightful gene donor informs me that we have acquired a new roommate...?
JH: rose! hey!
JH: we sure did.
JH: he's flopped on the couch now and kinda staring at me. looks kind of like a stray puppy.
JH: hehehe.
JH: he followed me home, mom, can i keep him? :B
RS: Oh dear lord.
RS: John. I suppose it is utterly pointless to remind you that this poor alien you are feeling the urge to coddle is in fact Cancer, no doubt an accomplished soldier and the pilot responsible for your brief acquaintance with hard vacuum a short three months ago.

John winced a bit. He'd had nightmares about that one for a while. He sneaked the alien a quick, uncomfortable look.

The boy was still sitting where John had put him like an abandoned doll, half like he was too tired to move and half like even if he hadn't been he was too afraid of moving in a way John didn't want him to and so it was better not to bother. Apprehensive and exhausted, the most he did was move his eyes to track John across the room. Damn it, John didn't remember him so passive, he'd been all full of fire and sheer intensity and what the fuck had they done to him? It made him kind of pissed off.

Another beep interrupted him before he could poke him in the ribs. He dumped an armful of pillows and afghans on the alien's lap and turned back to the convo.

RS: So since I don't enjoy bashing my head upon walls of sheer diamond, I am going straight to the next item. No, I cannot read your mind. I am basing myself upon nothing but experience, such as the way you behaved when Jade brought back Bec... or when my dear sister and I brought back Jasper and Mutie...

JH: is this going somewhere??? so many words rose, i'm dying, you're killing me, i hope you're proud.
RS: You cannot play with the alien.
JH: what.
RS: I do believe his environment has been sufficiently altered at present. Perhaps you ought to give him a little space to breathe? Or as Dave would put it... Get off his grill, John.
RS: To continue this painful metaphor, his grill has been overcrowded for the last ten days. He has been poked, prodded, and had rocks thrown through the bars. People have been rattling his grill. His grill is approaching complete saturation and may well be about to disintegrate utterly.

DV: in shorter words that dave would actually put it in
DV: because im dave as it turns out
DV: no you cant cuddle the alien
DV: the alien is a hands-free zone
DV: pickpockets and prestidigitators banned 4 lyfe
DV: i know how you yearn to make out with your new space boyfriend but no just no
DV: ps we have to sit on that couch no defiling the couch
JH: bit too late for that one! whoops.
DV: ...
RS: ...
JH: i didn't mean defiling the couch.
RS: Is that supposed to be better or worse?

He snickered, watching red and lavender unwind on his lenses. Okay, now this book -- no, that book would be better, way heftier. And that encyclopedia, oh hey, and Rose's leather-bound edition of War and Peace, and Jane's Harry Potter doorstoppers. Soon enough his arms were full; he went back to the couch.

DV: ladies and gentlemen john egbert
DV: space molester
DV: boldly groping where no human has groped before
DV: there there poor xenomorph show us on the tentacledoll where his sweaty hand fondled you
DV: no you're not supposed to eat the tentacledoll its not food no thats my hand not food either
RS: Dear brother, if you make a "dick eating" reference I will be forced to have Roxy ban you from
the server.
DV: man its not fair im her brother too why are you her favorite im gonna tell on you to dirk
RS: Alas and woe. It just so happens I am also Dirk's favorite.
DV: but hed understand the sanctity of a guys junk he could never betray that sacred brotherhood of
manliness and penises
JH: there, there, bro. my dick is safe. his teeth aren't that sharp!
RS: ...
RS: John, now would be a great time to tell us something to the effect of "Haha, just kidding! Of
course I didn't get the alien to perform fellatio upon my person on the couch."
JH: "Haha, just kidding! Of course I didn't get the alien to perform fellatio upon my person on the
couch."
RS: ... You just copypasted that.
JH: hehehe :B
JH: just kidding. his teeth ARE that sharp.
RS: John, may I remind you. I love you. I also know where you sleep.
DV: it was the nanites wasn't it
DV: you smooched him cyborg good job egbert we knew we could entrust the safety of earth to you
and your masterful tongue
DV: now he too can short out small unshielded electronics just by walking by his civilization is
doomed mwahaha
RS: No, once the initial injuries were repaired he wouldn't have kept a breeding population of nanites
without an external control to reprogram them; they must have been deactivated and shed by now.
DV: dont interrupt my goatee stroking with your science and earth logic rose
DV: it is all alien logic all the time this is an all-alien logic show
JH: hehe.

Alright! No getting distracted by convos. John had everything. He rubbed his hands together and
started in on the actual building of the pillow fort.

He was careful not to touch the alien when he had to lean in to take the biggest afghan from the
piled-up shit he'd dropped on the seat beside him. The alien made a low clicking noise deep in the
back of his throat, followed by a confused chirrup of sorts. John grinned at him and threw the afghan
over his head like a net, and started tucking it over the backs of the chairs and pushing it in the
crevices at the back of the couch. He used Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows to pin down the
other end on the chair.

The alien was looking more and more openly baffled, which was better than blank and no-one-home
by about a hundred miles, though he still wasn't moving at all, not even to bat away the cloth
hanging in his face. John resolved to start whistling next, surely that'd be annoying enough?

But anyway. Main architecture, done. Now it was mostly frills.

JH: but seriously guys you're distracting me from gray-dude-watching. not that he does a lot, it's
about as challenging as keeping watch on a potted plant, but still. anyone got any actual advice?
JH: i can't let him just go back to flop-ville, rose!
DV: he just *has* to pet him
JH: i just HAVE to
JH: damn it.
DV: get his hands all up in those smooth flowing locks
JH: oh shut your trap, you.
DV: survey the topography of those glutes in minute detail
JH: okay, this is making me a bit uncomfortable.
DV: its for science john
DV: science
RS: I do not advise that you allow him to fall back into complete catatonia, but neither does it seem advisable once he is responding, if minutely, that you assault his senses and his mind with a barrage of irritants which will surely prompt him to retreat again.

Um. Surely what he was doing didn't constitute a barrage. John guiltily stopped whistling.

Alright! Main tent complete. It swallowed a good half of the couch, plus -- if he cheated and pulled the cloth at an angle toward the floor via judicious application of War and Peace -- some space for the alien's legs. Oh but wait, he didn't want the alien to feel locked in either. Uhh. Bit of string, bit of string... aha! Electric cable, there, in the pile of robot parts. Okay now if he put this chair here, he could make an awning. Awesome.

RS: I suggest putting on soft music, or a TV program with as low a level of violence as you can tolerate, anything that wouldn't overstimulate him. Some animal documentary might do. And then just sit nearby, but do not stare at him.
DV: man you have never watched an animal documentary ever
DV: those penguins are hardcore
RS: Alas, new pets must get used to their surroundings and feel safe before you can play with them, or naught but stress and escape attempts will occur. When he is ready, he will hopefully engage you.
DV: in other words get your hands off the grey dude he does not need cuddles
JH: you are kidding, you are totally kidding, not even dirk after a sad pony macro needs as many cuddles.
JH: but yeah okay he already thought i was a rapist once, i probably should quit while i'm ahead.
RS: ...  
DV: ......  
DV: look mom the herd of dots is migrating back already short winter huh
DV: yeah son global warming you know
DV: makes for shitty seasons
JK: o o o (Those are the elusive mammoth dots!)
DR: Dude.
JH: why is everyone on the line? i was texting Rose!
JK: Well naturally we wanted to know how things proceeded with your wild captive after that daring rescue! Also make sure he had not yet eaten off your face.
DR: Or merely sucked it. But I see you answered that one already.
JH: look at the time! i'm gonna miss the disney channel! they have bambi, that's non violent enough right?
DV: thus introducing the trauma of bambis mom to yet another civilization
DV: you continue to exceed expectations john kirkbert
DV: breaking their wills making them ripe for the conquering etc etc
RS: Perhaps a different Disney movie would be more appropriate, John. I believe we have The Little Mermaid or Beauty and the Beast...
RS: On second thought, those might send the wrong message as well.
JH: this is way too hard. i'll just put on a nice quiet peaceful football match, how's that sound?
DR: Got some MLP eps.
JH: yeah see the issue here is the last time i tried to open one of your files i accidentally found a nice and uplifting story about a schoolboy and his teacher. :-\ 
DR: What can I say. It had a pretty nice plot.
JH: yeah, if one of his buttocks was named plot!
JH: not that i thought anyone's buttocks were nice in there oh god.
JH: this zinger did not go as planned.
JH: going offline forever now guys.
JK: Go get ‘im tiger.
JK: *double pistols and a wink*
JH: FOREVER.

Upon closing the chat window he found another one waiting underneath, just a note, the sender back offline already.

I love you, John, and I know you have to do this. But he managed to savage a lot of people before they found restraints that would hold him. I won't make you watch the footage, needless to say it was gruesome. Just because he has been hurt does not mean he cannot hurt you in turn. Be careful, please.

The smile on John's face faltered. It wasn't unexpected, though -- and it wasn't even as if he thought Jane was the only one of the eight to have the opinion that perhaps he should have kept out of it. He could tell Rose had doubts, and Dave was straight up unhappy. But Dave also already knew John had made up his mind and there was nothing left to do but snark about it. Jade and Jake were willing to wait and see, curiosity piqued... As for Dirk, who ever knew what he thought.

He turned only to find that the alien's toes, which used to stick out from the trailing end of his fort's walls, had disappeared; when he bent at the waist to peer inside he found him huddled in the corner of the couch, arms wrapped around his knees and half-buried in pillows. Moving on his own! Score.

The alien sent him an utterly exhausted look -- or actually more like a 'you're exhausting' one -- and spat out a sentence that started out slow and halting like a jamming machinegun and ended in a glorious explosion of growls and very irritated $kh$ sounds.

John almost wanted to applaud. Instead he grinned bright and approving. "I'm gonna pretend it's a 'thanks John, that's exactly what I wanted!'"

He let his smile soften a little before he straightened up.

God knew if he'd been pinned like a butterfly and exposed to any and all passersby in some pristine, depersonalizing hell, he could think of nothing he would want more than a cozy little hideout made of soft cloth and cushions.

He took a cautious seat on the other end of the couch. Clever gaps (if he dare say) allowed the alien boy to catch glimpses out in quite a few directions, while still being hidden himself, and cutting out a lot of the background mess of details. John couldn't see him. He made sure to stretch his feet out so they'd be visible, so the alien boy could track him, and then he turned on the TV to the Mythbusters channel, sound turned down low, settling in for a long wait.

A sigh -- the alien boy muttered something under his breath that sounded like he had a throat full of gravel and snakes -- and then the couch cushions moved a bit, like he was looking for a more comfortable position, and then there was stillness again.

John waited another ten minutes before peering through one of the gaps. His guest was draped spine-bendingly over the arm of the couch, fast asleep.

Chapter End Notes
Tune in next week for a more interactive Karkat! *prepares poking stick*
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Uh, just in case people now imagine I'm some sort of writing machine, I'm not even sure how the first two chapters happened so fast, and I can feel all my other multipart starting to bitch and moan that they need some face time already goshdarnit. Things will likely slow down on this front.

It was home; it was safe. It took John a shamefully long five seconds to understand what the protesting whirr of electronics by the door meant, and by then the panel had been forced aside and men in tactical assault gear poured into the crack.

John rolled up on a knee from his seat on the carpet, book in hand, mouth open for an outraged yell. Harry Potter saved his life, by taking the dart that had been meant for his chest right in the binding. "What the Heck?!"

Noir shrugged at him, even as he directed men to surround the couch and its silly little fort with economical flicks of his fingers. "Don't bitch, that was just a sleeping drug."

John spluttered. "Just a -- oh, fuck you!"

"Be easier on everyone if you just admitted you're out of your fucking depth and let the alien go back into proper custody, but you won't do that without a goddamn yelling match. Tedium, let's bypass that. Sanders."

John flung the heavy volume in his hand. It hit the man taking aim at him in the head, hard enough to fling him off his feet. John didn't even watch to make sure he was down, because at this velocity, yes, he was, and he better be grateful his protective helmet meant he would only be a little concussed.

"I think maybe you've forgotten where you are," John said in the sudden silence, in what he felt was a remarkably calm and pleasant tone. "I don't think I'm out of my depth. I think maybe you are."

They stared at each other. Noir's eyes had gone to slits, no doubt calculating angles, ways to get at the boy behind him. The couch backed up against a wall, so there was no way to approach from behind (not without a mech anyway, and while John had learned to think of walls as rather flimsy barriers while in the pilot's seat he doubted Noir would dare to go quite that far.)

There were still his sides, exposed; he wished one of his friends were here, he wished Jake or Jane would wake up and come investigate. He wished Jade would come back down from orbit with Remington, or Roxy in Molotov -- hell, even Roxy without Molotov. Noir was the main danger but John hated leaving his flanks open, because he knew as soon as he locked himself into a battle with the asshole they'd dart in to snatch his alien boy from the couch, no matter how short he managed to make it.

"What's that shitty tent thing anyway, don't tell me either of you thought it'd stop infrared."

"It's a pillow fort," John replied with open, insulting pity. "Your childhood must have sucked a
whole championship's worth of balls."

John had been piloting since he turned twelve. He'd been in real fights at fourteen, and -- it seemed -- risked his life weekly ever since, he'd been bred for speed and strength, he'd been taught by the Strider. The only reason he wasn't knifed across the eyes when Noir lunged was that the man had deliberately missed, so he could startle John into taking a step back, off-balance, and bring up the taser in his other hand.

John wasn't done screaming his throat raw when a chair swung in over his head and clocked Noir in the side of the head.

John fell to his knees, chest heaving desperately, muscles twitching all over as he tried and failed to fight the reflexive urge to curl in on himself. He heard a low, rusty-edged hiss, and a gray leg pressed itself against his flank as he was toppling over, gave him something to brace on.

Oh.

His alien boy was awake.

John could feel the alien's knee tremble even through his own shakes, could see how tense he was, how his hands couldn't choose between fisted or hook-clawed. He stood his ground, though, snapped something irritable-sounding that John figured was for him, reached down to grab the taser probes and tear them free, caught a hold of John's upper arm -- John presumed to pull him up.

One of the men snarled "Don't touch him!" and lifted his gun.

John tackled the alien in the back of the knees, rolled with him on the carpet and behind the coffee table, flimsy protection as it was. It wasn't a tranq gun he held, not even a bullet gun, it was a fucking blaster!

"What the heck, what is wrong with you!" he yelled, and tried to crawl over the alien, shield him with his body -- there was no way on earth they'd shoot through John to get at him, was there? Absolutely no way, oh god, and here he was, still aching all over and really needing to throw up and goddamn it.

The alien thrashed under him to get free, barking out insults about John's mother and masturbatory habits, no doubt. John gritted his teeth when claws pierced his skin. "Stay down!" he yelled back in his face, his back itching with aftershocks and with the horrible doubt that maybe he'd assessed the risks wrongly and was going to get them both killed. Now they were stuck behind the coffee table and it was a matter of seconds before someone went to pick up the dart gun; no one would be stupid enough to wrestle hand-to-hand with either of them, shit, they needed to keep on the move but the men were so twitchy--

Considering how many men with guns and itchy trigger fingers there were in that room, it was still a huge surprise when the first shot rang out.

Strangely, it didn't hurt at all. Maybe they'd winged the alien instead. He flinched, wanted to push himself up and check but that'd only make him more of a target.

"Everyone face down on the floor. Now, if you good gentlemen don't mind. I've twice as many bullets as there are men in this room, and I specialize in head shots."

John relaxed all at once with a shuddery breath, right on top of the alien. Which was a bad idea, because then his head seemed to remember he was dizzy as fuck.
"Now, John? What the sweet dickens is going on here?!"

... the other boy was really warm. Not feverish-warm, not that weird sickly aura to it, but at least a couple degrees hotter than John. Huh.

"John!"

John shook his head to try to clear his mind. "... I'm fine. Got tasered. I kind of want to pass out a lot."

"You're interfering," Noir ground out from somewhere on the floor. Possibly he hadn't gotten off it yet since the alien boy brained him with a chair (and hadn't that been awesome. Granted John could have admired it more without his own sudden issue with screaming pain and locked-up muscles.)

"Sir?"

"Stand your ground."

Aw, crap.

The alien breathed fast, one hand clenched on John's upper arm, hard enough he might even manage to give him bruises. John absently patted the alien's cheek and covered his mouth to silence his irritated growl, and traded a long speaking glance with his half-clone, crouched up there at the corner of the staircase and ready to lay down some cover fire. He flicked a speaking glance toward one of the men, saw Jake give an imperceptible nod back. Now if he tackled this one guy and Jake shot that one then maybe they--

Rose walked in through the open door, not a hair out of place, unthreatening soft curves and slender limbs encased in her purple flight suit. She didn't have a weapon at hand and still looked deadly.

And she was cutting off the invaders' retreat. The way they stiffened, they could tell, too.

"This has gone on long enough."

John started grinning. He exchanged a look with the alien, trying to convey that; the guy glared back furiously, and confused as hell. His hair was all mussed up and in his face, it made John want to giggle.

And then he bit John's hand. John yanked it off his face with a yelp. "Ow -- well, sorry! You didn't have to do that, jeeze."

No blood; it'd been a warning bite, no more. John looked up to reassure Rose that he wasn't getting chewed to the bone here; he caught the tail end of a glance as she glided past, his own situation already assessed and dismissed.

"Perhaps the numerous briefings on the topic weren't clear enough. I will summarize: this building is off-limits. If that will facilitate your understanding, it was afforded legal rights akin to those of an embassy. You are on foreign soil, Mr. Noir, and there is no extradition treaty."

John pushed himself up into a sitting position. When the alien tried to squirm free from between him and the couch, John pushed him back down with a hand on his chest, in case seeing his gold-eyed face reminded the bunch of adults with guns and a mission that Rose could not, in fact, literally dissect them with a glance. He got hissed at in return, but the alien stayed down, a ball of nerves and clenched-tight muscles.

"This little incursion is not legal and I would wager if it was sanctioned by your superiors at all, it
was in a purely unofficial and entirely too deniable way. Perhaps we would have been forced to swallow the incident in silence if you'd succeeded, but you have not. This is over."

Noir struggled back up to his feet, blood caking his temple, and snarled at her. John quickly jumped to his own feet -- and almost fell back down as the room seemed to start circling around him. Shit, why couldn't nanites help with that stuff, if Noir attacked Rose...!

"I'm not going to listen to a fucking brat not even old enough to drink--"

"Then perhaps you'll listen to me."

John started laughing. All the way to the staircase he could hear Jake let out a big gusty sigh, see a flash of a cinema-white dimpling grin. Rose merely allowed a faint smirk to curl the end of her painted lips, and tilted her head as if to say, you heard the man.

"Hey, Dad," John said.

"John, son. I'll be with you in a minute." His father's eyes didn't leave Noir's for one second. And now John could see the man hesitate. No wonder; it was one thing getting into a pissing contest with teenagers, no matter how much of a ~last hope for the human race~ they supposedly were, but this was one fourth of the Skaialabs Board of Directors right under his nose.

"Oh, please, Mr. Egbert, take your time," Rose demurred, eyes sparkling with sheer evil. The big bad guys in riot gear were starting to do the embarrassed little boy squirm-dance. John could understand. This was the voice of a man who had Raised Kids to Teenagerhood, and they had been Rambunctious and he had Prevailed.

It seemed that contrary to popular belief Jack Noir had actually been a teenager at some nebulous point in his life, because he was kind of squinting a bit like he wanted to flinch instead.

"I leave things here to you, Rose. Please don't forget to document any wounds incurred."

...Whoa, steel voice. John shivered a little, mostly with schadenfreude, as his father gave a curt nod toward the door and the intruders silently filed out. The man he'd knocked out with a book wobbled along, helped by a buddy; Noir glared powerlessly for a few seconds longer before he followed.

John's dad scanned John from head to toe and then back up; John gave him a reassuring smile, a little thumbs up. His father nodded and followed Noir out.

"Oh thank god." John took a step back around the alien and let himself plop into the couch, groaning. "What the hell did they think they were doing?!!"

He'd landed ass-first in the remains of the fort. Aw, dude, those assholes ruined everything. He dug a book out from under his ass and let his head roll back on the back of the couch with a little frustrated whine.

"Status, everyone?" Rose asked.

"Perfectly unhurt!" Jake piped up. John groaned again and gave her a wincing smile.

"I'm, uh."

"Tasered," Jake helpfully contributed.

Rose slowly made her way to him, one step and then two. John startled a bit when she gave the alien
a cautious wide berth, going around the other side of the coffee table.

The guy still stood right in the same place, staring at them all in turn in blindingly obvious, frustrated confusion. (So alive though, now.) He side-eyed Rose like he was wondering if he should be tackling the shit out of her; she immediately stopped walking, not looking afraid, so much, just willing to listen. John winced.

"Uh, hey, alienpal? She's fine." He patted the cushions at his side, gave him a hopeful look. "Just sit down, okay?"

All chance of that was lost when Jake braced a gun on his shoulder and tromped down the stairs to join the three of them in the TV corner. Suddenly, cornered kitty. The alien let out a teakettle whistle and bared his row of fangs, hands raised and feet set in an unfamiliar fighting stance. If he'd had fur there would not be a single square centimeter left unspiked.

John sighed, and leaned forward to tug down the back of his hospital scrubs, which were starting to ride up pretty close to the danger zone. The alien jumped and went gack! John cracked up.

"It's fine, it's fine, jeeze, you're such a doubtful guy." Tug, tug. "Come on, come and sit down, it's all good."

He was speared with an utterly incredulous, are you brain damaged oh hell you totally are I should have known look, but then the alien's eyes slid to his chest, where a row of little punctures had left dots of blood. A strange expression passed on his face; after a few seconds he perched on the edge of the couch, slow and cautious, hands clenching on the cushions.

"So," Rose ventured, "are you going to introduce us?"

"Yeah, sure! This is... uh. Err." Oh, right. He turned to the alien, winced his way through a smile. "I'm John."

He pointed to his friends next, for clarity. "Rose. Jake." Then he pointed his chin at the alien.

For a moment he thought the alien hadn't understood. He was giving John the why are you so stupid dear lord whyyy look again and not really trying to answer.

"Do aliens even have names?" Rose mused. "Perhaps this is an entirely human concept--"

"Khrk'th."

Or something like that. Something all full of tongue clicks and growls. John figured he shouldn't have been surprised. He tried to repeat it and failed lamentably, if he could believe the wince on the guy's face.

"Krrkutt? Krukut?"


The aspirated H sounded almost like a smothered vowel of sorts, and apparently it went before the first growl, not after, like he'd heard on normal speaking speed. "Kuh... Kar? Kut. No, that sounds stupid. Kat? You make me think of a cat so damn much, with the hissing and the clawing up people, it's crazy. Let's go with Karkat, okay? I don't think my throat will ever untwist trying to say it otherwise."

(He wasn't going to spell it with Cs in his head because that made the name even sillier. Pfft. Lolcat on a ride-on toy car. Ks were badass anyway.)
The alien looked suitably disdainful and sour about it. But after a half-dozen tries, John's and the other humans' names still came out as Zhann, Rrhoz and Zehk, so John felt vindicated.

"Okay, okay, Zhann, good enough."

Apparently facepalms were also an alien thing.

He didn't hiss again when Rose waved Jake back and continued her approach, though he kept a wary eye on her, shoulders slumped and elbows on his knees, head hanging a bit low. Like a dog that expects to be kicked, John thought, but then Rose's hand was tugging at his t-shirt; he pulled it off with a sigh. "The alien -- Karkat clawed me up; I kinda tackled him, so... It's already healed, see?"

He rubbed at the drying blood. The nanites had kicked in, and in the end they were very shallow puncture wounds; the only traces left were the few red smears on his chest and the holes in his t-shirt. Which he'd been wearing to play in the hangar with the mechanics anyway, so it wasn't in the greatest state to start with.

"The taser issue?"

John tried to wave her off. "I'm fine, I'm fine! Will you stop being so nosy."

Rose speared him with a withering glare. "You're being a little cavalier here, for a person who needed to be rescued from a mess of his own making not two minutes ago."

John wilted.

"Your own high-handed removal of the alien from their custody opened you to this attempt -- we can't very well argue it's illegal when you just did the same. We'd have no leg to stand on."

"What was I supposed to do, petition people?" he protested, waving toward the alien to illustrate his point as he did his best to stare Rose down. "He'd still be there next year!"

The ali -- argh, Karkat was (almost) his name, Karkat -- batted John's hand away from his face with an irritated mutter. Rose's eyes tracked his every gesture and expression with unnerving attention; John watched them stare at each other, wondering if he should get in the middle, but after a few seconds Karkat gave and broke eye contact first. John was a bit surprised, considering his memories of the core of stubbornness he'd felt back during their freaky mindmeld thing. Maybe he just didn't want to piss off a potential ally.

"... So far he does seem much easier to handle than what was mentioned. A bit cranky, but that's entirely understandable."

"Mentioned by who?"

"You don't think I haven't accessed all the research done ever since he was brought into custody, do you."

... Duh, John. Rose was so grabby about information, he should have expected it.

She sighed. "I suppose there would be reasons for someone to fight doctors, or their quite determined security. He'd have no reason to hope the tests wouldn't hurt, and once security got involved..."

John grimaced. "Lemme guess, pile up on the alien time."

"John," Rose said softly, "he tore a man's arm out of its socket and disemboweled another. Who was wearing body armor."
John's stomach muscles clenched involuntarily; he had to fight not to curl up, lift his knees in defense of his unprotected guts.

He had known those claws could do some damage from the start. Hell, if he had claws, he'd be more than strong enough to do the same, only he'd probably dig his way from front to vertebrae in one sweep, easy, scoop himself a big handful of intestines and organs and things. He didn't need claws to be dangerous, none of his friends did, all were -- as that one politician framed it, the one who'd wanted them saddled with dedicated handlers and psychological conditioning -- highly lethal.

"... Did they die?"

"No, but it was a close thing. And he wasn't trying to spare them."

He watched the alien, who still sat awkwardly perched on the edge of the couch, and who watched him and his sobered expression right back. It was clear from the apprehension he tried and didn't entirely manage to hide that he understood the conversation had taken a turn for the grim, and that he was the one being discussed, and that there was nothing he could do but wait and see what they decided for him.

(And then his dad had taken his pipe out of his mouth, blown out a last smoke ring, and then in the next second he was across the table and the end of his pipe was digging in the man's trachea, pinning him to the back of his seat. 'A simple demonstration, sir! I am a perfectly baseline human being with no psychological inclination to murder, and yet I could still choose to become quite lethal if I ever felt like it.' And then he'd leaned in and fixed the man's tie and collar and smiled, and said, 'They are not weapons, they are children. They will be healthy, they will be loved, and God willing once they grow up they will be willing to fight for us, but even if they don't they will still be our children.' And behind him Mr. Strider didn't bother to move one inch, except for the way his mouth curled up in the only documented proof that his face wasn't frozen expressionless. It was John's favorite bit of footage ever.)

Karkat wasn't a test tube clone baby to raise up into a good man. He was a pretty-much-adult mech pilot with his own set personality and history, and obviously he could fight hand-to-hand as well, and he had damn good reasons to want to go down fighting. (One of which being those people he loved that he couldn't stand to let down, the other being that it'd probably be better and safer for him and his if he managed to force the humans to kill him.)

He wasn't fighting now. Just waiting, head angled a little to the side, chin tucked in, uneasy. Not confrontational at all (unless that was meant to threaten them with his horns, but they were so little and round, John couldn't imagine them being used as any kind of weapon.)

"I still want to do this," he told Rose, without looking away from Karkat.

Rose gave a slow, unsurprised nod, and then a wry quirk of a smile. "Very well. If you insist." She set her hand on her hip, straightened up, scanned the room with her lips pursed in thought. "Jake, please? The door is shorted out. Could you keep watch for a little while longer? I'll relieve you soon."

Man, John had almost forgotten Jake was here; he was so quiet, which wasn't much like him. He turned to watch Jake blink, shake himself, and flick Rose a smile that wasn't quite as bright and wide as it ought to have been. John winced a little.

"Aw, buddy, sorry -- it's the middle of your night, isn't it."

"Never fear, my good man," Jake said, body wavering ever so slightly. "I'll just ... sit and watch. It's
almost as good as sleeping."

Jake gave the alien a long measuring look over the rim of his glasses before he turned and ambled away; he dragged an ottoman to the door and sat down with his back to the wall where he could glance outside from relative cover and keep watch on the inside, one of his guns resting casually across his thighs. John watched Karkat note all of that and his mouth take a sour twist. He eventually gave an irritated snort and turned away, stiffening when he saw both Rose and John watching him.

John shrugged at him, and shifted in his seat to pull a cushion from under his butt and give it a sad look. "Man, they ruined that fort. It was such a neat fort, Rose, you'd have liked it -- Karkat liked it, which says everything."

Rose sighed at him. "Yes, obviously you take superior care of your brand-new pet. Now, I may have missed it in this mess, but... It's been five hours since he was taken off his saline drip. Have you given him anything to drink or eat since?"

"--Um. Oops."

She sighed again -- did that a lot around him -- turned to the alien, tilted her head. "Karkat?" she said, giving the name a kind of trilling R John couldn't imitate. It still wasn't quite the way the alien pronounced his own name, but he recognized it easily. He went stiff all over again; even more so when Rose took a step and a half-turn back and curled her hand, body language all clear and telegraphed; going this way, waiting for you. "Come with me."

Karkat flicked John a look that was a little panicked at the edge. John blinked, startled. Well, okay, Rose was scary, but... She hadn't been threatening toward him at all! He tried a reassuring smile and shooed him off. "Yeah, yeah. Go with her. I'll--"

"Pick up the mess?"

"... Pick up the mess." Sigh. "Come on, Rose, I'm not even the one who messed it up!"

"Do you want to go find Mr. Noir and ask him to please pick up after himself?" she threw over her shoulder as she walked away. "Because he's really the only other culprit I can figure out."

"Mnrfrgh."

John dragged himself up, put his shirt back on, and started gathering books and cushions. Rose guided Karkat away to the big dinner table at the other end of the room. John couldn't help but steal glances, and the poor guy looked like someone had decided to give his spine a hand supporting all that dense muscle and put a steel rod up his butt. It was kinda funny that he'd be scared of Rose, who he hadn't even seen fight, but not of John really. Then again John had already proved he had no interest in hurting him just for fun... Hm. Rose, emanating an innate, transspecies aura of sadism?

Yep, sounded legit to him.

He found the taser when he was straightening up a chair, and, scowling, kicked it into the nearest wall hard enough the casing splintered.

Ten minutes later he was pretty much done straightening things out. The broken stuff was piled up in a corner. (He owed Jane a new book. This one was all bloody and torn. Um.) He dragged two of the chairs back to the table, shoved them at roughly the right spots, and flopped sideway into one of them. Rose and Karkat broke their latest staring contest and turned to look at him.

"Oh man, a pear. Ngh. Want."
Rose mock-glared, as she busied herself peeling and coring it. "No stealing food from the alien's plate, either. For all you know it might be a mortal offense where he's from. It was hard enough convincing him to eat at all."

There was meat on his plate, mostly that, well-cooked beef, cut in squares. Karkat watched them warily as he picked another bit with his fingertips. John grinned; Karkat's eyelids twitched nervously. Argh.

"Teeth, John."

John huffed. "Gonna be hard to hide those," he grumped, running his tongue over his prominent front teeth. It was pretty much the only big thing that set him and Jake apart, aside from eye color; the rest were all measured in tenth-of-an-inch increments on the planes of their faces. (Too bad it wasn't summer yet, because Jake tanned so fast, coming September he was pretty much brown and stayed that way halfway across to winter. John mostly got lobsterized.)

Karkat sneaked in another bite while they weren't looking at him.

"Hehe, maybe he's shy."

Rose chuckled faintly. "For future reference, he appears to be omnivorous, but there's a lot of preservatives in most of what we have in cans or frozen dinners that he might react badly to. For now protein is the safest bet. He seems to need a higher intake than we would, and fresh vegetables would invite other problems."

John nodded very seriously and tapped the side of his glasses. "Computer, make note. Strict protein diet, all other food groups barred. Does candy count as a food group for the purposes of alien nutrition?"

Rose rolled her eyes at him. "If I catch you feeding him a gusher, I'll tell mom on you. It's already incomprehensible how a human being can eat those confections and not be violently sick as it is." She put the two halves of the pear on the edge of Karkat's plate, whose eyes went all apprehensive again.

John smothered a snicker in his hand. "Oh no, please, not mom, I'll do anything." He nudged Karkat's shoulder with the back of his hand, tilted his head. "Hmm? What's got you so worried, buddy, she's not trying to poison you."

Grumpy scowl, a muttered string of words. He poked at the pear, picked it up with two claws, and gave it a cautious nibble, glowering at John when he caught him watching. John snickered and made a show of looking away from him.

"So! Rose! Tell me neat stuff. I need my knowledge expanded."

She rolled her eyes a bit, but indulged him. "It's extremely puzzling that his biological design is so similar to ours." A little wave of her hand toward Karkat's pretty much human face, his shoulders, his hands. "Did you know he shows no sign of even being a mammal? There's vestigial muscle under there that indicate at some point in his childhood he used to have two more limbs. Where are they now? Why did he even lose them?" A helpless shrug. "It's as if the two species were evolved from entirely different starting points but given the same floor maps for the end result. Talk about convergent evolution..."

"Almost makes you wonder if --"

"Don't say it, John!"
He waggled his eyebrows, chin set in his hands. "Intelligent~ design~" She picked up a cloth napkin and thwapped him with it. "Ow! Haha."

The towel was still raised for a second hit. Whoops.

"Now you done it, bro."

John startled; he didn't have the time to turn around to face Dave before two slender arms wrapped themselves around his neck from behind and pulled him against the back of his chair.

"Naughty, naughty Lil'bert! Quick, Rosie, punish him, I'll hold him down for you!"

"Ack! Roxy!"

Karkat's chair crashed to the ground as he jumped to his feet. John winced and flailed to free himself from Roxy's arms around his neck, images of the alien grabbing something heavy for his second human-clobbering of the day dancing in his mind.

"Karkat no--"

He was perfectly still, they both were, the alien and the blond young man both, Dave's monofilament sword resting light as a feather on his throat. Karkat was pinned, the back of his thighs pressed to the edge of the table, leaning back ever so slightly off balance to keep from slicing his throat open on the blade.

His upper lip was curled up at the corner, though, baring fangs. Uh oh.

John got up slow and cautious, tapped Dave's shoulder to get his attention. "It's okay, bro, Roxy just startled him. Not a half hour ago we had Noir falling on us like a pile of brick, he's twitchy, okay?"

It was hard to see where Dave was looking at with that opaque, wraparound visor on his face, but John had a feeling he hadn't glanced away from his target for even one second. "Train your pet better, Egbert, or get him a muzzle. He gets twitchy at my cuz again, I'm putting him down. You don't know where he's been and we don't want no space rabies on this island."

Roxy huffed and wrapped her arm around Dave's neck, and pressed on his cheek with her other fist until his face looked pretty ridiculously duck-lipped. "Aw, my protector. Swoon, swoon!"

Now was apparently noogie time! Dave's mouth curled down tight at the corners like he was trying not to pout. John bit back a laugh.

"Now stop scaring the alien. He looked wayyy cuter when he wasn't scowling."

Roxy peeked over Dave's shoulder and grinned at Karkat. Dave sighed and took a step back, herding her along with his body, and lifted the blade away. "When he eats your liver and gives you space rabies I will laugh. In my heart, not for real, but you know I'll mean it."

John snickered, at them and at Karkat's incredulous, oh my god what, just what expression.

He rested a hand on the alien's shoulder, waited to see if it'd be accepted -- yeah, just a quick glance and a light twitch -- and then turned his attention to his best friend. He was very cautious to touch the center of the flat of the blade to nudge it farther up, or he probably wouldn't notice he'd been cut until his fingers landed on the floor and things started gushing. The electric current keeping the monofilament rigid tingled through his nail bed for a second, until Dave clicked on the hilt and it turned back into a three-inches wide, floppy ribbon and rewound itself in. The hilt stayed in his hand,
slowly twirled between three fingers like a pen by a bored student.

"Right! Let's try this again. One step back, guys, breathing space is a great thing to have! Yeah, good, thanks. Karkat, this is Dave, and Roxy. Roxy, Dave -- Karkat."

Roxy's name turned into Rok-chi in his mouth, but that was the closest he'd managed yet, and on the first try. He refused to even attempt Dave's, just glowered at him. His irises were still a bit too dilated for John's tastes, most of the yellow hidden from view.

"Rok-chi! That's so cute! I like it." And then of course Roxy had to eel in between John and Dave before he could stop her and ruffle the alien's hair into a right mess.

Karkat went gneep and jerked back, eyes wide, started to dodge, and then froze under her hand. After a couple of seconds where Roxy kept scrishing, he closed his eyes, took a deep, bracing breath, cautiously pushed away her hand -- touching her wrist only with the back of his own hand, claws deliberately pointed away -- and then he started swearing up a storm. At least if it wasn't swearing John was ready to eat his hat. Dad had gotten him a pretty spiffy one last Christmas.

"And if you fondle my hair again I swear to god I will piss on everything you own!" John dubbed as the alien finally wound down. "And then I'll set it on fire. And also fuck the fuck out of you -- that one's for me," he added as an aside to his blond friends as Karkat spat out a last machinegun growl-clack his way.

"My, that young man sure has a foul mouth," Rose commented dryly from her seat on the other side of the table, from which she hadn't bothered to move. John gave her an innocent look.

"Yeah, honestly he really does." Okay. Situation more or less defused. He sobered up. "But Roxy..."

She gave a shrug, casual, and stepped off to wander toward the fridge in the kitchen corner. "Now we're pretty sure he won't maul any of us just for getting in his space," she called over her shoulder. "... Well. At least not when there's four of us and one of him in the room."

John scowled at her back, irritated by her dismissive attitude. "Roxy, he's had people feeling him up all over the place for days now!"

"I know." She turned back, a can of soda in her hand; he was startled by how serious her expression was. "And that's sad. But he's still got to live here with us, and I for one really don't feel like tiptoeing all the time because he can't figure out what's friendly touching and what's not, and appropriate use of violence and deadly force, not if I don't really, really have to." A shrug, and she opened the can and took a sip, and then grinned over the rim. "But it looks like he gets friendly touching! Even if he doesn't really like it. Tadah, everyone's happy."

"There were better ways to figure that out," John muttered, only he couldn't really think of one but initiating personal space invasion and watching his reaction.

"Perhaps," Rose said. "Or maybe he merely thinks he will get hurt if he doesn't submit."

"Close 'nough for government work", Dave retorted, and went to lean against the counter that blocked out the kitchen space, arms crossed, and still staring. Karkat hissed under his breath, keeping watch on him from the corner of his eye.

"Hey, alienpal. Sit back down. Sit down," he repeated, enunciating more carefully, and showed him the way by pulling back his own chair and taking a seat once again. "Sit down." A pat to the abandoned seat next to him.
Karkat's jaw clenched visibly, muscles rolling under the skin, but he pulled the chair back to the table and sat, body language full of there, I've done what you wanted, are you happy yet, cause maybe I could also dance for you. Want fries with that? Gnaaargh.

"Thanks, buddy." He pointed at the abandoned plate. "Still hungry?"

Karkat grimaced faintly.

"Okay, never mind."

Karkat's hands were clenched white-knuckled on the edges of his seat, claws scratching the paint. His eyes kept jerking from John to Rose to Roxy and Dave to Jake over there by the door, and Jake and Dave were pretty much at the very edges of his peripheral vision which he obviously didn't like at all. John threw Rose a pointed look; he was out of ideas, personally.

Rose took a sip of water from her glass and looked back blandly. Silence spread another layer of awkward on the room.

"... uh. Guys! Buddies. Best friends. It's kinda early for you to be off-shift, isn't it?"

"Pretty much done with this wave." Dave shrugged. "Dirk managed to slip through their line and ruin their transport, the usual number of creepymechs has been downed... Unless they had a few more hitchhiking a ride on the transport's bumper, it's over for at least a couple days."

Because yeah, usually, there would be a team of six big monster-shaped biomechs -- the ones they all thought were the usual aliens before, like Karkat's Cancer -- and a crap-ton of more ship-shaped ones, more obviously manufactured; the aliens' destroyers, same ways the Skaialabs mechs were usually assisted by a net of normal humans in normal battlecruisers and tiny gunboats, and a bazillion sensor arrays to see the aliens coming from a while back. The humongous alien transports ran back and forth to bring more fresh troops in once the humans were done ruining them, relieve the biomechs. Even if the aliens sent another wave sooner than usual they'd still have at least one, maybe two hours' warning to get back in orbit and get ready to meet the assault.

John wondered if Karkat'd had friends over there, in the transport ship, how he was going to react knowing they'd pushed back another attempt so decisively.

The aliens seemed to have such overwhelming numbers to throw at the humans, all of humanity's strategists were tearing out their hair trying to figure out why the heck they didn't try to merely overwhelm Earth under superior numbers. It'd be doable. What the heck was going on up there? Were their commanders asleep? Incurably incompetent? He couldn't figure it out -- Karkat seemed sharp as a whip, surely the species as a whole couldn't be functionally retarded as compared to humans.

"We'll need intel from him," Rose said quietly, "as soon as we can communicate."

"Stop reading my mind," John snapped back, less joking, more irritated than he should have been. "And I told Doc Lalonde I wouldn't do interrogations."

"If we can't produce results from this situation it'll be deemed too dangerous to allow. It doesn't matter what I told Mr. Noir, our progenitors don't actually have absolute rights. They're probably going to have to trade in a lot of favors to allow this to continue. Give ground on some things they'd been refusing to. We're not asking you to torture the alien, John, but there needs to be results."

John made a frustrated growl and raked both hands through his hair, elbows pressed to the table.
"... Zhann?"

"--Huh? Oh." Karkat was staring at him, heavy brows furrowed in worry. John managed a smile somehow; he wasn't sure if it was all that reassuring.

"'S a waste of resources, too," Roxy said, dragging his attention away from the alien. "'Cause seriously this building is made to keep people out, not in. We can't swear he wouldn't escape. So that means he'll need a guard to stick to him like a tick to Bec's furry butt. And he's stronger than a baseline dude, so he needs the guard to be one of us. Or maybe even like two of us. Problem is, during crunch times we can only afford to be dirtside when we gotta snooze like whoa. I mean, if you don't even get a tasty chunk of data to feed all our thinky people out of it, it's just not an effective allocation of resources."

Dave of course was no support on this, and Jake, at the other end of the big room, was flopped against the wall at his back and looked half asleep and not really listening. John slumped on his crossed arms, capitulating. "Fine. Pop a crown on me. I am the king of nosy question, it is me. Just as soon as we teach him English! Or you guys pry some more of that mindmeld goop out of the Research Division's tight-fisted grasp."

"Don't worry about that," Rose said, and she and Roxy exchanged a really worrying look. Eep.

"Alright, officially not worrying about that. All worrying has been delegated to you girls. I'm sure you'll distribute it well." He pushed himself up on his elbows; Karkat had been staring at him weird when he laid with his cheek to the table.

Rose tapped at the edge of her glasses. John wondered who she was chatting with, or if she was just recording things or accessing a file. Jade's eyes always unfocused visibly, and John himself tended to let his lips and throat move the tiniest bit when he thought at the computer glasses, even though the tech didn't even need him to subvocalize anything, just to think typing thoughts hard enough -- but with Rose it was pretty much impossible to tell she was surfing unless you caught her turning them on. Even then she could have turned them on by thinking hard enough, too; the tapping was mostly a courtesy.

"... Alright. House rules. Jane sent me a few suggestions. They mesh with what I was going to suggest anyway."

"She's awake? But then why doesn't she--"

"John!"

"--Um, sorry." He threw the alien a quick, guilty glance. He could imagine why Jane was keeping to her dorm.

"First, he must not be left alone, at any point."

John sighed. "Okay, I can agree with that one, at least for now. We'll need to reevaluate at some point, but yeah, okay."

"Yes, yes. Second, no hangar access."

"Well, duh." Though he couldn't help but grimace. No hangar for Karkat meant no hangar and no Warhammer repairs for him, unless he could trade guard duties with Dirk; Dave and the alien hadn't had the most auspicious start, Jake might get distracted or want to wrestle or something, Rose'd be too busy, Roxy would probably grope his butt, and Jade and her tiny friendliness he might not take seriously until she proved herself to him but John would rather not get his alien boy back full of holes
"Third -- if he shows any sign of physical aggression he goes back to the labs. I'm not talking of
growls and bared teeth and startle responses, as long as they exist to get away; if he makes a
deliberate move to injure anyone, even if he doesn't succeed, that's it, he goes straight back to UNE
custody."

John stiffened.

"Yeah, have to agree with this one," Roxy said, looking a little sad. Dave gave a single, firm nod.

John turned to the door. "... Jake?"

"--Uh, what? Oh right." Rubbing his eye, Jake leaned forward on his seat, elbows on his knees,
smothered a yawn. "Sorry chap, it sounds right sensible to me. I mean, what if he goes after tech
support? Or your dad? Can't afford the risk."

The thing was, he could tell Rose didn't enjoy telling him, but if she hadn't, Dave would have
anyway. (He might have taken it better from Dave, but mostly because, well. It was easier to ignore
Dave than Rose when you could tell yourself he didn't know what he was talking about, hadn't
planned for all possible contingency plans.)

Or Jane would have had to say it, and it would have been worse.

".. Okay. But you better hurry up with the communication thinger, because I'm not sure how to
explain that to him in mime."

He resisted the urge to flop again. His alien was... huh, still digging his claws in the side of his seat.
The metal was dented. There was no way he would relax against the back anytime soon, either.
Blargh. Short of force-cuddling the nervousness out of him, John wasn't sure what to do about it, and
even then cuddling might just backfire and prompt another oh my stars and garters where's my
blasted rape whistle episode.

Uh. Even if he cuddled guys, which he didn't. Well, unless it was funny. Or they were really, really
sad. Dirk in a hospital waiting room thinking he'd gotten Mr. Strider killed levels of sad.

-- Or they were his dad, okay, he had no problem being manly enough to enjoy dadhugs, and
actually Karkat seemed to him more of a defensive type than one who aggressed first, no matter how
bitchy he was. His whole piloting style was based on blocking and counterattacking, even. Likely it
would never come up.

The attacking and being put back in UNE custody, that was. Not the cuddling.

Okay what the heck brain.

He just... It disturbed him, remembering that raw grief, that soul-deep shame. Note to self, mindmelds
weren't very conducive to emotional detachment.

But he'd never been the objective type anyway. That was Rose's shtick.

"... Gloomy! Anyone want a beer?"

"Oh, Roxy, honestly!" Rose protested. John watched them, half-slumped on the table, as Rose joined
her sister in the kitchen corner to snark and Roxy gleefully took all that sarcasm as wrong-footed as
possible as she drank her beer anyway.
Dave seemed to like his spot right at the edge of Karkat's vision, so the alien would have to stop tracking either him or Jake if he wanted a real good look at the other one. Then again Jake looked pretty much asleep and not about to move anytime soon. "Hey, buddy?" John called. "Bud -- Jake Harley!" Voice booming, rusty-deep. "Inspection!"

Jake jerked up before his eyes were even open. John snickered. "I'm awake, Gramps! I'm awake. Cripes. I was just resting my oh go to hell John."

Pffhahaha.

Jake found a TV remote on the floor and threw it at him. John tilted his head to let it sail past and snatched it as it flew by, and lobbed it at the couch. It proceeded to land at an angle and bounce off back to the floor, where it clattered in a way that implied part of it had come off. Oops.

"Are you guys destroying everything in sight again?"

"Um, no, Rose, what would make you think such a thing," they chorused in perfect sync, the exact same line from times immemorial.

Rose huffed at them. "Can't you lob, oh, I don't know, pillows?"

"Maybe doilies?" Roxy suggested mock-innocently. "Less damage."

"Huh, wouldn't say so. Bet if you throw them right you could have a mean replacement shuriken," Dave contributed, face entirely serious. "Tie some sparkly shit at the edges for weight and sharp edges and it'll double as a sick crystal ball cosy."

"Stained in the blood of your victims," John said around a leer.

"Don't make me get my knitting needles, boys, I still need to replenish my stock of sanguine pigment."

Jake and John snickered behind their hands. Jake immediately went on to smother a yawn.

"... You can go to bed, Jake. We're more than enough to keep watch."

"Are you certain?" Jake asked. Rose nodded. John shrugged. "Well then. I'll wander bedwards. I'm fit to fall asleep right on my feet."

He dragged himself up and trundled off back up the stairs with a last little wave. Rose drifted by, picking up a book to get herself seated on one of the couches. Still behind Karkat and the door, though less directly so, less visibly guarding. She didn't have a weapon out, and Karkat seemed slightly more ready to trust she wouldn't pounce from behind, because he immediately shifted most of his attention back onto Dave, who kept leaning against the counter with his arms crossed and his impenetrable visor.

John wasn't too sure what to do with the alien. He was quiet and stayed put, and didn't seem hungry or sick or aggressive, just wary, and John had nothing he could think of that he ought to try and communicate right now.

"... Hey Rox. How'd the battle go up there? I'm missing all the action."

Her eyes started gleaming in satisfaction. John settled in for an epic tale (or a hilarious one, but either one'd be good.) Dave joined in maybe three sentences in, and then John had nothing to do but laugh and nod and exclaim at the appropriate parts, and snicker when they corrected each other, mostly on
their respective level of Badass Mofoitude.

Maybe fifteen minutes later his dad was back, pipe puffing at a jaunty, self-satisfied angle, trailed by a couple of repairmen that he set to work on the door before walking in. "I'm back, children! How did things go here?"

Rose put her book away. John bounced off his chair and went to him. "It's fine! Everything went fine. And you?"

His father's eyes crinkled. "Mr. Noir's excess of zeal shall not be a problem again for a while. He has been set on bodyguard duties for a returning visitor who will keep him very busy."

"Woo! You rule."

Rose distracted his dad from eyeing the little bloody holes in John's shirt via unleashing a truckload of politicking questions. John's eyes glazed over three sentences in. He stayed by, though, arms crossed loosely and shoulder almost touching his dad's. It was just... it was nice. He was a young adult, pretty much -- okay, not quite but getting there -- but sometimes it was... just nice, to stand beside a man who he knew would strangle people with his own hat before he let them get to John, even though John was stronger and more resilient and better trained and it really oughta be the other way around. It'd be the other way around if they got attacked for real, John promised himself, but in the meantime...

Mmh.

"You seem a bit tired, son. How long have you been up?"

"Oh, uh. I don't even remember, the day feels like it lasted weeks. I was already working at seven, I remember that..." He checked his glasses for this morning's login. "I got up at -- oh, wow, okay, yeah." It was still early but apparently he'd woken up with Jake, who was on a second-half-of-the-night-to-mid-afternoon cycle, and dozed for a couple hours before getting up for real.

"Hm. Your young guest also seems rather ready to call it a night. How did you all decide to handle this?"

"Uh -- well, he can't be alone, so..." John frowned a bit. "He can't sleep out here anyway, the door's not even fixed and it's not hard to open from the inside even if it was. I dunno if the guys'll be okay sleeping in the same room with him though."

"I like it better," Dave contributed from the other end of the room. Karkat's head twitched around from their group back to him, eyebrows furrowed in concentration and... yeah, Dad was right, lined with exhaustion. "Better keep him close. After the last prank wars we all wake up on a hair trigger anyway."

"Uh yeah, but where...? Think Dirk would mind if--"

Dave snorted. "Yeah, dude, he damn well would and you know it, he's coming back from patrol in five hours and if his bed's taken he'll kick you clean out of yours. Anyways, your alien, your problem."

John sighed. There wasn't a free bed anywhere on the island due to all their annoying guests. Well, maybe they had some free ones in the barracks they'd built in a hurry off to the east side to accommodate the guards, but John wasn't going to the heart of Noir's fiefdom to ask if he could pretty please borrow a mattress.
"I guess I could appropriate a clinic bed, buuut..."

"Yes, this does not seem to be the best idea, considering," Rose replied with a faint dismayed grimace.

His father frowned thoughtfully. "Tomorrow I'll go buy a camp bed for you. For tonight, I'm afraid you'll have to make do. Do you know how to find the extra blankets? That should make the floor tolerable for one night."

"Um, yeah, sure," John replied, because of course his dad was right, you didn't make a guest sleep on the floor, honestly. But at the same time, urk.

He went back to the kitchen table, where Karkat still sat, stiff and kind of... worn, smaller-looking. And still in his sadly rumpled hospital gown, which didn't help.

"Hey, Karkat?" His voice went a bit soft when he spoke through no conscious decision on his part; it was a bit embarrassing how Dave's eyebrow went up over it, but he tried to ignore it.

"Hrm?"

"Come on. Time to sleep. Come with me." He copied the gesture Rose had used along with the words, the half-step back, waiting. After a couple of seconds, Karkat pushed himself up on his feet and followed. He walked like a cat in unknown territory, one foot neatly placed after another, not making any sound, and making damn sure to keep John where he could take cover behind him if he had to without being too close just yet. Eh, so long as he followed.


Up and up and up.

First things first... He opened the bathroom door and led him in. It was big inside, one wall lined with sinks and mirrors and littered with various toothbrushes and hair brushes and makeup and shaving cream and hair gel, the other with stalls. The next door led to lockers, and two separate communal shower rooms, but there was no need to go check that out yet. John showed Karkat how to operate the sink and fill a glass -- ideally he wouldn't come here alone anyway, but he might be thirsty now... nope, wasn't, he didn't want the glass. John showed him the content of the stalls next, arched an eyebrow.

"Do I need to explain that one to -- oh hey that was a relieved look on your face, wasn't it. Do you want to--"

Whoops Karkat was inside and had closed the door neatly under his nose. John blinked for a minute, nonplussed -- maybe he was trying to escape? Hide from him?

... or maybe he was having a good long tinkle. Pfhehehe. John used the time for a lightning-quick pee break of his own and then went to wash his hands. And wash his hands. And, uh, wash his hands some more, um, was he taking a dump or something even though he hadn't eaten any solids in days apart from like not even a hour ago...

... It was a little weird listening in on a guy on the toilet. Uh. Even kind of creepy. But eventually he concluded that, no, Karkat was pretty much done. He was just... Maybe he just wanted to be alone for a little while, feel safe, even if the walls were flimsy and didn't even go all the way up or down.

John washed his teeth and his face and even shaved the five o'clock shadow on his jaw, but eventually he was out of little things to do in there and his eyes were getting gritty. He went to knock
quietly at the door.

"Karkat? You okay? You gotta come out now, pal."

A few seconds went by, and then the toilet flushed and the door was reluctantly opened.

Karkat's eyes were redder, John was pretty sure of it. Almost bruised-looking. He didn't quite meet John's eyes.

There was no fight left in him. John couldn't help reaching out and clasping his shoulder, gentle as possible.

"Aw, buddy."

Karkat bowed his head, staring away at the floor, embarrassment flickering there and gone behind the utter emotional exhaustion. John's arms were around him the next second.

Okay, looked like he did give boys hugs. Well.

He didn't keep it up, released him after barely two seconds; Karkat had gone stiff as a board pretty much immediately, and it was awkward, John hadn't even planned on it and he didn't want to try to see if he'd eventually melt if the hug kept up long enough, or if he'd just get worse.

"Haha. Um. Yeah. Come on. Come with me."

Whee. If he led the way he didn't have to look at Karkat's face! (Or let him see his own. Win/win.) A quick stop by a cupboard for extra blankets, and then he was pushing the boys' dormitory room door open and tiptoeing inside. All four of them could usually sleep through a lot of noise, due to having such different schedules, but Jake'd had a shitty night as it was.

It was fairly dark inside after he closed the door but John knew where everything was. He pointed at the bunks on the left, up and down, "Dave, Dirk," and then to the right, "Jake, John." Jake's arm hung from the edge of his bunk as he lay sprawled on his stomach. John went on tiptoes to peek -- yup, way asleep.

Karkat just stood in the middle of the room and stared.

"Come on," John whispered, and made hand gestures again. And nope, Karkat still wasn't moving. Maybe his night vision was bad. John reached for his wrist and tugged him forward as he knelt on the edge of his bunk, ducking underneath Jake's.

And uh, wow, 'stiff' didn't even cover it. Was he shivering? "Karkat? Hey, it's okay. Come down here." He got back up out of the bunk, carefully laid a hand on the alien's shoulder, turned him and pushed down to get him to sit on the mattress. "Yeah, there, good. Uh, move back a bit." He made shooing motions with his hand.

With twitchy, jerky kicks Karkat pushed himself backward on the mattress until his back was pressed against the bottom wall. He didn't lay down, though, just hugged his knees to his chest, a dim lumpy shape in the dark.

He looked like he had on the couch, all tense and lost and afraid. ... Maybe he'd like hiding again. John considered the blankets he'd dumped on the bed, and started tucking them in the bottom of Jake's bunk to make a tent.

It was dark as a smuppet's hand hole under there when John sat at the edge of his bed, the last free
opening, to tuck the inside in properly. Reclining half-in half-out against the headboard with a foot on the floor, he could barely guess where Karkat was from the dip in the mattress caused by his weight, the almost-subconscious awareness of the radiating heat of his body or maybe merely his presence.

He sat in silence, waiting for his eyes to adjust a little bit more, waiting for... he wasn't sure, some kind of movement. There wasn't.

He was so tired, didn't want to get up and go back for more blankets, now that two of his were serving as a wall (wasn't allowed anyway, that'd leave a sleeping Jake alone with him and no matter how pitiful some alien prisoner was John was not risking his half-clone-cousin.) It felt warm and cozy in there, and his mattress was pretty wide, and if he inched his other leg very slowly inside and reclined a bit more... to make himself comfortable...

He did feel a little guilty, to force Karkat to share. His dad would be all *Oh, son* if he knew. But, um. That way he'd know if he moved during the night? Yeah. let's, uh, go with that tactical... assesthing... mnh.

The mattress moved a little as he was falling asleep, but Karkat wasn't trying to leave, so John decided he wasn't going to care and went right on nodding off.

The only thing he remembered from his dreams was an infinite matrioshka of round-eyed little owls, staring at him through their tree-holes.
John woke up the next morning via a kick to the face. Or at least that was what he deduced while sitting on the floor with a blanket draped over half his face, his hand pressed to the explosion of pain in his cheekbone, watching the alien flail.

It was hard to be all that angry when Karkat didn't even seem awake.

"I take it the honeymoon's over?" came, rough-voiced, from the lower bunk at his back.

"Oh, shut it, Dirkface." John pushed himself up on his knees, pressed his hands on the edge of his mattress, and felt around for his glasses, so he could fix the level of ambient light without having to turn on a light and attract the Wrath of Dave. The alarm clock and electronic doodads all over the place gave the dormitory a permanent gloom, but it wasn't enough for details.

The alien was curled in a ball at the bottom end of the mattress. Yeah, John'd been right, his eyes were definitely closed. He kept twitching, though, eyebrows scrunching and jaw tensing and releasing, little bursts of aborted movement running all through his body, tightening his stranglehold on the pillow he'd wound himself around.

Definitely not a good dream.

"Karkat?" John tried to keep it at a whisper, worked hard as he could to reproduce the right sounds, the rolling R, the clacking tongue. "K'rkat, shh."

Okay, whispers weren't working. He stretched out over the mattress, cautious, and poked him in the knee.

If he hadn't been damn fast he would have gotten his hand kicked into pieces. He felt a rush of air as Karkat's foot scythed past his nose. "Whoa!"

"Arhit'zanikh-- uhn. Nn. ...Zhann? Sst'kh?"

Ouch. Now that had been a nice alien yell there at the start. From Dave's top bunk rose a sleepy but nevertheless pissed-off growl.

"Uh oh." John threw a look over his shoulder. Um. Yeah. Nothing was moving up there yet, but Dirk's cynical, amused look was clear as day. John jumped up on his feet and hurried to the wardrobe to get two changes of clothes. He palmed the door open, turned to look at his bed. "Karkat come with me hurry now now now!"

Karkat wrestled himself past the blankets and pillows in a great, baffled, half-asleep hurry and
dashed to the door. John pulled him outside, flattened himself on the corridor wall the second he was past the doorway, and slapped the door control closed. The door whooshed closed only a fraction of second before something heavy thunked on it and thumped to the floor.

"Phew." He started laughing. "Okay, let's not stay here, what if Dave chases us."

"... Dev?" Karkat was squinting under the dimmed corridor lights, brow furrowed more with each passing second. "Dev n'ralekh akat--"

John was pretty sure he could translate, no matter that he couldn't parse even half the noises Karkat was making. The gist of it went 'Dave is such a massive dickhead seriously what the fuck I really don't like that guy.'

He shrugged. "He has other qualities! Being woken up early doesn't really let them shine. It's very sad and you should pity him for it."

"I can still hear you."

John snickered again and caught Karkat's wrist to tow him away.

"Zhann -- nrrh!"

This one sounded more like a frustrated noise than a word. Then again a lot of his words were frustrated noise. John pointed at the door. "Bathroom! Come with me."

Glower! Oh hey, maybe he just wanted his wrist back. John released him. He was about to need that hand to open the door anyway; his other hand was busy holding the clean clothes.

The lights were lit. "Morning!" he called as he walked in. "Anyone in here?"

Jake called out an indecipherable greeting from the boys' shower room. John could hear the water from here. He dumped his armload on a sink counter and pointed toward the toilets, eyebrows arched in question. Karkat gave a little grunt and went.

John had to take this guard thing seriously, or Rose would frown at him. Hrrm. "Jake? I gotta piss, mind keeping an eye out for escape attempts or I don't even know what?"

His half-twin emerged soapy and dripping from the door, lower body mostly hidden behind the edge. "Sure thing, but if he decamps I am not chasing him in my birthday suit."

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks."

John disappeared to another stall. When he came out Karkat was, to his great surprise, not still locked up, but leaning over a sink, giving his own reflection the stinkeye and stealing the half of Jake's naked self he could see past the doorjamb wary little glances. Jake gave John a salute as he reemerged and disappeared hurriedly, chanting "Cold cold cold~"

John went to wash his hands and drink some, and then turned to face the alien.

Karkat's hair was a royal mess, even worse than it had been after the goop, worse than after Roxy had a go at it. His horns weren't even visible, only a few flecks of gold showing through all those dark tangles. The shadows under his eyes were charcoal, his skin was a bit sticky-linty where he'd had electrodes glued on, and the hospital gown was good for the trashbin.

Um. Especially since sleeping in it had twisted it around a bit. Loosened the waist some. And now
there was a slit of bared skin from mid-thigh up to the hollow of his hipbone, where the belly dipped in and kinda led the way to uh oh god this was steering way too close to alien crotch.

Not that he could see anything! But it was a matter of inches, really. A distressingly small number of inches.

"Hsssst."

"--Aha. Ha. Uh. Yeah. Shower time." Somehow showering all together in wholesome brotherhood seemed less weird than seeing him in that particular state of rumpled undress.

When he looked up Karkat looked weird, like he wanted to look away but wasn't letting himself, the tip of his ears grown darker, vaguely ruddier. Nervous.

"... Seriously you're not my type. I swear it's just morbid fascination. Come on, pal."

John started undressing in the locker room, dumping his old stained shirt on the floor to be thrown into the rag bin later on; his pants and underwear went in the laundry basket, as did his socks. He put his glasses in a locker with the changes of clothes, got clean towels, turned around. Karkat was staring at him from the doorway, claws digging in the wall like he was trying to anchor himself, kind of like 'you'll have to bring the wall along if you want me to take a step farther in'.

For a brief instant John was really tempted to throw up his hands and call Jake over so he could help drag Karkat under the shower and yank that stupid hospital thing off him. For fuck's sake.

No doubt there'd be blood on the tiles by the end if he did.

With a sigh, he tied a towel around his waist, making sure his crotch stayed hidden. He offered the second towel in silence, staring at the alien until he took a couple of hesitant steps in and took it from his hand, and then he nodded toward the scrubs and made a throw-away motion toward his own dirty shirt in the corner.

The tension was starting to get thick enough to choke on.

Jake started singing. John blinked -- Karkat blinked -- and broke into a rueful smile. "I won't even watch." He made a show of turning around, fiddling with things in the locker. Should have thought to grab shoes; going around in the corridors with damp, bare feet wasn't the cleanest thing ever. Oh well.

The scrubs fluttered to the floor. John counted to ten and turned around. Karkat was fiddling with the towel, both hands apparently necessary to hold the spot where it tucked in on itself like it might otherwise spontaneously fall off. John didn't have the heart to tell him he'd be taking it off again in about ten steps.

"Alright. Come on."

Shampoo and liquid soap and washcloths and other things hung in a basket by the door. John picked up a bottle at random and pulled off his towel, dropping it carelessly on the bench against the wall opposite the showers. Jake was wrist-deep in foam and busy scrubbing away at his hair, and still singing. John chose the shower two down from him; he turned it on, stepped under the spray, and squirted a generous palmful of Platinum Shine Deep Clean For Men (Dave could only kill him once) in his hand. Rub, rub, rub.

Karkat was still at the door. John turned, side to the wall, so he could eye him over his own shoulder.
(Oh hey, no nipples. Then again Rose had said he showed no sign of being a mammal at all. There was a bellybutton, though, if a little higher than John expected it.)

Okay, he knew a lot of humans who weren't comfortable with being naked around strangers. And for all he knew they were being ridiculously offensive to alien sensibilities right now. My eyes were defiled so, I can never get married! kind of thing. But it was still annoying!

"Karkaaat."

Tiny flinch.

"Kaaaaaarkat."

Eyetwitch.


Apparently getting him annoyed enough that he forgot he was scared worked pretty well. Karkat snatched a bottle and washcloth from the bin and stomped across the room like a miniature, irritated stampede. John grinned at him and pointed his chin at the showerhead next to his in the corner. He kept himself facing the wall, so Karkat wouldn't feel stared at.

Karkat hesitated for a second, and then yanked his towel off, lobbed it at the bench, and stepped up to his spot. He started prodding at the shower controls, scowling in fierce concentration. John decided to let him have at it; they weren't that complicated, and he was a smart guy.

"IYAH!"

Also this was Dirk's preferred shower, and he always finished on a freezing note. Pffhehehe.

"Egad," Jake said from his other side. When John glanced his way he was grabbing onto the wall with one hand and at his heart with the other, a bit dramatically. "Er. Startled me just a bit, there."

John couldn't help but smirk wide. Two vict--um, prankees in one go! He tried to smother it as he turned his attention back to Karkat, making his voice soothing as possible, which wasn't easy when chuckles kept pushing to be let out. "There, you twist this knob in that direction. Try it again."

He got a growl for his trouble. Karkat tested the water with his hand first, letting out a little grunt that John interpreted as good enough.

His, uh, bathing suit area seemed kind of weird. Hard to say exactly how from the corner of his eye, though. And John didn't want to be caught staring, that'd be kind of embarrassing. Chuckling, mostly out of feeling kinda stupid, he turned back to the wall and started scrubbing at his hair in earnest. He used the foam dripping down in big fat gobs to wash the rest of himself once he was done, adding a remorseless second squirt of Dave's shampoo when that proved not to be quite enough.

Karkat's skin looked really gray, contrasted with white foam, pure slate with not even a vaguely reddish cast to it. At least on his shoulders; the rest, well, he'd turned three-quarters away, all tense, and John couldn't see much of his face, just that mass of hair, soaked into relative flatness until the jagged ends almost reached his shoulders. Though now John could see most of the orange part of his horns, and even a hint of where the gradation into brick red started. It really was a weirdly intense, flashy color, compared to the rest of him.

"Have you no shame!" Jake exclaimed. John flinched and turned to look at him. Jake was trying not to laugh. "Ogling pretty alien boys in the shower."
"Ogling alien horns!" John protested. "Come on, my head would be angled different if I were looking at his butt."

"Who was talking about his butt?" Jake demanded to know, eyes sparkling. "Here I thought your curiosity piqued at his more... shall we say, non-human parts."

John spluttered, and wiped some foam off his face where it had almost slipped in his eye. "Like you'd know that if you weren't curious too! -- I mean, it's just kinda weird and that's normal and shut up."

Jake was now cackling openly, a dimpling grin showing way too many perfect white teeth. "I didn't say I wasn't curious about that bit! But for the rest, it's a pretty normal-looking posterior. Perhaps we oughta ask Dirk his expert opinion. Obviously it seems an important question for you -- whoa!"

John growled and whipped the towel at his annoying half-clone again. Jake dodged in a controlled slide on the wet floor and went for his own towel; John tried to block the way, but was jostled aside with a daring shoulder to the chest as Jake ducked under his arm. John grabbed at his elbow and towel-whipped him across the back with his other hand, though it was too close-range to build sufficient momentum.

After that they were wrestling, each grabbing the other's upper arms and trying to trip each other. John wasn't shy about using his superior strength to slowly but inexorably push him back to where he'd be trapped against the bench. He grinned fierce and a little mean when Jake noticed.

"Gnn -- curse you, Egbert, I'll get you back!"

"Hah! Just you try it, you--"

Dirk walked into them. Quite deliberately. One of his elbows found Jake's chest and finished dumping him ass-first on the hard bench; his other arm hooked John's neck and suddenly John was bent over at the waist and tripping to follow, yelping when he ended up forcefully guided back to his own shower, in a way that made him bump into the controls and be suddenly drenched in holy fuck that's cold.

"What the hell was that for!" he protested, sputtering.

"Forgot to rinse that shampoo off," Dirk informed him laconically, and threw a glance back over his shoulder. "Harley, do you need help with rinsing?"

Jake meekly pushed himself back up and went back to his own shower. "No sir."

"Don't know about Dave but Bro will be up soon, so if you're done you might want to clear out."

Jake heaved a sigh and went back to spray himself a last time and pick up his shower things, and left still dripping heavily. Dirk turned back to John, who tried on an innocent grin but didn't keep it long in the wake of an unimpressed orange stare.

"Yes?"

"You keep forgetting the alien is not one of your buddies, John."

John's smile fell, and his arms too. He wiped foam away without looking, staring at his teammate. His stomach was clenched with sudden shame, and it made him angry. He tried to keep a lid on it but his voice came out just as low and intense as Dirk's had been. "If he wanted to attack me when he doesn't even know where the hell he is or where to go from here, he would have done it already. If
I'm not going to trust that I can turn my back on him two seconds in a room he can't leave without me seeing him then I should just get him shackles already."

Dirk gave a slow blink, and a little nod toward past John's shoulder. "You scared him."

John flinched around to look at Karkat. Karkat blinked to find himself stared at, furrowing his eyebrows in confusion. He didn't look that scared anymore; actually maybe a little relaxed, the hot water turned high enough to steam up the walls, though John's stare was making him stiffen up again. John grumbled under his breath and turned back to glare at Dirk. "He's not scared."

"He doesn't have the first fucking idea what's going on in this madhouse and here you were, fighting, with super strength, and blocking the only way out. Maybe he wasn't scared but he was still pretty fucking tense. You didn't notice."

John spluttered, torn between anger and rising guilt. Karkat didn't look traumatized at all; his left eyebrow had quirked up in a "no, seriously, what the heck?" way but apart from that he was still busy rubbing the sticky, fuzzy patches of glue off his torso, hips turned slightly away.

And hey, that wasn't foam, those randomly placed whitish patches and lines dotting his body were part of his skin. There was a pretty big, puckered one under the side of his ribs.

"He does have a pretty choice ass," Dirk commented casually, and started washing.

"How long were you listening?!"

"Dude, I was brushing my teeth, not spying. If you two clowns didn't hear me it's not my fault."

"And no ogling the alien's ass!" John yelled right over him, incensed. "Bad Dirk! No perving!"

Dirk gave a slow, slow blink and shook his head, and went back to his shower. "Right. I'm ... just going to let this one... rest here. For posterity."

John gave him the stink-eye. "What are you on about now?"

"Tell you when you're older."

John huffed out an annoyed breath and finished rinsing. Karkat's shower had gone silent; when he turned around he found his corner empty. Karkat himself was sitting gingerly on the bench by the wall, rubbing his legs dry with the towel, and gave him a wary look like he wasn't entirely sure that was alright.

It really, really bothered John when he reacted like that. Sure he was a prisoner of war and his culture was likely different so he didn't know what to expect and uh okay John wasn't exactly offering the standard human prison experience either, but...

John still remembered how fierce his mind had felt, and now he walked on eggshells pretty much all the time unless John deliberately nagged him into forgetting it, and that didn't even last -- just a flash of temper and then it fizzled out.

(What had they done to him, the interrogators, the doctors, what had they done, had they broken him? No, he'd fought Noir, he still glared, snarled. Maybe it was too early and John was expecting
things to be swept away too fast, maybe after his pseudo-catatonia thing he was just tired and needed a couple days of quiet rest to regroup. John would have to ask the doc.)

"... Zhann," Karkat started warily, and then grumbled a long, mildly irritated tirade.

"I didn't get any of that, buddy!" John replied with a bright smile, because what else could he do, seriously.

Karkat groaned and massaged the bridge of his nose.

... And then he blinked at John's crotch and looked away hurriedly, cheeks visibly darkening. John blinked and then burst out laughing, though he did hurry to go pick up his towel from the floor and tie it around his waist, a little red-faced himself. "Karkat! Oh man, I'm shocked. Shocked!"

"You're the one giving him full frontal face-level man-sausage, dude. Can't blame him for having working eyes."

John stuck out his tongue. "One of these days I'm going to get you, Strider. I'm going to get you so good your grandchildren will still be whispering the story to scare each other."

"Uh huh. Unless you're being coy and trying to hint you want those grandchildren with me you'd better put your schlong away."

John sputtered. "It's away! I'm wearing a towel!"

"Pfft, that's less of a deterrent and more of a suggestion."

John went meep and sidestepped a little farther away from Dirk. The bastard was smirking. Barely there, but obvious enough for someone who had been raised with him from age eight.

"One day you'll figure out exactly why you keep losing at gay chicken against me, Egbert. One day..."

"Stop smirking, you asshole! Grnmbrr. Karkat, come on, let's go get dressed already."

He picked up his bottle and Karkat's and went to put them back in the basket, and stomped his way to his locker. At least he could use the door to hide part of his goods; now that Karkat apparently got all embarrassed over it, it was embarrassing, go figure. He handed Karkat a t-shirt, clean undies and jeans without looking, and busied himself shimmying into his own briefs.

Next he put on his glasses, because he had his priorities. A message popped up almost immediately.

JN: Morning, John. Where are you?
JH: hey sis! long time no see.
JH: and lockers, getting dressed. why?
JN: No reason. Coming down for breakfast?
JH: uh, duh. when have you ever seen me passing up on food, especially in the morning. i mean unless it's cake or something. why do you
JH: oh. right.
JH: karkat's with me. is that okay?

A few seconds of silence. John used them to put on his pants, frowning. He was in the middle of pulling his shirt over his head when the next message popped up.

JN: It's fine, John, despite all appearances to the contrary I am in fact not made of spun glass! News
at eleven.

JH: :/ sorry for being worried!

JN: ... it's alright, I'll be fine.

JN: Also I'm the big sister, I'm the one supposed to mother you! By the way guess what I'm making for breakfast. :B

JH: nnnooooooooooo! D:

JN: Yes.

JN: Heck yes.

JH: i'm disconnecting now. you evil purveyor of evil.

JN: Heck. Motherfudging. Yes. >:B

John emerged from his T-shirt snickering.

Karkat had figured out the lower body stuff with ease, none of that pants-on-head silliness, but he was still shirtless. Huh. Okay, what was it with that T-shirt that had the alien staring at it like his eyes were about to shoot lasers and burn a hole through it? (And what were those white lines on his skin? So strange. Birthmarks?)

"Don't like the logo? Sorry, Dave got it on just about everything I own. He's a funny little guy, though! Look, he's grinning."

Karkat's eyes slid sideways to John's own chest. John scratched at his stomach, just under the green ghost slime. The alien's expression was... uh. Really hard to read. But weird.

"... What?"

The alien closed his eyes and quickly yanked the t-shirt on. His claws stayed hooked in the bottom, kneading away.

"Karkat?" A low hiss between clenched teeth was his only answer. No eye contact. Argh. Aliens were weird! So frustrating. John breathed out and told himself he'd be more patient once he had some breakfast. "Okay, never mind! Come on."

A quick detour by the bedroom to get shoes and he was guiding his gray duckling back to the staircase and down to the common room. The TV wasn't on; Rose and Jade were sitting at the big table, Jake leaning his hip on the counter that separated the kitchen corner and chattering at Jane, who... urgh, he could almost smell the devil cake-mix from here.

"Hey guys! Morning."

Jade turned to look at them, and bounced on her feet. "Hi!"

"Yeah, hi, Ja--"

Jade waved him off with a teasing flick of the hand. "I'm not talking to you, I'm talking to the alien. I'm Jade! Jay-duh. You?"

Karkat blinked. "Zhey-duh?" A frown. "... Zehk, Zhann, Zedh?"

John couldn't help but laugh. "Yup, and she --" pointing at the kitchen and its inhabitant, "is Jane. Jay-nuh."

" Zehk, Zedh, Zenn, Zhann?" A low, long muttering started up, probably about what the heck were those names about seriously one consonant's difference what. Jade snickered behind her hand.
"Wow, Roxy was right, he does get ranty." She took a step forward and waved her fingers to get his attention. "You? Your name?"

"It's Karkat," John said, but she just went shh without looking at him and put her hand in his face. After a few awkward seconds the alien repeated it for her, all full of weird sounds. She inclined her head and nodded, and then just about twisted her own vocal chords into sailor's knots.

At least that was what would have happened to John's own vocal chords had he attempted it. Jade seemed pretty chill about it.

"Hm, no, that wasn't quite it..." She made another grumble-clicketyclack, exactly the same as the first, only Karkat's eyebrows were relaxing a tiny bit so perhaps not. Who knew? Certainly not John. "Okay," Jade said, "this is going to require some work! But never mind. Sit down? There's food."

Well. Jade was sitting beside Karkat, Rose in front of him, he looked pretty resigned. John wandered to the kitchen, only pausing for a quick shoulder-bump with Jake on his way in. "Miss Egbert! Fancy meeting you here."

His sister rolled her eyes, but smiled, too. "Mister Egbert! Why, a jolly long time no see. How do you do?"

She wasn't in a skirt today, the way she liked to be when she had any downtime. Those were her flight suit pants, skintight, white with the sky blue band on the outside and the padded knees, and it was a fair bet she wore the rest of it under the knit pullover that swallowed her down to mid-thighs. "Huh, weird look."

"New fashion, all the rage these days," Jane threw over her shoulder as she turned back to her pancake mix, a bit fast, a bit tense. John might have been lacking in social graces but...

"... Um. Janey?"

"I was teasing, it isn't industrial mix. All fresh ingredients straight from the market, no preservatives."

"Jane--"

"Not as big as I thought from the pictures," she said airily, without turning around, and John knew she wasn't talking about mix or pancakes or anything but Karkat, perched on the edge of his seat like a squat, hunching stone gargoyle as Jade tried to teach him via copious pantomime to say yes and no. "Go sit down, scram! You too, Jake. Pancakes'll be ready in a minute." And the smile she gave Jake was much too shaky and grateful to be anywhere normal.

... Jake was pretty much standing guard, wasn't he. Not obvious about it, pretty casual, but anyone coming in the kitchen corner would still have to walk past him first, and his feet were set pretty solidly. Not even because he expected trouble from Karkat -- he wouldn't have goofed off in the shower if he did -- but because it made her feel better.

John should have thought of doing that, too, or at least noticed, only he hadn't, because on one side was his sister, and on the other side was a traumatized gray dude who'd gone on a suicide mission for a friend and failed and then been at the mercy of science guys and the military for over a week, and he couldn't even imagine Karkat hurting her. How was he supposed to protect Jane from him when he wanted to protect them both?

_You keep forgetting the alien is not one of your buddies, John._

Shit. That didn't mean John couldn't want to spare him another round of that pointless, evil bullshit.
"Hello? Anyone in here?"

"--Heh. I'm not feeling like pancakes today, think I'm gonna go with bacon. Move aside and I'll cook up some!"

After a short, reluctant second, she did, and John did too.

Twenty minutes later breakfast was over and Jade and Jake were taking their turn at gathering the dirty dishes; Dirk, come late and not hungry, was drinking coffee at the counter while the rest of the group sat very civilly at the table. No one had jumped over it to go after anyone's throat or had an inconvenient panic attack, which was obviously a great success.

It was a wonder who was the most tense, Jane or Karkat. Maybe John ought to bring Karkat back to the bedroom for some alone-time; being surrounded on all sides by humans wasn't doing wonders for his blood pressure. (Having her home invaded by alien space monster wasn't helping Jane's either.)

He was about to mention it, only Roxy burst in from the door, waving something in the air.

"Success!"

She was holding two half-circle **things** in bright pink. The inside wobbled and shone in a manner strangely reminiscent of jello. Rose smiled in clear satisfaction. "Did you test them?"

"Pretty good fit. They're even adjustable a bit."

"What's that?" John asked, eyebrows scrunching in confusion.

Rose gave him a faint, catlike smirk. "That thing you were told not to worry about."

"The -- I thought you were going after the goo! Not -- uh, what was it you've done?"

"The scientists have been working to reproduce the neurotransmitter fluid for the last week. Something in the formula must be a bit off, because it keeps turning up as gel instead, but the tele-empathic component works fine."

Roxy took over, leaning over Karkat's lap to show John the inside of the devices. The things looked like pretty wide Alice bands, only there were two parts to the sides that pivoted down, kind of like a mic arm on a headset only much higher. "These flippy bits are supposed to go on your temples. Anyway, so then when we add very simple radio transmitters and other doodads, the neuroelectrical impulses are encoded and transmitted via radio waves and when they get to the other side they get translated back into brain stuff! Wireless mindmeld. Isn't that the **coolest**?"

John couldn't help but laugh. "Okay, yeah, it's pretty cool." He reached for one of the offered headsets (wasn't gonna call them Alice bands!), turning it over in his hands. The inside was damp to the touch, a bit gross. Still not as gross as the original snot bath. "So you just put it on and...?"

"Yup! The range isn't great yet, but this is just our first attempt. Maybe the width of the room."

John flipped the arm thingers on his temples, tugging locks of his hair free and fiddling with the flexible metal until skin contact was established. Ugh, it really did feel like jello in his hair, only it wasn't squelching all over the place in a big great mess. Beside him Roxy was cheerfully arranging Karkat's own mess of hair as he sat with his eyes closed and jaw clenched and breathing deeply through his nose, as if praying for just a little goddamn patience it doesn't even hurt I can deal with **that massive fucking bullshit okay one more second great now another one why is she fondling my**
John burst out laughing. "It works! Hey, Karkat."

A flash of incomprehension, and then Karkat jerked to stare at him.

It was like a tidal wave of gutpunch refusal, backed by horror and furious determination. The next second Karkat's chair was on the floor, the teleband had been flung on the table, and Karkat himself was five steps back and still retreating slowly after his first scramble, fists raised, fangs bared.

John didn't need it to understand the words, but Jade translated anyway. "Um, this one is 'no', this one is also 'no'... 'no, no, no', and I think the rest in between are swear words."

John glanced at the rest of his friends. Jake and Rose were on the wrong side of the table with Jane, though it might be quickly crossed; Roxy and Jade stood beside him, looking a bit nonplussed. Dirk had drained his coffee and put it down on the counter and twisted his wrist just so; the handle of his monofilament blade slipped from his sleeve into his palm smooth as a dream. John pushed himself up on his feet before he could unwind the blade itself.

"Karkat?"

A rattling growl rose from his throat, growing into a full-fledged, fangs-baring snarl. John grimaced a little.

"No, hey, shh, it's fine."

Apparently shushing the alien was a mortal insult of some sort, because a burst of furious words ensued, accompanied by an angry hand gesture that might have pimsplapped John to the ground had he been anywhere close to in range. But he wasn't going to corner him if he didn't have to...

"Fido trying to run away?" Dave drawled from the staircase. John winced. Aw crap.

Karkat flinched around, stared at Dave as he walked down the last steps to the doorway that led outside, planted himself there, and casually brought out his blade.

Bzzzz, unspooled and stiffening with a crackle of electricity.

If he let that go a second longer this would turn into the clusterfuck of the year. John stepped forward, spine straightening, eyebrows furrowed. "Dave, put that down. Karkat, sit."

His pointing at the couch behind the alien was hopefully clear enough, in case he'd forgotten the word. John gave him a hard stare, to underline it, and then went back to pay attention to Dave, like he had no reason to even worry about what would happen if Karkat didn't.

"Dave, it's fine, he hasn't hurt anyone. Might have broken the --"

ohwowsoneatohwowHIJOHN!!

"--Hi Jade. Ow." Okay it's not broken can you take it off please like right now? kinda busy fretting I MEAN LEADERING here ohgodclusterfuck monofilamentblade it dices it slices it Striderizes aauugh.

Haha misterbadass allgooeyinside. And then Jade's inner voice mercifully went off. "It's not broken! So cool."

"Yeah, yeah, it's pretty neat -- Karkat, I told you to sit."
The alien had stepped back until his legs almost bumped into the couch, and his fighting stance had shifted into something that seemed more of a 'oh shit in which direction do I run now' -- his eyes kept jumping from Dave to John -- but Dave would get him if he tried to go around him to the staircase, and the windows were all the way back toward the table and the kitchen, and besides they would all take too long to open.

John held his open hand back; "Jade, give me the thing, please." She put it into his hand.

Not even Rose objected to him trying it again, not the smallest 'blahblah traumatism be patient.' John wasn't... he couldn't, anyway, he'd promised them they would get intel in return for their support and he couldn't afford to come across as a pushover to Karkat if he was going to be responsible for him.

"Sit down."

After a few long seconds where John was almost, sickeningly sure he'd have to enforce his order, the alien took a few steps back and lowered himself on the cushions at the far end of the couch. Bright red welled from his clenched left fist.

John took a seat on the other end of the couch in silence, handed over the headset. Karkat took it with forced caution, stared at it for a second, breathed out, slid it back on. On his palm were the blood-smeared imprints of his claws.

... out of my fucking head, stay out of my fucking head, stay out no I don't want you in here, I'll tear out your lungs and wear them as a hat I don't even care if your attack dog cuts me up in slices to be gently roasted for your fucking alien breakfast stay the fuck out.

You're bleeding.

Amazing powers of observation genius gonna go far like that be General one day (forced me last time pushed it hurt you had no right none of you had any right!)

John winced. "I'm sorry."

Liar.

Ouch. ... I'm not sorry I looked / needed to know importantmaybe. It hurt you I didn't like that felt wrongbadno.

A slap of incredulity/yeahright pull the other one hit him in the brain. Behind it was a trace of confusion, why? and nerves because... huh, John thought, because he had his little idea and he hoped rather dearly to be wrong.

Wasn't looking for personal stuff sorry for that. Just war-relevant stuff, not private, duty as a soldier you know? Yours and mine. Could have been urgent, couldn't afford to wait.

He couldn't help remembering the horror he'd felt seeing that other alien in Karkat's mind, the one buried in tentacles, trapped there like he was slowly getting ... cannibalized alive? something like that. From the way Karkat flinched he could feel the echo.

Wasn't urgent. (Never urgent again.) So when are you killing me?

John stared, nonplussed. "Uh?"

... Public execution rah-rah look at our glorious army and those evilstupidweak things who dare attack us hasasofunny? A gray alien in chains paraded toward, oh god, was that a ... whipping post?
funeral pyre? John could only see the waiting chains and feel the anticipation of a pain reminiscent of the times he'd burned his hand cooking or trying to fix overheated motors, only a hundred times worse. Rallying the troops? Propaganda?

"Oh god. Never." Nonononono. Also the population doesn't know we captured you yet, just that your mech is down. Probably never will just for that reason they'd all want your head no way.

... I'm hidden/state-secret?

Pretty much.

... Nightmare-beastgods from the star-void on a flying, shit-spraying horse. I'm going to spend the rest of my natural life with the interrogation/torture division.

John was torn between laughing at the incongruous curse and wincing. Nooo, I got you, not handing you back. I'll bite!

Karkat yanked the headband off his head. John blinked; the alien stared at him, eyes a bit too round, turning in his seat so he'd face John, so John mirrored him, eyebrows furrowed in sheer bafflement.

He pointed at the teleband. "Put that back on," he said, imitating his dad's 'It's Bedtime Yes Really' Voice.

Karkat held out his hand, palm first (huh, the cuts were ringed with crusty blood, but pretty much done bleeding) and pinched the bridge of his nose with his other hand. John frowned a little more and crossed his arms. "I'll wait two minutes, tops."

"John? What's going on?"

John looked at Rose over his shoulder and shrugged his confusion. "Dunno, I think I said something weird. He was asking when we were going to hand him back to the interrogation guys! So I said never, that's when. I think he doesn't believe me."

Karkat was muttering to himself again, eyes closed, still rubbing at the bridge of his nose. John folded his leg on the couch and stretched it to nudge Karkat's knee with his toes. Tap tap. A heaving sigh. Karkat settled the teleband back on.

Fucking disgusting on my horns urgh squelching.

"Pff." So are they telepathic or something?

What?

Your (tiny round cutest) horns! Because last time you seemed to hear me way better once the goo got on them.

Go crawl in a charnel house ditch and die suffocating under the weight of the rotting bodies already. Not cute! and yes of course they aaaaaaaaaa not answering your questions what next a list of known issues?

"Bwahaha. Too late."

... what do you want?

The 'you' came attached with an impression of John's own face and some almost-words that felt like 'pink-outside bigtoothed tent-making blue alien'. Not you-humans or you-group but definitely you-
John. It felt a lot... quieter wasn’t quite the right word, because John could perceive it just as well as
the rest, but it didn't feel as spread out all over the place. It was all... tight, squeezed into one clear,
delimited packet of meaning, with no surrounding brouhaha of background feelings and
afterthoughts.

John shrugged. He didn't really expect anything. You not to die? Or go away inside your head again
that crap is very disturbing you know. My friends have questions, we want to know about your
people, maybe the war why? Need food, resources, distraction for the populace?

For the glory of the empire, Karkat retorted straight away, teeth bared in challenge, only there was a
discordant echo in the background that said, for -- And stop pushing!

"Ow!"

"Ow?" Roxy repeated, concerned.

John blinked at Karkat for a couple of seconds, dumbfounded. "Uh, wow. He kinda... slapped me.

... Basic psychic trick, are you brain-damaged?

Well sorry can't practice basic psychic tricks we don't have psychics, do you?

Karkat didn't even need to answer; his utter bafflement at the question was confirmation enough.
"Guys, if the goo wasn't enough of a hint, the aliens have psychics! I mean like people who can do
that stuff, not just by bathing in magic mind-reading snot."

Thank you so very much for that delightful image urgh.

John couldn't help but laugh at that, and for a second he could have sworn Karkat sort of maybe
wanted to smile back a tiny bit, or at least sigh in a longsuffering, tolerant way. The second he
noticed, Karkat noticed it too, and his mind hardened again, all background leakage stopped cold.

So. Keeping me for intel. Is the merciful act supposed to soften me up? humiliate me into
surrendering? What the fuck are you up to? I might get along with shit to spare me pointless pain
(not a coward shut up shut up shutup) but I'm not going to betray my people. (didn't even have the
fucking decency of threatening me openly fuck you with a rusty spike.)

Uh, what. When did I threaten you? I mean no you said I didn't openly but I didn't at all?... no okay
I wanted you to sit the hell down but that's because honestly what the heck you were panicking there
was no reason and Dave would have cut you into bite-sized cubes if you rushed him also you can't
escape Noir would gloat and grab you back fuck him no.

He'd just send Karkat back to the labs and now that he was awake again they'd probably go right
back to poking and prodding and testing possible bio-weapons. John wondered if they'd tried the goo
on him, too? (yes they had of course, tried to force their way in most of them were just garbled
voices got nothing but it hurt anyway keeping them out wore him down -- easier to go away.)

Karkat's mind voice went weary; his hand clenched on the front of his shirt, claw tips going through
the cloth. Ordering me like I'm broken already (like I'm so weak you didn't even need to break me.)

I'm not going to break you! I don't want that to happen to you. Or to anyone! It's not right. He bit his
lip. I don't think you're a coward. You're alone and you understand nothing of what's going on and
you've gotten hurt already, it's scary. I'd be scared too.
Karkat closed his eyes and rubbed at the base of his horns like he was getting a headache. His mind stayed clamped down, blocking his reaction. ... just tell me the terms already.

_Uh. Okay. I'm responsible for you so unless one of my friends takes over for a bit you have to stay with me. You don't have to be close but you do have to be in the same room. Uhh. No leaving the building and absolutely no attacking people, I'm serious about that one it's not going to happen. None of my friends all family want to hurt you either, no reason to._

Karkat stared at him, expression blank with incomprehension, even his mind murmuring too quietly for John to untangle the little whispers into anything coherent.

... War prisoner/intel to take? (Dumbass.)

"Hey!" I don't know how it goes in your weird alien ships or on your weird alien planet but here it's not a good reason.

_Hello how are you do you want some tea will you pretty please betray your people for us we have tasty treats? No? Okay then! Don't take me for a fucking rot-brained moron._

"Goddamn it." John slammed his fist down on the back of the couch, making the frame groan even through the padding, and glared. "Do you want us to torture you?! Is that it? Some kind of fucked-up fetish?!!"

Karkat hissed back and got into his face, snarling out something so low it made John's bones resonate with it. _Like you didn't hand me off to them before oh lord Grand Squeamish!_

_It was different it was urgent you've been here ten days now what the hell kind of current intel do you even still have?! You left on a fucking suicide mission anyway who'd have trusted you with it!_

No response, just a swirl of complicated, flickering feeling he didn't have time to name, quicksilver that fled his grasp and wind-fast razor slices of rage hate fight and fear pain no. John sighed and sank back down into the cushions.

... political thing, I don't know how to explain. We answer to the Earth government but not always, we're strong we protect they owe us.

... ah.

Karkat was still listening, frowning at him, not quite meeting his eyes but waiting for more, so John kept going, trying to explain the situation as well as he could.

_Kinda allied-but-separate? Couldn't fight you guys as well too much death but we can and we do and they owe us._

Karkat made a little grunt of surprise-acknowledgement, mind sparking with a brief mix of "huh" and "aha." John briefly wondered if he wasn't giving him a bit too much intel. ... Oh well, it wasn't as if he'd ever be allowed to go free. Besides they had to have noticed it was always the same eight mechs who came back at them, and their piloting styles were all pretty distinctive.

Anyway re: torture medical procedures are one thing, sometimes they hurt but it's not the point. Interrogation happens, sometimes it goes too far or turns bad, some humans do like to torture, or think it's a necessary method or use it as an excuse to get out their misplaced asshole issues but torture is a repugnant practice and so long as you're in our custody it's not going to happen to you and we'll be fighting tooth and nail to keep you and we all bite really hard. Okay? Okay.
Sigh. "He still doesn't believe me about the torture thing, guys. Argh. Like... really loudly doesn't believe me." So frustrating! They were telepathing to each other for god's sake, he should have felt John meant it.

... can't believe you want **nothing** for it.

My friends will have questions about science things. I don't get it just a fighter. Also your society things how it works and stuff? Maybe language not everyone wants to try the goo. That's not state secrets.

No -- you! **What do you** want? Wasting all those favors on protecting me?!

"AUUUUGH." John grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled. *I like you, stupid! I don't want anything. And protecting you from torture that's not even about me liking you it's about that shit is abhorrent and will not happen on my watch I'd have done it either way!*

(Maybe with less random hugs. Uh. But he just couldn't take that defeated, subdued look in his eyes.)

This time Karkat was very careful when he removed the headset. He lowered it to his lap, staring down at nothing in particular, eyes a little too wide, breathing a little too controlled.

"Uh. Karkat? What did I say now?"

No reaction. John threw a look back at his friends. Dave had a shoulder against the doorframe and his arms crossed and seemed ready to hold up the wall there all day. The rest were at the table, keeping an eye on the two of them, but also doing god knew what on Roxy's laptop. Jane was typing away, a bit too pale but nodding along with Roxy's comments in her ear. Rose was petting Jaspers, who sniffed at the table where Karkat had been seated in wary interest. John supposed it had to be boring from the outside, apart from the random grimaces and the occasional outburst.

Jade noticed his mildly panicked expression and got up, wandering up to them. She didn't come in reach of the couch, though, didn't sit, hands linked behind her back as she leaned forward to peer at both their faces. Karkat didn't react to her either.

"What **did** you say?"

"That even if I didn't like him I wouldn't let people hurt him? And I **do** like him. I mean, he's so grumpy, but at the same time he's, I don't know." He looked at Karkat again, but the alien didn't look any closer to putting his headset back on. John looked up at Jade, met her little wince with a frustrated grimace. "The way he reacted you'd think it was a surprise!"

"I call dibs on head bridesmaid," Dave drawled from the door.

"Oh, fuck you."

"Do you even still count as a maid?" Dirk wondered.

"Lies and slander, Jade will make a honest woman out of me any day now."

Jade snickered; John couldn't help but join her. "As if! Everyone knows I was only using you for your body."

(Man it was such a relief that they could joke about it now, because during and for a few months after the breakup, wowza.)
When he looked back at Karkat, a smile still on his lips, he was met with red-gold straight on. Karkat's face was intensely serious and slightly apprehensive, like he had something to say that he was pretty sure John wouldn't like, and might react badly to. John sighed and leaned his body forward, tilted his head, made sure his voice wasn't aggressive or loud at all. "Buddy? It's okay." He rested his hand on the alien's shoulder, patting in what he hoped was a soothing manner.

Karkat flinched, dodged out from under his hand, and took a deep bracing breath before he jammed the headset back on.

_I have a boyfriend already, okay?!_

For a few long seconds John could do nothing but splutter. Also, turn a pretty nice brick red. Holy mother of fuck.


Karkat bit his lip and briefly looked away, and when he looked back he -- his inner voice, his face, they were _so earnest_ it made John's brain explode in horror and stall for the third time in as many minutes. _I'm sorry seriously but you've got to stop doing that soothing shit, I'm not cheating on him, I love that stupid wreck. I don't care if I'll never see him again, he... fuck. Karkat flinched, a burst of pain flashing past his tight grip on his background thoughts. (I'll never see him again sosorry I'm a fucking asshole should just go and die--)

This time John was the one taking off the headset for a bit. Holy crappalooza.

"... And in this exhibit we have the amazing human chameleon, attempting to match that cushion over there... Hm, not quite scarlet enough, but a pretty good try."

John gritted his teeth and refused to turn to look at him, voice coming out a growl. "Dave, I will kick you in the knee."

He jammed the headset back on. _Okay, NO. I am not interested in you romantically! No way, no how, where the heck did you get that idea from?!_

Karkat spluttered, threw a hand up in the air to gesture with as he snarled back. _Shall I count the ways? You kidnapped me back! You built me an alien pillowthing! You guarded me as I slept! You keep calming me and hugging me and oh yeah wasting all your owed favors on me! You saw me being weak and hurt and a total wreck and you -- immediately you -- you decided I could do with your all-benevolent protection?! We were fighting a moment ago!_

Now it was apparently John's turn to splutter. _Basic decency is suspicious now?! Is platonic not a thing where you crazyaliens come from?_

Oh hey they were both on their feet now, mind-yelling in each other's face. John had a hard time not yelling for real, had to content himself with curled-up lips and wordless noises of frustration, but he'd probably die if his friends got to hear what this was about. God, Dave alone could milk this for ten years; what Dirk and Rose could do with it didn't bear thinking about.

_I have absolutely no, zero, null, void-of-space romantic designs on you!_

... _Okay, sure! It wasn't like that. Willing to believe such intense denial -- loud + wordy = true!_

John growled and crossed his arms. _Thank you._

_You were staring at my crotch._
Spittake. *That was just morbid curiosity! Come on you looked too I'm weird to you you're weird to me that's all!*

Karkat watched him with his eyes narrowed, blistering disbelief plastered on every single square inch of his face. *You made me lay down with you on a --*

Oh holy mother of god. John went meep and took a step back. The heat that had started to leave his face rushed back with a vengeance, even his eyeballs felt too hot. Holy shit. Just, holy *shit*.

"Okay, enough mystery, what the fuck are the two of you talking about?"

"Yeah, seriously," Roxy said, "it was funny dubbing the two of you but now I think it'd be waaay funnier to know what's actually going on!"

"... Haha. Um. Neat factoid for the xenosocio magazines, guys! Aliens don't sleep on beds. Turns out what we call a bed they call, um, a." Gulp. "Sex platform?"

We *sleep* on them! he hurried to explain. *It's just for sleep! We don't, they're not just for sex!*

... *Huh. Squinty, suspicious frown. Not just for sex?*

"Oh, *really,*" went Rose somewhere behind him, in a way that had John flinching again.

... *Okay sometimes people have sex on them it's very practicalcomfynice I guess but I just, sometimes people share? To sleep? Platonically?*

"Welp. Rox, you've got the shotgun, you get to be in that wedding party after all. Someone's got to stand in for his alien dad."

"... Am I to understand that John and the alien shared his bed yesterday night?"

Jake smothered a burst of laughter behind his hand, eyes gleaming with warring commiseration and hilarity. "They sure did. Oh damn, does that mean you're alien married now?"

Amidst all the people laughing at his pain and the people bemoaning his amazing ability to create diplomatic incidents out of thin air, John wasn't expecting to be slapped over the head, hard enough to make him pitch forward. He turned around to protest. "Hey--"

His sister stood there and not at the other end of the room anymore, hands shaking, jaw clenched, eyes a bit too bright.

"Uh. Janey?"

"... You made him share your bed."

"I didn't know it was a weird alien thing!" he protested. Jane threw up her hands in the air.

"*You knew he was worried about rape!* What the hell were you thinking?!!"

John flinched again, guilt choking him, replacing his embarrassment with something worse. "I wasn't, okay?! I wasn't thinking, I was just tired and I didn't want to sleep on the floor and it was more than wide enough for two and he--" *looked scared (looked interesting) and it was John's stupid bed drat it such silly unfounded fears as if he could ever (why don't you trust me already) "--* and I, I wasn't thinking, it was an asshole move. You're right. Shit."

Jane took in a shuddery breath, eyes closed, and then looked over John's shoulder at Karkat, straight
on, pretty much for the first time. "...John? Translate for me."

"Uh, sure." When he turned back to Karkat, the alien was staring at the two of them, eyebrows raised, eyes wide, pretty much floored. Aw crap, no doubt he'd been treated to a front seat concert of that whole mess at full volume.

"Alrighty! My brother is an idiot."

"Hey!" Glower. He wilted. *She says, my brother is an idiot.*

For a fleeting moment it looked almost as if Karkat was about to crack a smile. *Tell her I was starting to get that impression.*

... *I kinda hate you sometimes.*

Aaand this was a... not a smile, definitely a smirk. Made a couple of small fangs peek out at the quirked corner of his lips. *Stop flirting and translate already.*

"Nghrk." John glared, face reddening once again. *His Majesty Karkitty tells me to tell you he was getting that impression already gnagnagna.*

Jane's lips twitched a bit at the corner. "Well. He does seem to be a smart young man."

John huffed, puffing up his cheeks. "If you like him so much why don't you marry him already," he mumbled.

"Jolly good job not sounding like a kindergartener here!"

Maturely, John decided that the best answer to this had to be sticking out his tongue and going bleeeeeeh. Jane ignored him pointedly.

"So... If your -- your species does not sleep on, ah, cushioned surfaces, where does it?"

John re-thought it for Karkat's benefit, in case overhearing John hearing it wasn't enough, and then tacked on, *I, uh, take it you don't want to keep sleeping in my bed. Even if I'm on the floor.*

The grimace Karkat made had him choke back a guilty laugh, only for that laugh to escape anyway as the alien threw an image at him, of a wide mattress in a dim-lit room and Karkat rolled in a ball in the middle with an apprehensive, vaguely disgusted look on his face as music started slipping in from the corners. "Pff. Aliens have porn music too!"

*In which a reluctant young warrior is held captive by an oddly charismatic alien leader who sets about seducing him via utter decadence and inappropriate touching, features several love-to-hate-and-back scenes of passion, interspersed with slapstick language-barrier humor and random assaults by evil, nonsexy aliens, while the war slowly becomes a footnote amidst enough intercourse to chafe a professional whore raw. Karkat's chuckle was rough, quiet, both sarcastic and self-conscious somehow. So... no thanks very flattered go fuck yourself.*

John couldn't breathe for laughing, though his face kept burning from imagining himself dressed like a pseudo-sultan from some old harem-themed softcore porn story. *You asshole. Sowrong. Soooowrong. Anyways so where do you want to sleep!*

Relief and disbelief kept roiling behind the sudden amusement, dizzying. *I want anywhere but a sexplatformbed thanks kindly. Stake-lined animal pit? Bird perch? Lava bath?*
"I take it the wedding is back on track?"

"Oh, fuck you, Dave," John replied with a wide grin. "You're just jealous. I'd look so much better in white than you ever would. You'd be all washed out and also it'd totally be false advertising anyway."

"Ahem. John. If you please."

"Okay, okay." John went back to Karkat, who shrugged and looked away, scratching the underside of his jaw.

I'll make, something, John didn't quite get it, but he got the sense that Karkat would rather figure it out alone, that it made him feel awkward to ask it out of them. He shrugged and turned back to his sister, waiting with her hands on her hips and an eyebrow smartly arched. "He says he can manage on his own and please to be butting out."

It'll have to be in our room though.

A dismissive shrug, though Karkat was frowning a little like he wasn't entirely comfortable about it.

We can make a tent around it if you--

We nothing, butt out already you freakish bigtoothed nosy asshole. I alone.

Faint tension still came through even with Karkat's decisive words, nervousness. John didn't need to be thwapped by Jane again to get that one. He shrugged and replied, okay, if you insist. Offer's open.

Yeah. I... thanks. He sank back down on the couch, elbows dropping on his knees with a big gusty sigh, tension gradually flowing out of his frame. It's just weird. You say you're not flirting but you do that stuff. It's... not flirting for you?

John mock-cringed and flopped beside him, cushions bouncing under them both. Ohgod definitely not.

Karkat contemplated that for a couple of seconds, and then gave a slow headshake.

... Aliens are so fucking weird.

Man, tell me about it.

"Well. If you two are friends again."

John blinked up. Oh uh, Jane. Right. "You wanna sit down, Janey?"

She shook her head. She looked a tiny bit calmer than she'd been, but the way she watched Karkat was still cautious, alert, tracking his every little gesture. It'd probably take her way longer than that to relax around him. John couldn't help the warm, bittersweet burst of tenderness at how brave she'd been, coming to defend Karkat from his asshole moment even feeling like that, just because it was the right thing to do. Dad would be super extra proud, he was sure.

"No, thank you. I'll, perhaps Rose could come and talk with the two of you, I'll take notes. Rose?"

"Of course," Rose replied, and as Jane made a controlled, straight-backed escape, came over to join them in the TV corner, her cat in her arms. Karkat's eyes almost crossed from staring at him. Rose's lips quirked at the corner; she seated herself on a pillow on the coffee table, knees pressed together very properly. "I'm curious, do you understand what we say through John's own understanding of
your words, or does he need to repeat?"

Karkat's brow furrowed.

"Oh, uh, I think I have to pay a bit more attention than that, sorry." Jaspers was purring and kneading at her lap; John reached out to give him a scritch.

*I... understand a bit? It's more vague. General sense of things.*

"Huh, makes sense. He kinda gets echoes, I think."

"Hm." Karkat was still stealing glances at the cat; she smiled. "This is Jaspers. Do your people keep pets?"

From the confusion he answered with when John passed it along, the answer was obviously no. "I don't think he even has a concept of it. Do you guys even have domesticated animals?"

*... Draft beasts to pull, or ride. Big beasts. Sometimes hunting ones to track with. What does this one do?*

"Uh, nothing, it's a pet. Er, Rose?"

"A pet is a small, tamed animal that lives inside a person's house. It does not work for its keep as it is kept purely for the pleasure of its company."

Heh, sounded kind of a bit like--

*... John if you are keeping me as a pet I will pull out your intestines through your nostrils and make you a noose from them and swing you from the lamp and I will take the greatest care to make sure you stay alive every tortuous inch of this process.*

John cracked up. "What? No! No no no."

"... times like these," Dave muttered from his corner, "I kind of wish this were three ways. But then I remember, alien in my brain. Nope!"

John snickered at him and turned back to Karkat. *Good thing you can't speak to Dave he'd never stop bringing it up. He'd get you fake kitty ears and a collar with a bell. It'd be ridiculous. He couldn't help imagining Karkat tearing around the room in a rage, shredding everything with his claws like Mutie'd done a couple of times.*

Karkat stared at him in suspicion and a burst of nerves, and then before John could reassure him that he was just kidding around, rolled his eyes. *If you put a collar on me it'd be your goddamn floppy dick I tear to shreds, asshole.*

John grinned back at him. *No worries, way too kinky for me.*

"John, if you would please stop cutting me out of the conversation before I drop Jasper on your head."

"Whoops. Sorry Rose. It's just so much fun being able to talk to him. He's so grumpy, it's hilarious."

Karkat growled under his breath and glowered at him. An image of the alien kicking his ankle ghosted through John's mind, a sense of *intent*, only to be replaced by a flash of seven other humans descending from above with swords in hand and transforming him into a pincushion. *She wanted to talk let her talk stop being the high king of idiots, lord protector of stupidland, all hail his unmatched...*
A strange expression crossed Rose's face but John was laughing too much to ask straight away and when he was done she looked perfectly normal. Huh, never mind. "John. Don't make me hit you. Karkat -- as John might or might not have mentioned, there are questions we would be thankful to have answered."

But John says no torture you can't make me. A niggling doubt that John was just lying to him. John hesitated to answer it. In the end he didn't, merely paraphrased for Rose, "He doesn't want to and you can't make him."

"We can provide other incentive. If nothing else you'll eventually get quite bored, being locked in here. And -- John, transmit this. No anger, no protest, just transmit it. We are in a delicate political situation and we might be pressured into giving you up." John glowered, but repeated, though the words took on a harsh undertone from his own frustrated denial. "The situation becomes easier if we have tidbits to appease people with, especially since your previous custodians were, after a certain time, able to extract precisely jack shit."

Bitter pride flickered at that. He had stonewalled them pretty good, huh. Couldn't stop scientists from canvassing his body inch by inch with their cold fingers and colder machines but could sure shred the mind of any fool who tried to follow him in too deep, wasn't going to be hurt twice and they were so garbled anyway, so graceless, he learned more than they did. Even if so much of it was fucking useless, incomprehensibly alien.

John's eyes prickled with something he didn't want to think too hard about, lest Karkat hiss at him for caring too much again.

"For now we are mostly interested in basic biology, as some of your organs don't seem to have analogous functions to human ones, and language."

So you can spy on our transmissions?

"If there is anything to be said on open transmissions one would hope they would be encrypted."

... Point, I guess, Karkat grumbled, but glared at John sullenly when he relayed that to Rose.

"Later, as we build more trust, perhaps you will feel willing to offer advice as to the best ways to work repairs on your mech, as biotechnology isn't--"

Karkat had been pretty subdued around Rose, comparatively; John noticed that because suddenly he was up on his feet and leaning forward so fast the cat startled and scampered off. The link was burning with what?!, with needtoknow, with please, with the hulking nightmare shape of pincers and mandibles and two too many arms--

"Oh god," John choked out, caught unable to breathe in Karkat's own breathless terror-hope. "Rose, he's. He's asking if it's still alive."

And as behind her Dirk and Dave and Roxy slowly lowered their blades and guns Rose herself didn't move an inch, not even to lean away from the crazy-eyed alien quivering with tension in her face, only to smile, slow and satisfied. "Well then, here is our first bit of incentive. I knew we would find something."

Chapter End Notes
SHIT ADI AND I SAID DURING THE WRITING:
I like you, stupid! I don't want anything. And protecting you from torture that's not even about me liking you it's about that shit is abhorrent and will not happen on my watch I'd have done it either way!
This time Karkat was very careful when he removed the headset. He lowered it to his lap, staring down at nothing in particular, eyes a little too wide, breathing a little too controlled.
"Uh, Karkat? What did I say now?"

Askerian: (IT WAS PALE AT FIRST SIGHT.)

Adi: hahahahaha
Adi: Jade abandoned Dave with the baby
Askerian: XD
Adi: won't pay child support
Askerian: XDDD
Adi: barely even calls her own kid
Adi: u.u
Adi: I feel like Karkat should come in at the tail end of this and be sort of horrified
Askerian: XD
Askerian: i don't even know if he'd understand anything at all
Adi: he'd definitely get a mental image of Dave gestating a baby in his stomach.
Adi: I feel this would leave a false impression on how humans reproduce
Adi: one day he and John will be about to do the nasty and Karkat will go "WAIT BUT WHAT IF YOU START GROWING A HUMAN MADE OF OUR COMBINED GENETIC MATERIAL IN YOUR STOMACH!"

Adi: I think the fact that Karkat has John cast as a seducer says something about either how long it's been since he got some or what his thoughts on John are
Askerian: XDDDD
Adi: XDDDD
Askerian: well, also how john didn't just push him down and go at it
Askerian: >.>
Askerian: he's totally trying to wear karkat down! only apparently he doesn't even know that's what he's doing. XD
Adi: well, but in those stories inevitably the captive ends up quite happy in his or her situation, yeah?
Askerian: XD yeah
Adi: Karkat, sweetie, I think the fact that he just out and out denied romantic attraction, no matter how much denial he's in, means that if anyone is actually looking to get laid here it's probably you.
Adi: Just... you know, pointing it out
Askerian: XDDDDDDDDDDDDDD
Askerian: maybe he's just making really sure! john isn't interested. XD
Adi: ...so, are they sharing the boat on the Nile or did they decide to get separate ones?
Askerian: :D

Askerian: "... Aliens are so fucking weird." "Man, I agree."
Askerian: And They Were Bros.
Askerian: NOOO MY SEXUAL TENSION.
Adi: Yeah, that probably feels like coming across an alien civilization where they give blowjobs instead of shaking hands
Askerian: hahahahahaha XD
Askerian: hey, i'm checking you over for testicular cancer! it's neighborly. *CUPS HELLO*
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Fanart, fanart, so many lovely fanarts *twirls*

John and Karkat first meeting in the biomech's cockpit by Spocktalia (the pic is pretty dark on my screen but toggling my settings a bit = ngh)

A portrait of flight suit!Karkat sneering and being so goddamn pretty I can't even by Nevernoahh

John's first view of Karkat in cockpit with the creepyvines by Tobu/JanglingArgot

(ugh they look so organic ugh urgh urgh)

Sketches of John Kirkbert, Space Molester by W-the-Idiot that cracked me up hardcore XD

Sketchy panels for chapter 1 (the cockpit scene sure seems to have marked people! XD) and smilyfaces and flight suit designs by cyrusfish

many Evangelion-inspired really neat sketches of the kids' flight suits by sugoi-hime

(ugh the original post seems to be gone nooo why ;;)

NGHHHH John on top of Karkat applying the mind goo with flight suits artfully torn up WHY IS THIS SO SEXY by ohmygod-i-dont-even

another Karkat in his cockpit, rough and very expressive sketch by Derpaturtle

oh my god THE SHOWER ROOM SCENE by ohmygod-i-dont-even. Needless to say this is NSFW for John-butt. XD XD XD

I am so happy gaiz. So happy. T^T Fanart everywhere, raining from the skies. (I keep feeling like I've forgotten someone, too. D: D: D: who did I forget?! Please yell at me, I'll deserve it. It'll learn me to copypaste the urls as I get them and not in a big great rush just before posting.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The boys' bedroom wasn't really big. Two bunk beds, a desk under the window opposite the door, cupboards full of civilian clothes and shoes, and traveling cases under the lower bunks filled with odds and ends they hadn't touched in months. It was a room mostly for sleeping in, since their staggered schedules didn't allow for much lingering; their other, more prized possessions and random time-wasters tended to be strewn all over the common room, where they could actually use them without waking anyone up.

John wasn't used to watching the room from the floor, but sitting on his bed just made him feel weird knowing Karkat interpreted it as him lounging on a pimp throne, his optional but expected any minute now.

The alien shuffled past on his knees, brows furrowed in concentration as he carried Jake's old loafers to the far corner, ignoring the human as hard as he possibly could.

Rose had, like a queen of perfect evil, generously decided that the poor shaken alien shouldn't be taken advantage of in his first moment of panic, but instead given some time to settle down and think things through rationally. By that, she mostly meant "let him stew in his fretty juices until he is cooked all the way through and ready to melt under my teeth."
She'd taken back the headsets, too. Something about installing on-off switches, serious design flaw blahblah. John couldn't talk with Karkat, and trying to help him with whatever he was doing in that narrow corner between the foot of the bed and the wall only got him hissing and bared teeth.

"I am so bored."

Karkat's head briefly popped up over the footboard, just long enough to give him a narrow-eyed, suspicious look, and then he disappeared again, muttering under his breath something John would have bet his firstborn was for the nth time, I can't understand you, dipshit.

(If he'd been planning to have a firstborn, or any bio kids at all, he totally would have bet them, anyways. Maybe it was cheating to bet them since he wasn't? Hmm, maybe he could bet Warhammer's -- no, hahaha, heck no, no betting his mech's anything.)

"Wish I'd thought to take my handheld. Can't play games on glasses. This sucks."

Oh hey, his glasses. He tapped the frame and glanced his way through his contact list. Today everyone was online, though some were on Away or Do Not Disturb; everyone was apparently awake at the same time. How weird. How full of potential fun!

How not fun at all in practice. Somehow.

JH: oh my god i am so bored. soooo bored. i have maxed out all levels of boredom that exist on this plane of existence and ascended to a new realm full of even more boring crap auuuugh someone please save me.

He watched Karkat poke at the tissue box that everyone pretended was on the desk in case of sudden colds and was glad when the alien put it back where he'd found it, apparently unimpressed by how crumpley it was. Karkat had been given leave to use everything that wasn't on a bed or locked away, but explaining why that one was public property and not to be absconded with would have been awkward.

JD: ummm sorry john!! we cant come and visit you :(  
JH: who's we?  
JD: jake and janey and me. were going on an adventure! were on the boat to temple island atm. eta in four minutes! :D its going to be so much fun, i havent been there since i was like twelve or something  
JH: wow guys, thanks for waiting until i can't come with. :/ i'm feeling the clonesib love there.  
JN: Sorry, John! Those two reprobates kidnapped me; by the time I blinked we were already at the beach. I was TRYING to do a write-up on all those fascinating little facts we learned today! Honestly, Mr. Harley, Miss Harley.  
JD: wed say were sorry but wed be lying like lying liars who lie lyingly ;3  
JD: whoops theres the harbor! tricky reefs ahead. see you later john, have fun with karkat!!

... Damn it. A nice end of spring day, everyone awake together, everyone dirtside together, no enemies in view for at least another twenty hours -- it should have been a vacation. They should have gone to the mainland and into a real city, watched a movie on a real big screen, or maybe Dad could have taken him and Jane and gone back home for the weekend -- they hadn't found an occasion to do that in... wow, a year and eight months now. John wasn't sure why Dad hadn't given up and sold the house by now.

RX: lolol aw poor jonnyhboy  
RX: all on his loensom w/ blushy alien brid,e & sexingup platnrom^ hubba hubba  
JH: alas he is refusing to put out.
RX: *lonesome **platfrom
RX: hahahhh. ur goin to fast! u need 2 SEDUCE him!!
RX: *sexy music strats playn SEXILY in the backgourdn*
RX: they totes have that right? u said they did. u recognized it as pr0n music too so it must be prty smililar
JH: uh yeah, i guess it kind of was...
RX: u gotta tell me aaallllll about how taht came up btw. AAALALLLLLLL abotu it.
RX: lick did u get 2 actuely SEE a bit of alien pr0n ? :33
JH: ... oh hey will you look at what Karkat is building. pretty amazing how he managed to pile it up so high! it's never going to stay up! gotta save him before it all falls on his head brb.

Karkat's construction hadn't even reached the footboard yet, of course. Hehe. Um. John stretched his upper body across the end corner of the mattress, toes and one knee still on the floor, and looked over it, deciding that getting clawed across the face for satisfying his curiosity sounded vaguely preferable to keeping on thinking about Roxy's line of questioning and how likely she was to ask again later on.

It looked like a pile of random junk. Actually it looked pretty much like the pile of random junk that used to be there until about two months ago, when Dad noticed something was getting smelly in there -- more than normal eau de boy's room, that was -- and made them clean it all up. They apparently shouldn't have bothered?

"Zhann. Zhann. No."

John blinked and grinned charmingly at Karkat, who sat on his legs by the bedpost and glowered at him, hands wrist-deep in the pile, and refusing to be charmed. "You pronounce that one pretty well. Okay it's really short, but still!"

Irritated huff, blowing bangs out of his eyes to glower at him some more. The red eyes worked strikingly well for that. "Zhann. You. N'rhekhssthalneish! No."

"Aw, come on--"

Karkat was apparently at the end of his patience for nosy humans, because he planted his hand in John's face and shoved him back. John was draped awkwardly over the corner of the bed; he couldn't catch a grip and ended up back on the floor, landing butt-first with a dull thud and half the sheets pulled down with.

For a second they both froze, John utterly startled and Karkat eyes wide and suddenly apprehensive, like only now after the fact was he wondering if he'd gone too far.

He had a cobweb in his hair and a plush banana in hand. John raised his hand to rub his smarting nose, and then started laughing. Karkat deflated with a heavy sigh, shook his head at a slightly different angle from everyone else but in a way that still meant 'I despair of this guy, I really do'.

Then he went back to inserting his banana in construction holes, which had John pffhahahahing again. It only got John a quick, 'let's avoid staring straight at the crazy person in case it provokes them lalala nothing to see here' glance, though. Boo. John threw the sheets in a rumpled mess on the mattress and flopped back against the side of the bed. Time to be bored again -- oh wait, another message alert! Whee.

BR: Fifty pushups.
JH: what??
BR: Cure for boredom. Guaranteed or your money back.
JH: oh come on mr. strider, you're kidding right??
BR: I never kid. Romy removed my humor gland as a lark in med school. Humor-free ever since.
BR: And twenty crunches. Chop chop.
JH: ... aye, aye, sir. fifty pushups and twenty crunches and one alien looking at me like i'm deranged coming right up.
BR: I'll know if you skip them.
BR: I always know.
BR: Always.

The worst thing was he did, in fact, always know. John heaved a sigh and rolled onto hands and knees. One pushup. Karkat paused to stare at him. Two pushups. He didn't even want to know what the alien thought he was doing, and why he was doing it now. Some strange of bizarre religious penance? Compulsive behavior?


With his luck he was doing some kind of alien mating display.

He was on his thirty-fourth pushup and Karkat had long since gone back to his arcane construction, frowning at it like it was an atmo reentry equation that refused to give any kind of reasonable, non-crash-landing results, when the bedroom door opened. John craned his neck to look at the newcomer. He was already sure it wasn't Dave, though, on account of the lack of foot planting itself between his shoulder blades to flatten him back down.

"Hey," Dirk said, and casually stepped over his legs. "Going on a test flight. How's the alien bed going?"

"Not a clue," thirty-six, "won't let me look!"

Karkat, of course, didn't hiss at Dirk to step back when Dirk looked over his head, just hunkered down a bit and watched him warily. John was kind of jealous. Not of the hunkering, but... oh, he supposed he'd rather have Karkat not being afraid than getting to see the stupid mess back there.

"I think he," thirty-nine, "doesn't have -- enough shit." Forty-one. "Room's too clean! Hehe."

Dirk hummed thoughtfully and hooked the handle of his suitcase with his toes, pulling it out from under the bed. He swung it up on his mattress, casual and unconcerned, and proceeded to rummage it into a total mess. A book glanced off John's head, landed on the floor. John glowered at it. "Hey! -- goddamn it -- lost my count. Uh. Forty-seven." Oh god almost done.

Karkat was still staring at them from under his fringe, eyes sharp, not missing a single thing. John hoped he didn't have Jane's habit of actually writing down his observations. Else there'd be a "The Exceedingly Strange Habits of the Earthian Homo pilouus" on alien shelves pretty soon.

Then again Karkat was probably never going to leave this planet again. Uh. Yeah. John was a little glad when he reached fifty-one (crap, he'd done one too many) and switched exercises. Gave him an excuse to change angles, stop seeing his face.

Now he could watch Dirk negligently dropping his crap on the floor as he looked for... whatever it was he wanted.

Karkat got it before him, a blink and his back straightening suddenly, all 'oh, got it!' He cautiously stretched a hand toward that first book. Stretch, streetch... a quick, wary glance at Dirk... Dirk was
pretending not to notice, so Karkat ganked the book. His permanent frown had relaxed a little bit. The next time he went back for a laptop screen (where was the rest of it?) he wasn't half as wary that Dirk might turn around and kick him, and the third time he didn't even act cautious at all. Dirk kept dumping plastic ponies and old data sticks and robot parts here and there.

"How come you get to help him and I don't!" John eventually protested.

"Helping him? He's helping himself. I'm not doing shit."

Hrrmn.

"Oh, that's right, my shirts are in the cupboard, not the suitcase. Silly of me." As he turned away, he dumped the empty suitcase on the floor. It stayed there approximately six seconds, after which Karkat disappeared it. The alien was smiling for real now, a tiny one, just to himself.

Hrrrrghn.

The next ten crunches went by really fast for some reason.

"Anyways. Might not be back for dinner. It depends on how the test goes." Dirk perched on the edge of his bed, watching John finish his set. "I'll do my recalibrating at Tycho Base if I need any."

John snorted, flicking him a grin. "In other words... you'll do your recalibrating at Tycho Base."

There was no way on Earth there wouldn't be at the very least one piddly little thing that Dirk would need to obsess over. Which meant he was guaranteed to crash the moon base party. "Which day is it again? Ooh, vegetable lasagna day. Lucky you!" Space Marines had the best canteen. If by 'best' you meant 'most likely to achieve sentience and turn on their human overlords', that was.

Dirk pinched his lips in that way that meant he wanted to smile back but was too cool for it. "What do you think the extra box of pears by the fridge is for?"

"I thought it was to bribe their engineers into giving you priority repairs."

"No, that's the strawberries. Pears are for trading for the greasiest fast-food they have stashed away."

John laughed as he sat up, let his hands hang between his knees. He wasn't tired, barely warmed up really. "I'm so jealous. A pox on Dad and his healthy meals!"

Dirk extracted himself from his bunk by way of hooking one hand into Dave's bunk's guardrail and reverse-curling himself upward in a boneless, snake-like wave that started from the knee. All 'look at my abs! I do a hundred crunches a day!' Feh.

"Alright, time to go." He nodded to John, and then to Karkat. Karkat quickly looked away and pretended to have been busy with his mess of a bed all along. "John. Karkat. Later."

A minimalist wave of his hand, and he was gone. John let his own hand drop. Karkat was still looking at the door in mild confusion. John shuffled his butt along the floor closer to him. He wasn't distracting him from his business if Karkat had stopped on his own, right? "What is it, pal?"

Karkat's eyebrows scrunched together, more in puzzlement than in get-out-of-my-face. He repeated, articulating a bit too much, "Lay-tuh?"

"Lay-turr. Uh, okay, how to explain that."

John considered the issue for a second. He wasn't as good at it as Jade. She'd managed to teach him
yes, no, water, food/hungry, and a couple other things, all without the telepathic headband, and John had little clue how she'd managed. ('Come on/come with me' and 'sit' he got, too, but they were mostly because everyone'd been telling him all day long)

He propped up his hands on their index and middle fingers, made them walk toward each other. "Hello!" Lefty said to Righty with a little bob that might look like a polite nod (bit hard to be clearer when their heads were his wrists! They weren't *that* bendy.) "Hi," said Righty. They proceeded to babble about random crap for a couple seconds.

Karkat was staring at him and at his hands alternately, face torn between 'okay, so far I get it, I think' and 'why do I know you.' John grinned with all his teeth and made Lefty shuffle closer. "Hel-*lo*, nurse," that little scamp purred, thumb getting fresh with Righty's knuckles. Karkat growled at him.

"Hehehe. Sorry, sorry." Alright, back into character. "Goodbye, Lefty." Righty walked off. John flapped his hand a bit to signify she was gone for good, or she'd flown off on a stiff wind or whatever, and then he reset the scene. "Hi! Hello. Blahblahblah! Blahblah too. Yes! No. Later." He decided not to editorialize about Lefty being a buttface, and Righty's 'later' meaning 'see you in hell', and made Righty wander off for a little trip a bit too close to the edges of Karkat's pile of crap (he wasn't sneaking a look! no need to look so suspicious!) before wandering back. "Hello again!"

Then they knuckle-smooshed. Okay, not really. He didn't want to confuse Karkat that 'later' meant 'I will ravish you next time'. It would have been funny, though.

"Hrm. Aghain?"


"Later... hello again?"

"Uh. I guess. Yeah." Except when it was used with its actual meaning instead of by colloquial lazy guys. Teaching was hard!

Karkat made a hummy thinking noise, slowly shuffling his weight so he wasn't sitting on his feet anymore but cross-legged, hands resting loose on his ankles, facing John. They stared at each other for a couple of seconds. Looked like Karkat felt like talking to him now, only John still didn't have the headset and Karkat didn't have enough vocabulary.

The hollows under his eyes were so dark. John wondered if, as in humans, it indicated exhaustion, because if that were the case he must be about to fall over. Made his eyes pop out, though. All gray, gray, darker gray -- bam! Buttercup/fire truck combo.

"...Let's get started on colors!" He pulled the bottom of his shirt and pointed at it. "White!" Next was the ceiling. "White too." He pointed at his bed sheets. Karkat's ears reddened and he glanced quickly away. Um. "... Also white."

"...White?" The alien pointed at the pages of a notebook. John nodded. He got it quick!

They went through black and purple and pink thanks to one of Dirk's ponies. Karkat hesitated for a second next and then pointed at his own eyes.

"Uh." John leaned a little closer, though he could see them fine from there. He pointed to his own iris, made a little circle. "Red?" A bigger circle. "Yellow."

Karkat nodded slowly, repeating the words under his breath -- he didn't like it when John chuckled
over his pronunciation, but John couldn't help it! -- and then cautiously pointed at John's own eyes. "Whi-tuh...?"

"And blue."

His permanent frown deepened, though, when the dark jeans he wore turned out to also be blue, and Jake's pillowcase, which was, granted, paler and vaguely sea-colored. "Okay, not blue. I guess... Blue-green? And this is green." Jake's bed sheets were very green. Foresty, really. So were the matching radioactive slime ghosts on John and Karkat's chests. John tapped his own with a smile; Karkat's face went weird in a way he couldn't read and then he was turning back to his pile without another word.

"Uh. Karkat? More colors?"

"... No. Later, Zhann."

Okay, okay, what had just happened. John went on hands and knees and shuffled closer, tilting his head to peer at the alien's face. "Aw, but--"

"No!" Karkat snarled at him, and disappeared in his corner between the footboard and the walls. The suitcase, opened into a L, was slammed like a wall between the pile and the rest of the room.

John could have climbed on his bed and peered in from above, but he had a feeling Karkat might scratch his eyes out if he tried it. Okay, the heck. Seriously, the heck.

He sat back down on the floor slowly, baffled and maybe a little hurt. Karkat shuffled around in there for a little bit, likely trying to make himself comfortable on all that pointy, bumpy crap, but in a quiet way, like he wanted to pretend he wasn't here and John couldn't find him. After that, silence.

JH: rose? are you still busy?
RS: As it happens, not anymore. I am returning home and will be there shortly.
JH: oh cool.
JH: uh, listen. i think i pissed off karkat, but i really don't get why! i was showing him the colors and he was pretty okay about it and then suddenly bam he's crawling in his hidey hole and growling at me to back off. i don't get it!
RS: Interesting. Which color was it?
JH: uh, green i think. bright green, he was okay with forest green. i really don't get it!
RS: There, there. Pretend I've patted you.
JH: you're the best pseudo-patter ever, rose, it is you.
RS: But of course.
RS: He's an alien, John, he is bound to exhibit strange idiosyncrasies from time to time. I wouldn't be worried. He'll realize you didn't mean any harm and cut you some slack for your own alienness in a minute, and then you shall be BFFsies 4ever again.
JH: that sure sounded like sarcasm there. are you sarcasming at me, miss lalonde?
RS: I would *never*.

Heh. Yeah right.

RS: But that is neither here nor there. Will your guest be willing to emerge and meet me downstairs in ... three minutes, now?
JH: uh. no idea. i'll try. why?
RS: I've managed to arrange a little school trip, if he is still interested.

-- Oh. Oh man.
John bit his lip. He wished he'd taught him the word for mech now, it was of such importance in both their lives and instead Jade had taught him fork and knife and John had taught him purple and sit, and right now that sounded like the silliest, most pointless thing. (That surge of grief-hope-guilt, oh god. Why did Karkat have to feel everything so violently, John couldn't get it out of his head.)

"Uh. Karkat?" No response. "Karkat, come on."

"Hrrrrrrrsst."

Man. If he went to the barricade he might get clawed up for real, wow. But how to -- oh, loose paper, a pencil. He scribbled a quick caricature of Karkat's monster-mech, pincer-hands and grasping-hands and mandibles and all, added three smaller stick figures beholding it, one of them with little horns and a mouth full of zigzags and another with a triangle skirt and chest coconuts. Totally art. Dave would be jealous. He folded it into a paper airplane and used some of those expensive mathematics of aerodynamics lessons and perfect gene-engineered hand-eye coordination to send it sailing into Karkat's base. It did a wholly unplanned loop and banged on a wall, but ended up in there eventually.

Paper crumpled in Karkat's hidey-hole; a low, dangerous snarl rose, only to be cut off like someone had pressed a button and turned off the sound. The alien burst out of the corner, suitcase kicked clean out of the way to bang into the desk. He looked so ready for a fight John was jumping on his feet and lifting his hands to block in sheer reflex.

Freeze. Stare.

"-- Heh." John breathed out, dropped his hands. "Hehehe. You startled me. Uh--"

Karkat shoved the picture under his nose, cut him off with a quick bark of a word, and then a longer tirade as his claw tapped the monster-mech, more like a question.

John sighed, gave a slow nod, a sober look. "Rose says come with me."

He went to the door, palmed it open, walked out. There was no need to keep track of the alien; Karkat was this close to walking on his heels the whole way down. The second they reached the common room he scanned it for Rose, alert; if he'd had dog ears they would have been pointed up and quivering with tension. She wasn't there yet, though.

The elder Strider was. Sitting at the kitchen counter, he was sipping from a soda can, foot swinging casually. He wasn't turned toward them but shades or not John knew he'd noticed them. John went to the man, hands cautiously pulled out of his pockets in case he needed to dodge anything in a hurry. You never quite knew when he'd decide to test your reflexes, after all.

"Hey, Mister Strider." If this was a situation in which John could call him Bro, he'd be told, but the man only nodded a sober greeting back. "We're waiting for Rose."

"Yeah, me too."

John was now pretty sure he wasn't looking at John but straight past him. Just a feeling.

Strider slid off his barstool, landed in perfect silence on steel-toed boots that should have made some goddamn noise but somehow never did, tucked his thumbs in his pockets -- fingerless black gloves, forearms corded with muscle and not a gram of fat, striped with an astonishing variety of scars, burn and knife and gun and whatever else. John didn't blame Karkat for going fighting-tense and shifting his weight on the balls of his feet; the man was a predator straight through.
Blink. Karkat didn't break eye contact, but he did slowly angle his face to the side -- totally willing not to fight it out if you are! his body seemed to say -- and said, to John, "... Deakka?"

"Haha, well-spotted. Yes, he's Dirk's... uh. Let's go with dad."

"Let's go with not."

John was pretty sure Mr. Strider was looking at him now, and not in a super-pleased way. "Hey! He's not from around here, I can't explain the exceptions first or he'll get all confused."

"Huh," went Karkat, or the alien equivalent, which was slightly more nasal and a touch more Osounding but pretty much the same otherwise and John blamed Jane and her girlboner for linguistics for his ability to notice that. Oh did he blame her. He quickly typed it down and messaged it to her before he forgot.

"I see everyone is here," Rose said from the entry door, and they all turned to her in unison.

Karkat took a step toward her, and then forced himself to a stop, hands opening and closing, opening and closing like he really wanted to go grabbing at her, and maybe shake her down for answers a bit. John stepped up to him and bumped their shoulders together pointedly; Karkat closed his eyes briefly and breathed out long and slow, forcing his body to relax some. (And then he twitched and threw him a quick glare, what was that about?)

Karkat stepped forward again -- head high, this time, spine straight and shoulders back and firm, slow enough not to be threatening but not submissive, not scared. Just determination, his eyes burned with it, the desperation that John knew was underlining it currently reined in. "Rrhoz."

"Khrkat," she returned calmly, nodding a greeting. Rose pulled a glossy picture out of the bulging, overfull folder under her arm, held it in front of her; it was the black and red mech, seen from the side as it floated on its back in some kind of huge pool. She arched an eyebrow. "Come, yes or no?"

Karkat's jaw clenched briefly, but he didn't snarl or glare; he tilted his chin up, just an inch. It should have looked like challenge but it didn't, quite. "...Yes."

She nodded thoughtfully, and pulled the headsets out of her folder, held them out. "John, I trust you don't mind serving as interpreter?"

"Nah, I'm good." He put his on his head, tugged a few locks of hair free, flipped the temple bits into place. Karkat was mirroring him at his side, jaw clenched, brows furrowed.

It wasn't words that came first this time around, just an awareness, the spine-prickling feeling of older-bigger-dangerous standing at his back and too close where he refused to turn to keep an eye on him, because no matter how deadly he was (very deadly yeah man you have no idea) they all knew the real power in the room was Rose. John himself was, was... sleeping-lion?, potentially dangerous but not hungry (maybe prideally but bound to Rose more, and whatever she decided, that would be it.) (Hey not that much okay I mean she makes good plans but--)

My brain. Out. Karkat's thoughts went all restrained; it was like hearing a crowd still too far away, a ton of voices but none stronger than a whisper, and so tangled they were impossible to differentiate.

You gotta teach me that trick some day pretty neat all quietghostwhisperly.

A brief burst of nonplussed amusement. Help you protect your mind from me? you'd trust me/why would I? my one advantage you're so weird.
Karkat slanted him a glance, something complicated brushing the surface of his thoughts and then submerging again, and then he shrugged. ... Fine, why not. Some day maybe. If your mind stops butterfly-fluttering ooh a shiny. Now tell Rose what does she want explain.

"Alright, it's working. Rose? We're listening."

She was watching the two of them, arms crossed, lips pursed, eyes unreadable, she'd probably been watching them like that all along, but that was Rose for you. She gave a quiet little sigh, shifted her weight, and focused on Karkat. "We have decided that fixing your mech will be mutually beneficial, and so there is no need to ask for a... good will gesture from your side first."

Blackmail, she means, John involuntarily added; Karkat's reply was a feeling of teeth gritted, of I could tell.

Won't make me cough up more intel for the privilege of saving -- something John couldn't untangle, but one of the components was the black mech, though it also flashed white a couple of times, slightly less humanoid somehow. Soul of generosity! I am so delighted could piss out all my organs go dancing barefoot in the streets to express my unending joy woo broken glass gutter nastiness rusty nails it's a party (she really is being generous, too, the fuck is she angling for, what's her angle there has to be one just has to be.)

John couldn't really contradict him. Rose could be extremely generous, actually! And caring, and concerned, and discreetly, pretend-I'm-not helpful. Once she had decided that she liked you, or that you were hers in some other way, that was. Otherwise not so much. There was no way Karkat was there yet, not even for John's sake.

"The rules are: You do not get access to the mech itself. We will be in a little observation room overhead. You can see, you cannot touch."

(but how can I fix how can I healsave--)

"We will be acting on your advice. John, how likely is it he would sabotage us and try to make us kill it instead?"

Karkat flinched, his immediate never followed by a quieter know I should but, but no (can't be alone can't lose it/him no one else left nooneelse), can't, should but I can't (such a failure so weak so weak) that tore at John, made him flinch, made his hands clench from the need to touch him. "Not at all," he assured Rose, forcing a smile that didn't seem to convince her.

"That's good to know," she replied slowly, watching him with eyes narrowed in thought, before turning back to the alien. "Next rule. There will be civilian humans around. You do not touch them, you do not approach them, you do not deliberately scare them, you do not attempt to interact in any way. Needless to say if you go so far as to hurt them our agreement is null and void and you will be returned to the research and interrogation divisions."

John nodded with Karkat's own radiating feeling of sober agreement. The alien had little interest in civilians (what was that notion anyway, noncombatants? Were they injured/weak but kept because so smart it was okay?) so long as they didn't attack him first, but if they were so weak, that shouldn't be an issue... Huh, would he even be allowed to defend himself or would that count as hurting them?

I'll defend you. It'd be unfair to make you stand there and take it. Plus kind of baiting you, asshole move.
"And the last rule." She slipped her hand in her folder again.

Oh hey, handcuffs. Karkat didn't recognize them at first, alien wrist restraints probably looked different, but he lifted their use from John's mind and stiffened. Behind them Mr. Strider shifted his weight quite deliberately, reminding them he was still in arm's reach.

Okay okay I can do it, doesn't change a thing really I can't fight anyway.

John's first instinctive response was they look like cop handcuffs you could break the chain easy. Though even as Karkat breathed out in a shuddery gust, he had to correct, ah no crap that's titanium you couldn't. I mean dude I couldn't I'd break my wrists first and they'd still be locked in only swelling everywhere and really achy. Um sorry.

... thanks for nothing emperor dumbass. But it had made him feel better anyway, though he locked that away quickly before John could overhear exactly why or how much. Didn't stop John grinning, though. Karkat let out a tiny, puff-of-breath, reluctant laugh and looked up at Rose. "Yes." How? Ask her how.

"Front or back, Rose?"

"Hm. Back for today. If he behaves we might change that." She held out the handcuffs; John reached out. Mr. Strider reached past him, between the two of them, and snatched them first. Karkat tensed up and flinched around, vaguely thinking of dark indistinct shapes in the water that could have swallowed his boat whole, gliding so close, a flicker of memory he didn't even seem to pay attention to, and that John hoarded quickly to the back of his own head, or at least tried to. Karkat didn't seem to notice, at any rate.

Mr. Strider made a quick little "turn around" motion with his fingers; slowly, reluctantly, Karkat went back to facing Rose. How dangerous is he really, scarred face scarred everything maybe just means he gets hurt a lot...?

Haha uh no. Like. Really no. He's been training me all my life and I've only dropped him five times tops, and I think for two of them he was showing me how to come back up after taking a fall/deal with fighting while in pain. None of us pilots can take him I really don't think you can either.

(Okay no, sometimes they managed, but it was always flukes, or felt like it anyway.)

Karkat crossed his wrists behind his back with only a minimal shiver; his mind voice stayed full of snark and not as much nerves as John had expected. I get it he is lord badass emperor of badasses eats steel and uranium for breakfast craps out starship fuel rods yadda yadda. Hehe.

Not scared (anymore)?

... No point, if I'm not going to fight him anyway (if he's so much better the end result's already known no need to bother.) I shall be so docile a sheep would fucking weep from shame at my shining example and throw itself on the butcher's knife, knowing its life of softfluffy servility is a futile, hopelessly outmatched endeavor from there on.

"Pff."

"John?" Rose inquired. He gave her a deflecting grin; he really didn't think she needed to hear that one in full, and it was fun having a secret conversation right in front of people. Reminded him of his brief stint at normal school and passing notes behind the teacher's back.

"Nah, nothing. Karkat's being rambly." A little shrug. "He promises he'll play nice!"
Promise my ass as if I've got a choice.

Karkat tugged on the handcuffs, testing the way they settled against his wrists. Mr. Strider had set them pretty tight, John could tell at a glance; there was absolutely no way Karkat would slip out of them, not even if aliens could dislocate their thumbs.

(You can what? That's disgusting.)

"If everyone's ready? Let's go."

They trailed out after Rose. Karkat wrapped his fingers around his wrist so the chain wouldn't be pulled taut and the edge of the metal cuffs wouldn't dig into his skin, Mr. Strider walking behind him with his hand wrapped around Karkat's other wrist. The man could haul him around or throw him down with zero warning that way, so vulnerable fuckfuckfuck but he wasn't interested in hurting Karkat and besides he was Dirk's father right he'd be pretty much like Dirk only older and Dirk was pretty okay so far. Yeah. Yeah, okay, breathe. Staircase, harder to balance without arms but doable and (John'd probably catch me anyways (yeah of course he/I would))

Stairs and stairs, another handprint-locked wooshing door, and then they were stepping out in the courtyard, way bigger when you didn't have a big robot to cross it for you but he'd been so sick didn't remember it, they'd floated? Flown? Flown yeah I remember now no wait that's you, that's--

Outside a dozen soldiers in tactical vest stood facing the door in a half-circle, Jack Noir right in the middle. Goddamn it.

"Egbert," Mr. Strider said in his low, veiled voice. "Hold." Absolute order; John took Karkat's arm without thinking twice, grasp not too-tight but solid, all business. Strider let go, stepped a little to the side so he'd have more space to move.

"How nice of you to come assist us," Rose said in her most neutral voice.

What's going on? Shit that's the psycho guy made you fall zapped you, shit shit why so many guards, try to take me by force?(can't fight oh shit should have known I can't fight--)

"Shh." John squeezed Karkat's arm a little, trying to be reassuring. Nah, they have to be polite we're out in the open people would see not sneaky.

Karkat was a little doubtful as to how the threat of being seen would stop them, but he seemed tentatively willing to take John's word for it. (If you're wrong I will haunt the fuck out of you.)

"Be damn unconscionable if we didn't," Noir answered Rose, "seeing how you're gonna drag that thing right amongst a bunch of fucking civilians."

Rose gave him a polite smile. "You are entirely right, of course. Shall we?"


"Not so fast." Noir's eyes narrowed in thought as he looked her over, and then scanned the other members of their little group. Mr. Strider got a little curl of his upper lip, but his eyes glided past him and onto John and Karkat. Karkat's eyelids twitched; he didn't bare his teeth, but he wanted to. So instead John stared back at Noir, and then smiled, the friendliest, toothiest smile he could muster.

"We're on a schedule, Mr. Noir," Rose reminded him pointedly. "The scientists are having to postpone a lot of experiments--"
"Won't take a minute." He pulled a length of black cloth from some pocket, lobbed it at Rose. "Blindfold. Not leaving it able to find its way back there."

Karkat hissed low and quiet between his teeth.

"I am not unwilling to compromise, but this wouldn't work," she countered with a sigh. "The reason is as of now still classified, but believe me, it wouldn't."

John hesitated. Karkat really didn't like the idea, though he'd gone on brain lockdown again and John couldn't tell how badly, but Noir was going to be a right pain in the ass if they didn't give some ground, and uh, thinking about it, it would be kinda irresponsible to take a really strong, claws-equipped alien out for a walk with such a small escort, even if they were all three of them badasses in their own right.

JH: we could take off the headsets?

Rose threw him a quick, unimpressed look.

RS: The information would still be in your head when you put it back on.
JH: ... oh right.

"Humor me," Noir said, in a voice that didn't sound like it even knew humor in passing.

*Okay why the fuck do they want me blind shit they could hobble me too while they're at it truss me up tie me to a pole like a pig to be roasted put sticks through my eardrums saw off my horns would I be hindered enough then? They're scared you'll escape and find your way back there.*

Karkat's flash of surprise was smothered almost immediately, but not before John could catch the bewilderment, the edge of 'what's being able to see got to do with finding my way back?' He couldn't help but blink and look at Karkat; Noir broke eye contact with Rose to stare at him.

"What's got you making faces, brat?"

"Maybe just seeing yours," Mr. Strider drawled, sounding bored. "Huh. Good point. Wouldn't want the alien to go blind. Hand that over, Lalonde."

John was torn between relief that Noir had stopped paying attention to him to glare daggers at Mr. Strider and worry at how much like a lump of iron Karkat's biceps was starting to feel.

Mr. Strider didn't ask Karkat his opinion; he just stepped behind him, deftly plucked out the telepathic headset -- sudden silence, cut right in the middle of a burst of ohfuckshit -- and folded the length of cloth in two and tied it on. Karkat's claws pressed tight against his own forearm, on the edge of piercing through the skin. John flicked his finger against the inside of his upper arm to distract him.

Another wraparound, another knot; Mr. Strider casually tugged a few locks of hair out from under the blindfold so they wouldn't pull and then put the headset back on Karkat's head.

"Nice color, by the way," Noir grunted, eyeing the hot pink headbands on Karkat and John's heads with a suspicious eye. "New fucking alien fashion?"

He said it with an undertone that flipped the words around, *you an alien-fucker yet, boy?* Made John want to punch him in the mouth. He could see the taser at his belt, so maybe not right away. (That
And Karkat was blind, blind, blind, fifteen humans who were looking for an excuse to shoot him and drag him back to be tortured all around him and Rose who was so cold and might find defending him not cost-effective and Dirk's father who had no reason to give a shit and John--

John, you -- John, shit, you -- I can't see I can't see fuck (you're an enemy I shouldn't can't this isso bad) fuck don't leave (can't ask you that) (there's no one else) please I (shameful so shameful what next crawling shit shit shit) please--

I won't leave, John replied, and briefly squeezed Karkat's faintly trembling arm, I wasn't going to, you don't have to beg, you never did.

I. Fuck. Pretend you didn't hear any of that I just -- okay, okay, I can deal I'll just. Think sheepy thoughts. Yeah. Baa. Is me.

Heh.

"There, there," Strider was saying to Noir, all heavy-lidded and slouchy and bored, "No need to be envious, that shade would clash with your panties anyway."

Caught by surprise, John couldn't keep himself from laughing. Neither could a couple of Noir's men, though theirs was shaded with horror. Noir turned his head sloooowly to pinpoint them, nostrils flaring, but all fifteen of them were doing their best to stare holes through the building's wall. Rose's lips were pinched in what looked like annoyance but was more likely to be restrained hilarity.

I don't get what's wrong with those specific undergarments, or with that color, Karkat told him, forgetting to be panicked for a brief perplexed instant.

It's uh for girls?

... (aliens are weird of course it's for girls it's pink) And?

John floundered. Uh.

It wouldn't hold those ridiculous floppy bits properly I guess (why am I having these thoughts I'm blaming you I will blame you forever cannot unsee) but why is that so funny?

No, it's -- urgh never mind I'll get Jade to explain crossdressing to you later we're walking now. Okay there's nothing in front of you it's fine and anyway I'm holding you up you can't fall.

Karkat kept on being quietly puzzled as to why John thought he would fall. It's one step ahead I'm not that -- Okay what was the last notion there, it had to do with perceptions but John couldn't tell if it was blind or deaf or hindered or something else entirely. (I know they're tiny but fuck you very much John alien.)

He wasn't sure who got it first, it was like the thought had sparked at the same time across both sides of the divide, or so close it made no difference with how fast the echo came. Horns? No horns. Oh.

How does it-- John started to ask.

Well it -- not telling, it just does.

... Heh okay. I have to tell Rose though.
Karkat returned a mental shrug, and his attention slid away from their conversation and toward the men escorting them, light steps on the packed-earth courtyard, surrounding them, moving with them like a school of fish. It was a bit eerie. Rose led the way, but Noir and Mr. Strider had fallen back, flanking John and Karkat, two steps back, the best vantage point to either tackle them or each other.

"I suppose you would like a less direct path?" Rose inquired as they crossed the yard.

"Yeah. Go through the med labs. Lower level's empty today."

... Asshole, John thought.

What?

_He wants to confuse you yeah? We're going through medical. It's uh gonna smell pretty distinctive sorry. (I wonder if he -- ambush?) Crap! Didn't mean to think that--_

_I managed to think it on my own, Karkat retorted wryly. You won't freak me out more than I do myself I'm a pro at imagining catastrophic endings should make it a job or something (I'll be better at it than mech pilot for sure) horrific visions of flaming death and epic failure nonstop in here it's like an action-thriller-horror movie theater we're open all day please feel free to never leave. (wish I could.)_

John only realized he'd said "Aw, buddy, no" out loud when Rose looked over her shoulder at him.

"Everything alright?" she asked, casually but just quiet enough to be unintelligible by the guards. John shrugged.

"So far, yeah." Oh hey, it gave him an idea. "Keep watch for a sec?" he asked with a quick grin.

Rose quirked an eyebrow but dropped to their level, hands joined behind her back casually. Good. He didn't want Karkat to think he was leaving him totally defenseless, after all, and soon they'd be in the hospital and once there he'd have to keep his eyes peeled.

He closed his eyes, leaned his mind toward Karkat's. Not looking for deeper thought, this time, just sort of... piggybacking onto the running commentary of his awareness.

Booted feet on the ground, heavy/mid-tall, he could only locate the closest... five, six? This one was Rose, lighter, and Noir and Dirk's father were much quieter/lighter/shallower than they should have been at this distance. Predators, stalking, herding him, made prickles run up his spine, made his horns ache at the roots straining to -- oh, a wall coming up, heavy building, stairs coming in two steps, one step, huh, why hadn't John _John you open your fucking eyes right this instant what the fuck!_

John didn't trip, because he still remembered where Karkat thought the first step was (he'd been pretty accurate too.) He was grinning from ear to ear. Maybe it was because Karkat was blinded right now but John hadn't really noticed that extra sense in his mind before. It was such a strange way to see the world, fuzzy and hard for his mind to grasp; he got along more with Karkat's understanding of the sensations than the sensations themselves. It was subtle. Probably having his eyes open drowned it right out.

_What the fuck were you ooh you sneaky little bastard that's pretty good (don't want to admire you idiot-savant but damn) how'd you figure that out (shit I'm the one who's lived with psychics all my life how the fuck did you first ah there it is.) Oh huh your colors are a bit weird._

Karkat's relief at once again catching flashes of vision made John a bit light-headed. _No, yours!_ John retorted, grinning a bit wider. A couple of Noir's men kept sending him wary, baffled looks. He winked at them. He thought he could sort of feel Karkat looking through his eyes, but it was so faint
he might have imagined it. At least Karkat was calming down some; that was good enough.

JH: thanks rose! done now.
JH: horns are sensory organs. kinda like echolocation? his radius is pretty small, apparently on account of tiny horns, but you couldn't make him walk into a door. there go all my best pranks for today.
JH: it feels really weird! but pretty cool.

What in the name of the greatmother/monster/orignofall's ever-discharging asshole are you doing? Mind feels all weird.

Oh, I'm typing at Rose.

Lips parted, Karkat twitched his chin like he wanted to turn his head to stare at him, but whoops blindfold, nothing to see, apart from a mildly dizzying mirror-echo flash when John glanced his way. Whoa.

What where how? Telepathic after all?

No silly, glasses. They read brain impulses. (man between that and the mind-snot headsets I hope none of it will give me brain cancer.) You've got to learn to use a normal keyboard at first but once you know how to do that and it's all ingrained you just have to think typing thoughts.

...Which apparently Karkat couldn't access as well, or even at all. Huh! Maybe it didn't use the same part of the brain. Iiiinteresting. He'd tell Rose that later, it sounded like something she'd love to know. Her and Roxy.

... Huh. Okay. Now pay attention for fuck's sake Noir's getting closer I don't like this.

John casually let himself fall back a half-step, so he'd have an easier time getting in the middle if anything happened. Stop tugging on your wrists, you'll hurt yourself. I've got it.

(godfuckingdamnit stopflirting.)

John was tempted to sputter that he wasn't flirting goddamnit, but he could tell Karkat didn't really think he was, only that it sounded like pretty much textbook it, oh those wacky aliens. He could also tell that Karkat was now breathing too fast, and through his mouth in an effort to minimize the scent of formaldehyde and disinfectant. Okay, if fabricating reasons to get annoyed at John could keep him distracted...

RS: That's interesting. We suspected, considering how poorly he took to the MRI scanner, that he was perceiving the magnetic field somehow. I wonder if it's this same ability or a different one.
JH: how poorly are we talking about?
RS: He was vomiting and experiencing vertigo for up to a hour afterwards. No bleeding out any orifices or observable long-term effects, but his exposure was relatively short, all things considered.
JH: ... plans to weaponize the heck out of that?

No answer for a second, two, and then Rose gave a strangely reluctant little nod.

RS: Naturally.
JH: makes sense.

Rose gave him a weird little look that he couldn't read. He frowned.

JH: what? it does. a weakness like that.
JH: i just hope they won't push to test the high settings on Karkat. i am having no illusions on the lowest settings but damn it they already have the first test results, they'll have to make do. >;/
RS: No need to worry about that. It would be easy to argue that as long as he's the only alien we have in custody, testing him to destruction is wasteful and short-sighted.
RS: And if/when we manage to capture more it then becomes about human rights, but this part is more murky seeing as they are not, per se, human.
JH: yeah and if as a result we treat them like they're not even animals then we're not human either.
RS: I wish everyone would see it the way you do.
But they didn't, of course. People sucked some days.

*Hey pay attention (I can't see when you're not watching damn it.) Bet your ass he's trying to make me flip my shit perfect excuse to go oh hey you can't control your alien-shaped useless-companion miniature lion thing we need to control him ourselves so noble aren't we. (that's how people-shaped redbleeding aliens think right? like highranknoble but playpretend oh no, so nice?)*

Karkat was trying to make his mind feel flippant, annoyed, but underneath that John could almost feel/see/relive the memories that the smell of the place brought up. Prickly, though -- undertones of (stop pitying coddling shielding me I'm strong too I'm a fighter damn it not your pet not.)

So hey, there were better ways to fix his mood. You're not going to flip your shit anyway are you? he asked. Be all civil and calm and nice it'll piss him off even more.

*Yeah good idea prisoner piss off the alien with the gun and the grudge.*

*Pff you're (mine) my prisoner he can fuck off.*

Uh. Maybe that was a bit, uh, maybe being able to telepath at each other so fast, faster than their ability to censor themselves, was a bit problematic, because from the way Karkat had slammed the metaphorical door in his face again, uh. Yeah.

*Karkat? I didn't mean like creepy slavething mine. Responsible-for-you mine?... Karkat? Kaaaarkaaaat?*

It took a couple of minutes, pointlessly walking up and down silent, clown-painted corridors (*fuck those clowns*, thought a small part of John's mind, but a much smaller part than usual, preoccupied as he was), and Karkat's shoulders had hunched forward, and he ... well, it was hard to say if he would have avoided John's eyes or not considering at the moment there was a length of black cloth cutting the gray of his face in two, making the twist of his mouth pretty much unreadable.

... Whatever, Karkat eventually mind-grunted. *Out soon?*

*Yeah. We've uh lalala song lyrics song lyrics crap I need a song I really hope if I can maybe sing the right song in my head long enough I'll stop thinking it and you won't uhhh argh maybe a really annoying one?!*

*Relax, idiot, I can already tell we've gone down the same corridor twice. ... Yes even with you going notwatching forgetting sillydistracted all the stupid time. You guys really can't...?*

John shared a mental shrug. Some people had a good general sense of direction. Also you could count corners and feel-remember roughly how many degrees each successive turn you'd taken was and add them up. Made things more about memory and logic than just plain senses, though. Karkat absorbed it, thoughtful.

*All that and you don't even have psychics you poor stunted bastards.*
Karkat drew himself up and actually growled under his breath, the kind that made John's teeth vibrate somehow with how low it was, and when the guards surrounding them stiffened and the muzzles of their guns twitched his way he didn't even stand down. *Your teeth are stunted that's even worse!*

Well, the plan *had* been to get Karkat annoyed enough that he forgot to be scared! John decided to pretend that stunning and witty comeback about the horns had been a deliberate part of said plan all along. *Wow*, he sent over with a healthy helping of amusement on top, *you must be the first person ever to take issue with my teeth for being too small that's a novelty.*

*Not the size dumbfuck the rounded edges. No teeth no claws you're dull all over no pointy bits at all the rest of the biosphere must be made of marshmallow how the fuck does a species like yours even survive otherwise.*

*Mostly by being the nastiest-minded vindictive assholes out here,* John admitted, and then Rose stealth-kicked his ankle. *"Ow!"*

"Oh, sorry, John!" she lied. The messenger icon was flashing angrily at him in the corner of his lenses, and had been for a little bit now.

RS: Would you mind telling me why he's growling?
RS: John?
RS: John!
JH: I may have insulted his horns to distract him from being nervous. It totally worked!
RS: By making everyone else tense. I know your conversations must be fascinating but situational awareness is a good thing to have.
RS: He's sensitive about his horns, I take it?

John snickered, sneaked Karkat a look. His lips were still clearly down-turned. *Pff pouting.*

*(stop being so desperate about the flirting damn it will you go through the whole grid what's next throwing Dave at me and then getting in the middle) Shut your face before I shut it with my fist.*

John manfully refrained from retorting anything too loudly about empty threats or Karkat being currently handcuffed so he'd like to see him try. He wasn't very good at controlling his thoughts, sadly enough, but Karkat only huffed and turned his head pointedly away. (The guard on that side went all twitchy because it looked kind of like Karkat was staring at him through the blindfold; Mr. Strider scoffed under his breath.)

JH: The more it goes on the more I think it's like making a small feet joke at a guy.
RS: ...
RS: I *see*.
JH: Hehehe.

Rose rolled her eyes at him, and then looked over her shoulder at Noir, who still shadowed Karkat like he couldn't wait to try out the deep fry setting of his taser on his gray ass.

"It might be a good time to mention that preliminary testing has shown the alien to have a positively pigeon-like ability to orient himself, and might now be wondering why this is the third time we are passing the big harlequin."

*(Oh crap, that harlequin. John remembered bursting into tears the first time he'd seen it. And the*
second time too, and the third, and after that he'd learned to go with his eyes closed. There was just something deeply unsettling in its friendly smile and ceiling-to-floor looming frame.

Why that would make Karkat respond -- past the first alarmed *Whatswrong let me see* -- with a sudden burst of, of *affection* John didn't get, but Rose and Noir were still staring at each other and it was a bit distracting.)

"May we get out of this building yet?" Rose was asking with weary patience.

It was probably exactly what she wanted when Noir speared her with a look like he was wondering why his eyes weren't fitted with death lasers yet. "It can *what*. You're saying that *now*? What the fuck is wrong with you, hiding that shit from people who really do fucking well need to know?"

*What's going on? John?* Noir's steps echoed heavier behind Karkat now, his presence-echo more -- *more dense*, in a weird way John didn't have words for. Karkat interpreted it as rising threat level, though; John had to tug on his arm to keep him from speeding up and taking himself farther out of arm's reach, or they might think he was trying to run away.

"I did tell you it would be a pointless exercise. You were not in a receptive frame of mind." An elegant shrug. "It didn't cost us to make the attempt regardless, but we *are* on a schedule here and the clock is ticking."

Noir seemed ready to spit nails. Mr. Strider stuck his hands in his pockets as he turned to him -- *oooh, insulting*, John thought, and could feel Karkat thinking it right alongside him, *all 'eh, I could take you with just my feet*', echoing so close John could only pick up which was whose from the undertones, John's from knowing the man and Karkat's just because it was apparently this blatant, what do you mean most people wouldn't read it that way.

*Assuming you're right and your people are all stupid and blind and trustingsoft then Noir must know him well if he can read him too*, Karkat commented, trying to distract himself from the nearly palpable crackle of tension at his back between the two men. John started to turn to look at him, and then a priority message took up his whole left lens.

BR: Egbert, stop chatting up the alien. Half the guys now think you have imaginary friends.
BR: The other, smarter half have probably figured out the glasses thing, it's not that new as technologies go, but honestly. If someone is observant enough to notice that, it's a fair bet they might also notice that it's not Rose you're chatting with. Guy's body language is as controlled and opaque as yours, for fuck's sake, he telegraphs like he's in a western.

Whoops. Um.

"There, there," Mr. Strider was drawling in real time, multitasking telling John off and pissing off Noir like a pro, "nothing to worry about. But Medical just doesn't cut it for a romantic walk, you know? B plus for effort, though."

"I am going to stab you in the kidneys, Strider," Noir hissed really quietly (but Karkat's ears were really good and even if he didn't understand the sounds John did so hey.) "And then I'm going to step on your face and *stab you again*.

"Aw, hon, that's so sweet," Mr. Strider drawled, at normal volume. A couple of guards choked quietly. "Exit's that way."

Biting his lip to keep from laughing, John tugged Karkat's arm and guided him in the right direction; the guards glanced back to Noir, and, with his curt nod, preceded them out.
Thankfully there was no courtyard between that building and the next, only an alley. Noir made them stop before the door, sending two men forward to "clear out the idiot civilians who likely thought 'off-limits for the duration' meant 'unless you've got that super important doodad to pick up real quick'."

They shed another handful of men to guard the staircase as they ascended and a few sent off to whatever key points the man had noticed, which was -- huh, quite a few more than John himself had noticed. John might really dislike him but the asshole was good at his job.

He would have thought Karkat would be interested to keep aware of where all the threats were, even if he had no intention to escape, but with each step up he took the alien's thoughts thrummed stronger and stronger with strobe flashes of anticipation-worry-guilt-worry, with the biomech flashing between its black and white versions, wanttofeelsafe shieldme warring with sofuckingsorry shouldneverhave and needtofix needtohelp.

He'd beg, if Rose decided to make him, he'd beg to be allowed to betray his people's secrets, and the shame was sickening but that didn't make it any less true.

*Don't be stupid, she won't*, John tried to send him, but even though he wasn't actively blocking him out Karkat was turned so far inwards he didn't pay any attention.

They were guided to a room off to the side, sort of narrow but long; the opposite wall from the door was all windows, lined with tables and computers and notes and observation machines and stuff John either didn't know or didn't get enough time to identify at a glance. There were three people in white coats massed at the end of the room, behind four of Noir's men, weapons out.

Karkat didn't give a shit about any of that; he'd turned to face the windows, arm quivering under John's hand.

Noir and Mr. Strider traded sides, choreographed-smooth, so Noir could stand between Karkat and the civilians and Mr. Strider could take Karkat's other arm. Karkat gave a faint twitch, but didn't fight, didn't even ask John what, why. His chin was up and the muscles of his jaw rolling, but there was no thought to be had, only a thrum of alertness, expectation.

Rose turned on her heel from where she'd been exchanging polite nods with the head scientist, took the three of them in. "Khrkat?"

"... Yes." *Whatever you want.*

John didn't even have to translate. "Hm," she said, and then, a little more gently, "I'll take the blindfold off. Stay still."

"From behind, Lalonde," Noir reminded her, gruff but low.

"Of course," she said through a little accepting sigh, and stepped around to get at the knot from behind. "I'm fairly sure he doesn't have rabies, but... Ah, there we go."

She went back around, rolling the blindfold in her hand. Karkat blinked the fuzziness out of his vision, irises going painful-tight under the harsh ceiling lamps. John lost track of the faint echolocation feedback.

"Come with me."

There were only a few steps left to the window, maybe four or five. Karkat ignored everything else.
The hangar underneath contained a borderline Olympic-sized pool. The biomech floated there in some sort of tarpaulin that kept it from getting wet. Two of its upper limbs were in traction, like the hugest broken arms ever; the left grasper-arm was -- no surprise -- still missing, nothing but a nice big papered-over gap in the shell to show where it used to emerge under the pincer-arm's armpit. Vivid red cracks and dulled pinks ran through the chest plate, horns on that triceratops-crown at the back of its head and on its shoulders were chipped. It was broken and utterly still, chained down every three steps, people running with contemptuous familiarity right up its raptor leg, and watching its massive chest suddenly expand to take a single breath still made John jump.

Sheer spinal reflex had his finger twitching on an imaginary trigger, wishing for his blaster, wishing for Warhammer's controls under his hands, Warhammer's weapons. *This is the enemy*, he knew-felt-thought, all his years of battle experience yelled, *this is--*

(--dad.)

... What?

Karkat's face was a mask, jaw tense, brows barely furrowed, eyes heavy-lidded in something that looked almost like boredom. Weary but resolute, it projected. Behind that... behind that, things buzzed and rustled and screamed, too far away to pinpoint, to unwrap rage from pain.

*Is it a... memento from your dad?* John asked cautiously, trying his best to keep his own revulsion at bay. Karkat didn't answer, eyes roaming over his nightmare of a mech, tracking every break, every chip in hardened chitin.

"Why is it in a pool?" Mr. Strider asked, tilting his head so he could look at the scientists over Karkat and John's heads.

One of the doctors -- a big black man in a white coat and bright aqua turtleneck -- took a step forward, quickly checked by the guards. He gave them a mildly annoyed look but didn't try it again. "The organs might be made to resist short bursts of acceleration, but we have no idea how well they'd stand up to long stays under normal gravity. We're setting up an antigrav room, but the size of the field is a problem." A little shrug. "In the meantime, water helps. You could ask him if it's necessary."

"We certainly could."

The doctor furrowed his eyebrows. "You can communicate with him, right?"

Rose hesitated. Noir slanted her a look, and rolled his eyes. "Let's cut to the chase. I do know people in Interrogation, I can guess what the fashion statement is about. Stop playing coy. If there's a tech leak it won't be from my fucking people."

... Well um.

Mr. Strider sighed. "Well. Too many people from too many branches know anyway, it was a matter of time."

"We can," Rose capitulated. "Doctor King, was it? I suppose you have a list?" The man nodded; another of the doctors hurried to get a clipboard from a table at the back of the room and they started whispering to each other. Rose turned to Karkat; John elbowed him to get him to pay attention. He turned from the window reluctantly, stared at her in a way that seemed weirdly grim, like subdued hostility. "Khrrkat. You may interact with these people. Verbally. Don't try to approach. John, ask him about the gravity issue, please."
"Uh, sure." They want to know, is the gravity going to hurt it long-term? Organ failure and stuff I guess.

No. Karkat paused, frowned a little. Not standing up. Lying down might bruise his organs some (it's not how they're kept in dock.) Probably not for a while longer. Our gravity's higher.

John relayed. One of the doctors took notes.

"Alright. Now the most urgent item is the breaks in the shell -- we've had to stave off several infections so far, though really not as much as there should have been with so much exposed raw flesh. But we did have to trim the leftover stump on the secondary left arm before the infection could reach the main arteries."

Karkat hid a flinch at that one. (Shit.) He turned to look at the doctor, who didn't move and met his eyes with calm determination, but one of the other two flinched back a bit, going vaguely green, and shifted so he'd be more fully behind one of Noir's people. Karkat didn't spare him a thought. John ask him, is the shoulder joint ball still intact? (won't grow back otherwise shit shit shit.)

"Wow. He's asking if the ball part of the joint is still intact, because apparently it could grow back if it still is?"

Only with proper nutrients and appropriate medical attention (damn it what do I know about that shit do I look like a sweaty douchebag mechdoctor why didn't I listen to his stupid tirades more I am such a useless waste of space.) An image briefly flashed through, a big guy with a broken horn, the feel of him -- his appearance, his person -- all wrapped up in blue.

"Huh. We did notice the regeneration ability, but for a whole limb to -- ah." The big man gave Karkat a sober look. "I'm sorry, the skeleton was infected."

Karkat closed his eyes, breathed in, and swore under his breath, something that didn't really translate to John but had a lot of snake-hisses running through it at the very edge of his ability to hear; it made the hair on John's forearms stand up.

"Hey, uh... At least it's alive, right? Still alive. I mean it's not great but...? Why that would make Karkat flinch, he didn't know. Shut up, whatever. Tell them the most important is to fix the cracks in the chest and back plates. He'll suffocate otherwise.

John then spent several minutes trying to explain what Karkat was visualizing, and then explaining back to Karkat what turtles were and why the same thing happened to them because having air under the shell would make their lungs collapse and apparently that wasn't quite the same issue but close enough for government work, and did he think the usual treatment for turtles would work.

"... Listen, guys, can we just sit down at a table and maybe have some paper and pens? I swear he's not gonna stab anyone with it. I can't figure out how to explain half of what he thinks up."

Noir frowned. "Hm. How about he thinks it, you draw it. Don't tell me you can't hold a pencil steady, not with your hand-eye coordination scores."

Noir knew his scores. Creeeepy. "Hm. Karkat, that works for you?"

Expressionless. "Yes."

"And I'll be helping hold him."
Karkat hissed softly, staring at Noir for a second, before breaking eye contact. *Whatever. (go ahead grab me, free sample day at the feel up an alien shop--)*

"I dunno," John said hesitantly, mostly to be a dick, "You're really not as strong."

Noir leveled a heavy-lidded look at him and pointedly twirled his taser by the trigger guard in a little loop. Gnrgh.

"Hrsst." *Thanks John if his finger slips while it's anywhere near me I am stuffing that thing up your ass I swear to the eternal gods in between the star-void. (that's if I still have a brain left it didn't dribble all out yeah more likely.)*

"Okay, okay. Jesus."

"Keep your hold," Noir instructed as he made his way behind the three of them.

Mr. Strider tracked him, but didn't say anything, so John made himself not say anything either, not even when the first thing he did when he got in range was to press the mouth of his taser right up against the base of Karkat's skull. It nestled there amongst the shorter bristles of his hair, nudging pointedly. John reminded himself that if he cracked his tooth enamel again clenching his jaw too hard the dentist would bitch him out even harder than last time.

"Fun thing about point blank range," Noir mused under his breath, "I can deliver shocks pretty much continuously until the battery runs out."

"Will you stop being such a huge asswipe," John growled back, "he's not going anywhere, he wants us to fix his mech, he's not gonna mess it up."

"Go give your pretty little guarantees to the guys he put in the hospital," Noir snarled back with sudden, shocking sincerity, "oh wait, Fernandez would have to come out of his fucking coma first."

--oh.

"Now shut the fuck up and move to the side -- don't let go." He wound his arm with Karkat's, going under his elbow from the outside and then twisting up to press his hand behind Karkat's shoulder blade, so he could just twist a bit and keep him off balance or even force him down on the ground with relative ease. "There. Let go."

Reluctantly, John did. *Mr. Strider will protect you*, he sent Karkat, but the alien only replied with a weary thought-ripple that didn't convey much apart from how sick and tired he was of just about everything.

John made his way to the nearest table and accepted a notebook and pens that one of the doctors had slid him along the table. He sat with a sigh and started drawing the cross-section schematics of the shell Karkat was visualizing for him. Doctor King eventually made his way to him, flanked by two of the guards. Huh, John could have sat down closer to him; he just wasn't sure how far before the signal between him and Karkat decayed too much to convey everything properly, and the room was really kind of long. He smiled in apology, pulled out a chair for him.

"Okay, so we need an air-tight patch, is the first thing, and the cracks aren't big and he doesn't need to breathe a lot, but you'll still have to aspirate the air under the shell out first before you do anything. Second, the shell will grow back, but it's gonna take a little while. They have organic supports that get kinda absorbed as things grow back through them, the way we do with bone repairs, but Karkat's not sure of the composition or how they make them or anything, so it's gonna have to be the low-tech option."
He kept sketching. The patches had to be kept way clear of the broken edges of the shell, or it'd scar and stop growing back, kind of arch a bit over, the way a bridge couldn't stand right on the edge of the riverbank or it would eventually crumble into the water...

"Hm. Yes, pretty much what they do for turtles," said the other doctor, the woman one, as she joined the two of them and leaned in. The last guy was still back there, waffling around hesitantly behind his guards. "We'll need to call a vet for suggestions on the best techniques, it'll have to be adapted for size--"

"Yes, and tested for allergic reactions as well, though the outer shell shouldn't give us trouble as it's designed to let nothing in or out regardless..."

They devolved into medico-technical babble about appropriate glues that John only vaguely understood. He listened for a minute, then cleared his throat. "Karkat wanted to ask about fuel. Uh, food? Same thing. He, huh, wow, medical terms. Okay, I didn't get that." Karkat sent him a feeling like a longsuffering sigh, and the taste of sugar suddenly flooded his mouth. "Guh. Sugar. Pure sugar. He'll have, uh... vitamin issues later on? Some kind of deficiency. But so far he mostly needs sugar."

The woman doctor's brow furrowed. "How do you administer, with the shell...? Saline drips wouldn't work. Does it eat on its own?"

John shuddered. Scary thought. Karkat scoffed at him. **Wimp.**

"Feeding tube will work." **Thank God.**

**Wimpy wimp.**

John would have been much more reassured if Karkat was saying so because it was impossible; but the undertone was clear that he was saying it because it was unlikely. Yeah, no, he was going to keep being freaked out, thanks.

"What type of sugar?"

"I really don't know, I'm sorry. Urgh, and Karkat says the mech feeding on his own is unlikely, but..." He grimaced a bit, ruffled the hair at the back of his head nervously. Those mandibles, oh lord. All the lab techs running all over the mech. They now reminded him of mice thinking the cat was dead when it was really just taking a nice refreshing nap. "Just the fact that it's possible at all means you guys should probably know."

The doctors traded glances. "Now that's unexpected," Doctor King said, an eyebrow arched. "Are you sure?"

"Uh." John checked with Karkat. "Yep. Sometimes they have reflexive actions, I guess. Like, even without their pilot."

"Hm. Well, the mech's brain impulses are pretty much even stranger than the alien's himself, so it shouldn't be too surprising."

"... But it's surprising anyway." John tilted his head. "Why?"

"Well." The woman doctor considered her answer for a second, and then she shrugged. "The only nerve impulses we were able to find seemed linked to autonomic functions such as breathing and passive organ function. We were starting to think it was brain dead."
Yeah, pretty much, Karkat commented, all dry and casual except not, not at all. John suddenly felt nauseous.

But you said he was alive! You wanted to know if he was still alive --

He is. Still breathing isn't he?

That doesn't mean alive! You can keep a corpse breathing forever with the right equipment!

"Mister Egbert? Is there something wrong?"

John looked at the doctors, mouth open and unable to figure out what to say. (I know I know fuck you I know he's as good as) quietly ran nonstop in the background, wound up in a ribbon of grief-loss-self-hatred-grief.

"He. Uh." He closed his mouth. Opened it again. "It's. Normal? I mean. Karkat already knew? But how, I mean, he said he was alive--"

(dad dad daddaddad.) it's how mechs work stupid there can't be two brains in one body, there can't, that's all there's left instincts and basic bullshit and maybe some memories. (wrappedaround sillychild tinypunyminetooredinside hidethechildhideit) just some stupid memories floating around with no fucking context they don't even last long wisps on the wind and then all gone (all gone, dad notyetplease no--)

"John," Rose said, voice all gentle, and John didn't get why until she touched his face and he realized it was wet. Oh. "Are you okay?"

"... Yeah. Yeah."

"Is Karkat okay?"

He didn't even need to check. "No."

All the way across the room Karkat snarled, fangs bared. Fuck you shut up shut your fucking word trap! His eyes were dry, John wasn't sure how because inside he still felt like howling. Just tell them, I bargained for this won't break the fucking deal now!

"No, you shut up!" John snapped back, one hand wiping furiously at his face. "You -- how -- we can take a break if you--"

"No!"

Karkat took a step forward that managed to drag the two adults with him. Noir's face tightened, narrow eyes gone to slits, shoulders tensing. Mr. Strider threw Noir a sharp quelling glance, leaned in, whispered something in Karkat's ear. John didn't have enough access to overhear, not that Karkat seemed to understand the words anyway. The tone was clear. Calm down already, shush, it's fine, it's all fine, breathe.

Karkat breathed. Mr. Strider rested his free hand on top of his head, gave him a little shake, a pat. "There. Good. Egbert, report."

"... It's -- it's how biomechs work, there can't be two active brains, so they." It hurt in his throat, too tight. "So they kill it. The mech, I mean. The forebrain. Bam, it's more convenient like that."

"And since when do you give a flying shit," Noir rasped out, "with the length of your kill list."
John stared at him for a few long seconds, wordless. "It's. It's his dad, he wanted to say, but that didn't make any sense. "He -- knew it? Him. Before he was a mech. He loved him."

Rose's brow furrowed. "Karkat loved the mech, or the mech loved Karkat?"

"... Both?"

"How are biomechs made, then?"

John couldn't help wondering as well, and for a second or two it was just a question, and after that he knew. He knew with all the horrible immediacy of seeing it happen, screeching, worried dadmonster in white, not that big really maybe twice as himself, dragged away by, by black things full of spikes and a huge vat come this way soldier better view over there. Gurgling things in there gushing out from spigots and tubes and things, splattering him(dad), oh no it won't drown look it's starting.

Tissues dissolving and being reshaped, from dad-white to space-black and in between there was this ... mushy soup of flesh and exoskeleton and exposed raw nerves, and of course it feels everything from start to finish if it didn't that would mean conversion failed haha but what does it matter they're not people just beasts sure they're useful early on but by this point it has outlived all other sorts of usefulness anyway. It'll be done soon enough. Another three days.

He could smell it, acrid chemicals and raw meat, clogging his nose, sliding down his throat. He bolted from his chair, grabbed the nearest trash can. Oh hey, there was his breakfast. Hi there, morning bacon. Shit. Shit, fuck, hell, he was crying again, Karkat was making him into a real fountain, that had to stop already.

"Aw, man." He took in a shuddery breath. Rose was holding out a couple of Kleenex. He wiped his mouth, blew his nose. "Crap, that's horrible."

Karkat's eyes were almost closed, his face turned away toward the glass. John wasn't sure if he could see his -- his -- the biomech from there, but he looked so...

"That was quite the violent reaction."

John blew his nose again, accepted a bottle of water from Doctor King to rinse his mouth. How the hell did he put that into words?

"It's not that it's gross, Dave showed me worse, it's -- they threw his -- his... companion animal? Protector? Creature? They threw it in a vat with some other shit, like nutrients and -- genetic reconstruction stuff? And just let it all dissolve together, and then it made kind of like a cocoon, I don't know, it's gross, but that's not it -- it was, they didn't care it was in pain, they didn't care Karkat loved it, I mean they didn't even bother with painkillers or anything and it was all, all raw nerves floating in this puddle of fleshy bits and they pretty much killed it, only it kept breathing afterwards."

He couldn't convey the emotional impact, couldn't explain -- "dad" couldn't be the right word, but that was what it kept coming up as; even when he tried his best not to reword what Karkat sent, the feeling was the same, the associations -- his father's tobacco scent and a callused hand on his shoulder, showing him how to hold a spatula, how to make a fist -- feeling safe and shielded and like this was his place, where he belonged.

... John. Take your headband off.

What?

Take it off because I can't take mine off and get the fuck over it. I can't take your fucking thoughts
right now, just can't, can't keep you out stop it stop judging (stop feeling sorry stop thinking about it--)

Shut up yourself. When we're out of here I'm gonna hug you until your lungs come out and you can't stop me. But he pulled the headband off anyway.

"John?"

"Just need a breather." He drifted back to the window, looked down at the black mech sprawled out there, shell dull in a way that absorbed all light, gave nothing back. When he squinted, the restraints seemed draped over a patch of outer space.

He remembered it white, and only two or three times as high as himself, and wrapping its big pincers around him to bring him closer to an armored chest, curling over so it could skree a threat at some random enemy with delusions of ever getting to the boy underneath.

"... So," he said, less for the doctors than in an attempt to push the emotions back down, "that telepathic goop in the cockpit is pretty much pureed beast forebrain. Nothing but floating neurons and neurotransmitters and stuff."

"We did manage to figure out that much," Doctor King said, voice oddly gentle, as he came up to stand beside him.

"Haha. I'm never going to feel clean again!" John proclaimed brightly. "Just saying."

"Heh. A pause. "Do you have a theory as to how the pilot communicates with the mech?"

"Horns?" John suggested. "They're kinda telepathy receivers. Though I don't have any and I could still communicate, even with Jade. I guess there's probably some kind of telepathy radiation in the goop that's at least long enough to get through the skull. ... Ick."

"Slap some ten-syllable words on it and that's our current working theory."

"I don't think Karkat knows much more, I mean, most people don't know exactly how their eyeballs change light into images, they just know they do."

The doctor must have had questions to ask, a ton of them, but he didn't push John, just let him look his fill and waited.

Eventually John nodded, flicked him a little apologetic smile, and drifted back to Karkat and his guards, who were still holding him tight. His shoulders had to hurt by now, and his hands. John lifted up the headset in his hand, make a questioning noise.

"Yes, yes." Karkat grumbled under his breath, rolled blood-red eyes at him, all 'oh god John why so ridiculous'. John grinned back, plopped it back on.

Hey there.

... hey. Long time no see it's been at least five whole minutes wow.

Like you didn't miss me like crazy. Admit it it was like a wound on your soul!

Oh yeah of course my very own brain alien it's like your own personal intestinal parasite companion the day's just not complete without a good bout of enthusiastic splattery diarrhea.

"Pff. Stupid."
Karkat's eyes narrowed. "No, you."

John stared, widening his eyes and letting his mouth fall open in a perfect O of surprise. "... Was that... your first complete sort-of-sentence? My baby is all grown up! He's like... a toddler now! D'aww." And then he ruffled Karkat's bangs, because hah, so there.

Karkat gave a grumpy, halfhearted growl of a word. Mr. Strider snorted quietly. "If you two are done flirting... Not that I care but I'm kind of at point blank range there."

John didn't know who started blushing first, him or Karkat, but his cheeks were blotchy pink and Karkat's a dusky red in very short order. They both turned to stare at Strider, start identical "What no we weren't!" tirades; Karkat's was in his alien language of snarls and whistles, of course, but the meaning was pretty clear.

"Uh huh. Yeah. I'm buying it. Blowing my whole fortune on stocks, man I'm gonna be rich."

"Bluh bluh you sound like Dave, stop it."

"Oh no, not Dave," Mr. Strider deadpanned, "that's horrible, my life is over."

"How 'bout you cut the bullshit and go back to that schedule you assholes kept yammering about?" Noir said. "I'm this close to puncturing my own fucking eardrums here."

Mr. Strider's Southern drawl went from casual to molasses. "Aw, snookums, are we boring you."


Maybe they should stop flirting too holy shit I am not alright with being trapped in the middle here!

"Gurgh." What the heck were with those visuals. "Karkat. Karkat no. Just no." John made an anguished face to convey exactly how many worlds of no. How many universes. Oh god putting that thought in my head I will never sleep again so wrong so wrong. the wrongest.

And now Rose was laughing. Great, just great. John gave up.

Like hell you do. Okay this is so fucking awkward if they allowed me to get away from all that eyefucking buzzing past right behind my horns I'd go drown myself in the toilet I swear to fuck. Quick find them a distraction go back on track science stuff I'll even answer free unsciency questions. He was only half-joking, too. It was a good suggestion, though!

Holding you to that, John threw back, and then clapped his hands together. "Okay! Doctor King. Doctor, uh, what's your name, ma'am?"

She laughed quietly, wrinkles crinkling. "It's Zheng."

"Alright! Karkat and I are fully ready to answer your most boring, most detailed questions. Even if most of them will get answers that amount to pretty much 'I don't have the first clue!' I hope that's okay."

He went back to his chair and his papers; the questions started back up. Karkat had relaxed somewhat, maybe helped by how Noir and Mr. Strider had decided that they were tired of standing there and had turned him around so they could prop their asses on the table, which meant now he couldn't see outside anymore. He stood there with his eyes half-closed, thoughts all professional and weirdly calm. Though from time to time amidst the diagrams and the sensory information on things like the texture of some necessary sealant for the broken spike-tips, there would be a pinch of
emotion. John tried his best to pretend he didn't notice them, but they both knew it came clear through, and Karkat found it quietly mortifying.

There were some things that stubbornly refused to translate. Quantities, especially, or cellular or molecular structure. It didn't matter how clearly Karkat could conceptualize them, it just wasn't John’s thing and kept returning big blank beep! format incompatible, data unreadable! at him. He used to like biology when he was younger and could afford to follow normal school stuff, but what did he need it, he was a mech pilot! Now he was really regretting cutting it out of his schedule. Though really the issue was probably that Karkat's people didn't visualize their molecular graphs the same way.

"Argh. I wish you guys had asked Jade instead, she's all over the place, it's like she sees the word science and it's good enough for her to grab, I'm sure she'd have gotten it." He sighed. "I'm sorry, it just won't come through. Anyone else wanna try it?" *Karkat, do you mind?*

... *did you just seriously ask me if you could dump someone else in my brain to rummage for answers? Is that really a thing you did? Oh god yes please mindrape me more, go get a third headset for a nice relaxing gangbang maybe?*

He sounded more weary than scared or angry, but John winced anyway. **Ack, sorry didn't think. Not even if we told them it's a conversation okay not an interrogation you do not get to push like a pushy thing?**

(like a John you mean?) Oh fuck it why the hell not, you're so frustratingly dense sometimes. (brain like that breakfast disk, bounce things off it all day long and at the end it's still hehe what with a grin on its entirely untouched face.)

*Haha, I'm gonna tell Jane you're dissing her pancakes. She works so hard at making the faces pretty.*

*Why so it's more satisfying to bite their eyes off? huh I can see that it sure would work for me.*

Alas, no pancakes for the alien, not while they still weren't sure what he could eat without getting sick.

John chuckled. "Karkat's okay with it," he said, pretty much at the same time as Rose said, "I'm sorry, no."

"What, why?" He stared at her, baffled. "But there's all that stuff I just don't get, Rose, it doesn't even make it through!"

"Then it'll have to wait until he has a better command of English. John..."

Okay -- okay, what was that expression about. Embarrassed? Sad. Somewhere in between. He kept staring at her for a few seconds, baffled, and then turned to Mr. Strider, to see if he'd have an explanation to that blaring subtext he was having trouble reading. The man had gone unreadable all over, but then that was his default state.

Noir had one eyebrow up, like something very interesting had just happened. He whistled between his teeth, stared at John with an expression half-vindicated and half-irritated somehow.

"What?" John growled.

"Well, hell, you are compromised. Here people were telling me it was just your bleeding-heart case of stupid and my paranoia."
"Noir," Mr. Strider snapped, but not like he thought John had been insulted. More like...

More like Dirk had when Jake let it slip to Jade about that surprise party, kind of. Irritated, weary, but... What the heck?

He glanced at Karkat, eyebrows furrowed, thoughts sparking across faster than he could have ever worded them. *What'd I say that sounded compromised? (what? what? saying i'm what? stupidtricked/infoleak? betrayeroflovedones? planetkiller? so ridiculous not even funny--*)

"Strider, headset."

Just like that Karkat was gone from his head, no more vague buzz of awareness, no more faint traces of sensory echo, his answer never coalescing past a sudden burst of unease.

Mr. Strider was holding the headset, face still unreadable. No words forthcoming. John turned, stared at Rose. She didn't look back at him. She was staring at Noir instead, her eyes narrowed into slits.

"Rose, what--"

"Not now, John. Doctor King, Doctor Zheng, Doctor Millebert, thank you for your forbearance. We'll schedule a second meeting at a later date."

John would have bought her politeness more if she'd even *looked* at the doctors, but no, still glaring death at Noir. She twitched her chin toward the door; the man gave a fake-obedient, sarcastic little nod, and directed his men to fan out, that they were leaving. John opened his mouth and closed it a couple of times. What? Whaaat?

"We're leaving, John. Come along."

He sputtered. Karkat was being herded out by Noir and Mr. Strider; the unnerved look he sneaked John under his bangs jarred him back into movement and he caught up at a quick jog, snaking past one of Noir's men so he'd be next through the door. "Since when are you my mom?!"

The corridor was wide enough that he could pass the trio of men and prisoner without bumping into anyone. He was tempted to bump into Mr. Strider anyway, that asshole, but while the man might have gone into robot-mode that didn't mean he wouldn't take revenge for that one later. It was so confusing keeping track of the limits between 'you're adults, decide this on your own, I'm your trainer, not your boss, and this is not my jurisdiction' and 'respect your elders, punk, I knew you when you were in diapers and I can still spank you if you sass me.' John knew their collective parents wanted the eight of them to think independently and make their own decisions as a collective unit, not be brainwashed into obedient soldiers who'd never question their superiors, but the transition could be hell. At the moment the balance of power hung clearly on the side of Rose as team leader and Strider as her silent, not-my-place-to-have-opinions right-hand-man.

He caught up to her just as she was shoving the door to the outside open. She was walking *fast*; keeping up borderline forced him to jog, and his legs were longer. "Rose, why are we just barging out of here like what, we weren't even close to done! What's that bullshit about--"

She flinched, flashed him oddly pained lavender eyes. Noir snorted.

"He still hasn't cottoned on. How do you still figure he's not?"

John was getting angrier by the minute, but he was too baffled to know what to do with it, who to aim it at, and Rose turned on her heel first, glared at Noir, opened her mouth, and he was so sure she was going to lay into him, and defend John from that stupid--
"Do give that molehill its time to bask in the rarefied heights of your paranoia. It isn't anywhere near deserving that word bandied about, and you know it."

... Huh. What?

"And may I know what you were hoping to accomplish by starting this conversation right around civilians? But wait, allow me to make a guess, you were hoping to start a rumor about John's incompetence, trying to undermine him--"

"If by undermining you mean not allowing him back into a machine of death that's unmatched on Earth save by seven of his childhood fucking girlfriends until he's deprogrammed then fuck yes."

Rose actually honest to god gritted her teeth. "Oh please, as if Skaianet has no competent shrinks of its own to make actual assessments."

The man curled his upper lip, disdainful, but there was a satisfied smile ghosting at the edge of his mouth that had John clenching his fists until it hurt with the urge to plant them in his face. "Oh, please," Noir mimicked, "like you won't cover for him when push comes to shove."

Rose iced over almost from one second to the next, hot anger replaced with the emptiness of space. "When Earth is at stake? I suggest you rethink that statement, Mr. Noir. I suggest you rethink it very fast."

"Thought you didn't want to have this conversation in public," Strider interrupted, giving a pointed look at the buildings on both sides of the alley.

They weren't talking loudly but there were a couple of open windows in the medical building and who knew who was listening up there, and also what the hell compromised?! What had John done different from yesterday? Was treating Karkat like a human being—uh, a sentient one some proof of upcoming betrayal? If that was all they were basing themselves on then the analysts could go to hell because he wasn't changing a single thing.

Rose turned on her heels and led them up the alley, around the medical building and not through it. John followed, stewing in silence. None of the people present would say anything, but Noir's guards kept stealing glances at him, pretty much the same way they kept watch on Karkat, like no matter how docile he acted like he was dangerous and liable to turn on them at a moment's notice. And that was just...

It hurt. He didn't get along with Noir (hah, nice little bit of understatement there) and he thought his security guards were annoyingly underfoot sometimes and humorless robots all the time but they were all on the side of humanity first, on the side of protect the civilians at all costs, but now he-- but...

(If Rose didn't think Jack Noir was at least a little right she would have set him straight right there in front of the doctors. She wouldn't have said a molehill, implying there was still something.)

(Compromised. What the heck did that even mean?)

(what had Karkat been feeling uneasy about?)

The trip through the courtyard was quiet, apart from the occasional booted foot scuffing packed earth, the random bird call. It was jarring when, reaching the door, Mr. Strider called his name.

Rose unlocked the front door and walked in; John stopped on the front step, reluctant to turn around. "... What?"
"Your turn." He nudged the alien toward him; Karkat stumbled a little bit. Not a lot because Noir was still holding on, and glowering. Strider tilted his head down, like he was giving his hand a pointed look through his glasses. "... Take over first, Princess won't feel safe otherwise."

Karkat was looking up at him, face all tense, almost grim. Didn't try to communicate, though, no expression, no attempt to speak.

Probably wondering why they didn't keep walking, if they were going to try to keep him before he passed back into pilot territory. (Was he wondering if John would let that happen after all?)

John stepped back down, stepped around him, made a show of catching both arms over the elbows. He didn't speak to Noir, just threw him as cold a look as he could.

Noir arched an eyebrow, doubtful or maybe unimpressed or probably both. "What's your problem, Egbert, you're the only one allowed to manhandle your boyfriend? Hasn't got a bruise on it."

"Stop calling him it," John said, or maybe he was rasping it, it was too quiet for a growl, and it would be so easy to just free Karkat and turn and --

Strider's hand landed on his shoulder, heavy. He shoved. John bumped into Karkat's back, who was pushed forward and tripped on the front step with a startled hsst! noise. "Hey!" John protested, but when he turned to look Strider wasn't looking at him, his head was turned to look at Noir head on, and his gloved hand tapped a tense, anticipatory little rhythm against his thigh.

"You go on ahead, kid. Got things to liaise about with my government counterpart."

... Well. John still would rather kick Noir's ass himself, but apparently Mr. Strider planned on taking care of that.

With an irritated little sniff, John turned away and nudged Karkat farther in, so the door could woosh closed behind him. Rose was waiting at the bottom of the stairs, but that was all the acknowledgement she gave. She wasn't looking at John and Karkat and the second they were walking toward her she started climbing. John gritted his teeth.

"... Zhann?" Karkat whispered to him over his shoulder.

John realized he was still marching the other boy up the stairs like a convict and let go all at once. "Crap, sorry."

Karkat didn't look satisfied. He turned a little more as he climbed the stairs, frowning at him in between a furtive, confused look back at the entrance and one at Rose. "Zhann -- what?"

Hah. John didn't know where to start. He didn't even want to start. He stared ahead, up into the stairwell, watching Rose's legs disappear on the landing, put his hand in the middle of Karkat's back and pushed.

Karkat didn't try to speak with him again, all tense under his hand, shoulders hunched. John tried to feel bad, but he was too angry.

They walked in the common room and the door closed and locked behind them. Jade was at the table, having dinner, though she'd stopped with her fork halfway to her mouth to eyeball them. John frowned; he'd rather have been alone for that coming discussion, or at least keep to the other end of the room, but Rose was over there already, dumping the folder on the other end of the table and going to rummage through a cupboard.
She threw something silvery on the table; it slid along until John could catch it. Keys. He turned to Karkat, made a little twirling motion. Karkat obeyed without a word. John unlocked his wrists. He threw the handcuffs back across the table, for Rose to pick up.

They stared at each other.

"Um -- guys?"

"Please don't get involved, Jade," Rose ordered in her oh so calm, classier than thou voice that got John's hackles up.

"Yeah, don't say a thing or she might yank your clearance too!"

Rose's eyelids twitched minutely. John glowered at her, chin lifted in challenge. Karkat stood two steps to the side, rubbing his wrists and looking from one to the other and looking all awkward and uneasy, but John didn't have any time to spare to tell him where to sit or that he could goddamn well sit wherever he wanted to sit, or even not sit at all, that'd be fine too.

"John," she said around an irritated sigh, "you're overreacting. I don't think you're--"

"Yes you do, at least some, or else you'd have set him straight! You pretty much agreed with him, it was just the wording you didn't like."

"If you'll just calm down and be rational--"

"I'm plenty calm, okay!" He turned to Jade, incredulous, frustrated. "Jade, can you believe she agrees with Noir on this?! That asshole says I'm compromised, and she agrees!"

Jade went "um" and dove into her glass of water, like she actually needed all her concentration for it. John stared, breathless.

Jade... agreed too. They'd been talking about it, and Jade agreed. Who else? Was everyone -- did everyone agree?

And no one had told him? Hah. Heh. Of course not, of course they wouldn't, if they thought he'd betray them of course they wouldn't warn him that they knew. Haha. Funny. Yeah. Hilarious.

"Why don't you just tell me," he said, voice strangely calm, "what the heck I did that has everyone up in arms, anyway?"

Rose sighed like she found his slowness tiresome. "You offered Doctor King the use of the telepathic headset."

Hrrn. "Yes, and?"

"Doctor King is the head of his department. His mind is full of classified information."

-- oh.

Oh. Right. Alright, that had been dumb of him, wow. But distracted meant compromised now? "Okay, so that slipped my mind --"

"It slipped your mind," Rose repeated, slow and incredulous. "And you don't see why that's worrying at all? No, John, I'm talking." John snapped his mouth shut, face reddening. "In addition to data mining, there's a theory out here, which Noir obviously subscribes to, that the alien can hook people, or in other words addict them. You offered him Doctor King on a platter, that was suspicious
enough. I'm willing to accept that he doesn't feel dangerous to you so you weren't worried he might present a danger for others--"

He couldn't hold it in anymore. "I would know if he was planning anything bad!" he shouted, throwing his hands in the air in sheer frustration. "I'm in his goddamned head!"

"And who told you he couldn't lie mind to mind? Would that perhaps be the very same person who might benefit from lying to you?"

"Oh, don't start it, you have no idea how that feels, how it works, there's no way!"

"No, I don't," she agreed. "That's not even the main thing to me," she said right over him. "It's just that it's not the only thing that keeps slipping your mind."

He bristled. "Go ahead, call me an idiot!"

Rose took in a big, slow breath, look how patient I am when you're acting like such a child. "I am not saying you are dumb, John, I am saying you operate on instinct, and while that makes you a very versatile fighter and a great field leader, it does not help when your instincts have apparently gotten stuck on Karkat Good, People Mean to Karkat Bad!" Another breath; her face did that weird thing where it didn't relax so much as slowly ooze back into an expressionless marble mask. "He eviscerated guards. You winced for a grand total of approximately two minutes and then immediately returned to treating him like those claws were decoration. He clawed through your cockpit that one time and you almost died asphyxiated. You are not holding a grudge. He--"

John slammed his hand on the table, which groaned under the impact. Solid oak, though; it didn't splinter. "It's war!" he howled. How could she not get this?! "He didn't do it like the one who --"

"It's you. You don't hold a grudge about what he did to you, that's fine, it's just like you, but he almost got Jade too and you don't even mind that either."

He sputtered. Was she accusing him of not caring about his cousinsib now? Really?! "I told you it's war, it isn't personal -- tell her, Jade!"

Jade lifted her hands like she was surrendering, palms out, wincing. "Well, uh, I'm not holding a grudge either, I mean, I was trying to kill him right back."

"See? She gets it!"

"Yes, all very nice and logical," Rose started in her measured, calm voice, and John fucking hated it, "and since when are you that rational about any of us? The only person you get more overprotective over is Jane, and this morning unless Jane was waved under your nose you were more concerned for Karkat."

John's fists were clenched so hard it hurt, nails digging little bloody half-moons into his palms. Rose leaned over the table, mirroring him, fists planted, meticulously painted lip curling in a snarl.

"You keep having secret discussions and in-jokes and forgetting he is not your friend. Are you even fucking aware of how long it's been since the last time you cried?"

(He did. Eight months. Jane. Janey-Jane she won't stop screaming dad she won't stop what do we do, what do we do.)

(And now Karkat and his monster-dad mech, his horrific undead memento that he still needed to save even when it had been too late from the start.)
"You are treating him like a puppy you just found abandoned on the side of the road -- he wasn't abandoned, he was on a mission to kill us! You've known him thirteen days and for ten of them he was under lock and key and catatonic, and don't you think that is even slightly suspect?"

He straightened up slowly, slipped his fists off the table. They were shaking. He clenched them harder. "...So then why don't you just, just stop letting him at my brain and lock him up somewhere and lock me up somewhere else and wait until that magical time where you read my brain in a non-hooking way and can somehow tell I'm better. Or maybe never, that'd work too, right?"

"It would work if the goal was to alienate you and make you cling even harder to him as a result because you thought you had no one else," Rose snapped back.

"Yeah well guess what, it's working anyway!"

His chest heaved; he breathed in, tried to regulate his breathing rate. Rose was staring at him with eyes bright and sharp like broken glass, full of edges. (He'd put the break in there, good job, John, good job, he'd put in the wet glimmer too.)

Jade stretched out across the table to punch him in the shoulder. "What the fuck, John?!" She turned to Rose, hands fluttering nervously. "Oh, no, it's okay, we'll just--"

Yeah. Okay. Made things pretty clear there.

"I'm done," he said. He turned away, then thought better of it and turned back to snatch up the headsets from the abandoned folder. "Karkat!" he snapped as he stalked toward the door. "Come with me. I'm still responsible for him, right, it's still a thing that's true right now? Okay, good, later."

The alien didn't move fast enough, so John snatched up his wrist in passing and towed him to the door.

He let him go once they were in the staircase, going up instead of down, stomp and stomp and stomp and he wished he had something to fight, he wished he would be allowed to spar or at least train but Strider would be too busy to spot him and in this state of mind he'd probably break equipment or hurt himself, he wished he could just go running around the island, down to the beach and then back up, go rock-hopping on the cliffs.

He couldn't, not with Karkat in tow, he was locked inside this one single building, it wasn't even that he was grounded in the most literal sense -- god he missed flying, missed the sky, the weightless immensity of space -- but he felt like just as much of a prisoner, jailer and jaiilee, and apparently he wasn't even entirely off.

The roof terrace was empty, only a few plastic benches and tables pushed in the corners, garden stuff, gone dark with rain. He turned his back on the medical wing, the other barracks and hangars and whatever else that had grown like poisonous mushrooms ever since they started fighting that war. The other side of the building... used to be the forest almost reached the walls -- oh the adventures to be had in there -- only they'd cleared that right up to the slope, put in garages and asphalt, a landing strip.

If he sat down at the bench, leaned his back against the table, allowed the waist-high wall to block the view, it was nothing but lush tropical leaves going up and up and up the hill, and the volcano caldera rising all in naked rock from there, and if his eyes kept going up it was nothing but blue and more blue and only a few wisps of floating white.

"Zhann."
John closed his eyes. Karkat was standing at his side, a couple of steps back, out of immediate arm's reach, and he didn't want to deal with him right now. He didn't want to deal with anyone.

Not much of a choice. He sighed, patted the bench at his side. "C'mon, sit with me."

Karkat frowned at him, but sat, straddling the bench to face him. He pointed at the headsets that John was still holding, chin set in challenge. John sighed and handed him one, went about putting on the second.

He didn't try to send anything, just sat there, trying not to think. Karkat's mind prodded at his, more to see if he'd move than trying to get in.

*It's fine go ahead. (I don't even care by this point look at whatever you want.)*

He closed his eyes, shifted lower into his seat, let his head flop back. Karkat shared a burst of nerves-tinged image, two seconds of video with feelings, John limp and giving-up and throat bared stop it wrong.

*So stop looking. I don't even care right now what are you going to do, bite me?*

Irritated growl. *Kick you in the face if you keep woeisme."

"Heh." He waited a second. *Okay, get on with it.*

Karkat grumbled under his breath, but... oh, he could feel him tiptoe through his mind, not literally but in the way random thoughts and memories would resurface for half a second, when his own train of thought hadn't been going that way, when they didn't belong to the same chain, in the way he would get echoes back of his own memories tinged with someone else's emotions, opinions.

It was... it didn't hurt. Probably Karkat wasn't forcing it.

*You're a clumsy big-footed jackass is why, daintily trampling across my delicate brainmeats with your spikiest army boots. But it wasn't even that irritated, maybe reflexive grumping, maybe rueful.*

*(Compromised, whispered his mind, and it sounded like Noir and like Rose and like Doctor King suddenly horrified and Jade drawing away, all his friends drawing away because he wasn't safe anymore, because apparently he'd chosen a side without even knowing there were sides to be chosen at all.)*

*She's right you know.*

"--What?"

*It's not normal not right caring so fast so much. She's right. They're right.*

John could only stare in blank disbelief, and couldn't manage to feel a single thing. *You hooked me?*

Karkat growled under his breath and kicked his ankle, halfhearted. *Not on purpose stupid. I'm not a psychic you're not a psychic not meant to meet this way surprise sometimes shit happens.*

... but, what? what? I don't, what?

*One psychic two psychics they control how far they go sift what they get (net across a river only want fish not river mud urgh not tinityuseless fish either.) Not sifting means bam everything at once like it was yours and it's not yours, feels like it is but not yours, mine but you won't keep out (goddamn it John) and then you like me so it hurts. (why I don't get that) (no fuck I do emperor of*
pitiful wrecks is me yay all I ever wanted to be when I grew up a disaster area)

I still don't get a single fucking thing you're trying to explain what do you mean how?

Karkat heaved a big sigh, crossed his arms. Embarrassment and shame trickled through. Tele-empathic band, does what?

... let thoughts and feelings come through?

Let thoughts and feelings be thought and felt by other people stupid dumb idiot moron.

Ow, ow, okay I'm an idiot it is me, idiot king, emperor even. So I feel what you're feeling and then what, think I'm you?

Ow! Kicked again, and this time not halfheartedly. John drew his foot up, propped his heel on the edge of his seat, and rubbed it, glowering sulkily.

Sympathy with people happens when you know what they go through and instead of going that guy is a whining whiner who whines I want to silence him with my fists give him something to cry about you think oh no that's horrible let me cradle you fight for you pet your hair shh there there. A pointed, angry look. Karkat's cheeks were flushed a dark wine-red. What you did. (platonic how??!) John spluttered. I told you wasn't interested like that why can't sympathy be platonic damn it!

Karkat gave him a grudging bit of acquiescence, but it was tainted with doubt. It came laced with (not the topic at hand at the moment let's not get sidetracked no romance discussion), and John also happened to want to drop the topic (seriously what kind of fucked up culture was it when it was almost unheard of to save and help people just because, that it had to mean he wanted to get in their pants?), so in the end they had the mental equivalent of a mutual "hmph" and buried it, retreating to their respective skulls for a little bit.

So ... He was just feeling what he was feeling about Karkat because of the connection, then? No, that wasn't true, he'd have liked Karkat anyway, he was grumpy but smart and funny and he cared so much about everything, it was insane, how could you dislike a guy like that?

Pretty easily if you see only the grumpy asshole bits. ... I'm not saying you wouldn't have liked me without, only it came too fast too hard and now it's like you've known me years and years, and you haven't. Silence, for a second, his presence retreating like a wave from the sand, only to come back smaller and quieter and sadder somehow. And also you're basing your opinion on stuff I would never have showed you willingly.

"... Ah."

So basically he was getting his compassion jollies as a result of forced mental contact that he might just as well come out and call mind rape. Nice going, John. Just... fucking nice going.

And in the news tonight King Stupid mayor of Stupidtown is going for the martyr crown as well is nothing safe from his universal lustydevotion?

John couldn't keep himself from laughing, a quick, startled bark of a laugh. Uh what? So many undertones in there, gone right over his head, he could feel them zip past, but the image of Karkat commenting mike in hand it evoked, yeah, that worked.

Connection takes two people it's not one way and you're not trained it's like getting angry at a toddler for running with something and tripping bam broken big surprise there.
You're not trained either! Not a telepath yourself can't even defend yourself without can you?

Yeah but I know some tricks (helps when they're douchebags, those don't like pain I got a ton to share) and also some of it is my fault I should have remembered it could happen tried harder.

... Aw, damn it, why'd he have to think that stuff about having a ton of pain to share. The worst was that John could tell it wasn't even a conscious decision to mention it, it had just burst through because he honestly believed it. And now John was lingering on that and it embarrassed Karkat, made his fingers twitch with thoughts of taking off the helmet because it sounded like he was looking pitiful on purpose. Alright, change of topic.

Remembered it could happen how?

Karkat grimaced, blushed again. Well it's not common or anything you have to have at least one pilot (for mech access duh) and one dumbass who gets in their cockpit with them (tight fit but no one would mind would they no karkat no stop thinking about that oh hell) -- Surprise the telepathic fluid is usually restricted!

... uh do people who sneak into cockpit usually. Like. Have sex in them?

What no! Disgusting holy fuck spooge all through the fluid how do you filter that out, breathing it in urgh urgh urgh!

John straight up giggled. "Pfff. You're a prude, aren't you."

Shut up stupid pervert dumb.

Yes sir.

... no they... mindmeld, nicesafeclose if you're already nicesafeclose with them then you can be more, understand all straight through down to the marrow of them, make or break the two of you but... oh hell just come and look.

Karkat's mind drew him in. John let his eyes close, because it was threatening to smother the images -- hazy docking bay, indistinct mechs -- it wasn't photography, John just knew they were mechs because Karkat knew, because he was aware of their steady, watchful presence even when he didn't look their way -- and a tiny, tiny girl bouncing down a gangway and grinning at him so bright (annoyance/affection, reluctant but real anyway he would fight for her if she needed him to.) She had short curly flyaway hair and her horns were easily the most solidly visualized thing about her, shaped like a cat's ears, and today she was also smug. As. Fuck.

'should try it Karkat so awesome feel soclose like nestled in lovenine's soul all warmpurrysafe!'

Karkat, shocked at their flagrant kinkiness, had replied something like, 'I like my soul standing lonely and bitter in the cold wind of get the fuck away from me,' but inside he thought of that other boy who he lovmissed torn away long gorgeous antelope horns such a useless wreck without Karkat they (assholes in charge) would never let them meet again, and he wished he could have felt him that way even once, and the double echo made John's eyes prickle.

Shit sorry didn't mean showing the underlayer too. Just her and her kinky naughty funtime pride.

It's okay. He hesitated for a second, not sure he really wanted to know. But it was important to Karkat, part of his life, and it'd be ... it would be bad to pretend that part of him didn't exist. ...What's his name?
Karkat propped a heel on the bench so he could hug his knee to his chest. He did it casually enough, but John felt that need to hold and be held underneath. It wasn't for him, so he pretended he didn't.

"G'mzee."

"... Heh, that's a funny name."

*He's a funny guy. Been missing him for months and years though. (not that much farther out of reach just because I got stupidcapturedcaught, never would have seen him again anyway.)*

... Why?

John could feel the wall come up, once again, and then Karkat snorted, bitter, and let it go all at once, all the old exhausted rage of it and the hopelessness. *He's highclass I'm not, golddigging whore sullying him how 'bout a nice frontier post can't pollute him from there, he'll move on you'll die no one's fault! Couldn't refuse a posting after all not disgustingwrong gutter trash like you he'll have nothing to get angry about. A sigh. Stop ouching inside John it was a miracle already they didn't just put me down. Waste of a pilot I guess.*

John shook his head slowly. *Your life is so completely shitty, buddy, I don't even get how you can walk out without being hit by a meteorite.*

Karkat snorted, glanced up at the blue sky. *Could still happen.*

"Heh." ... now I feel stupid for being so down (hurt) because they don't trust me (because it feels like they're saying you or them and I don't know if I can choose, you told me it's the telepathy made it that way but I don't want to choose I don't want to have to choose why can't I have both (why don't they trust me.))

... Shit. Even Jade. Maybe even Jane, and she hadn't said anything, none of them -- oh, yes they *had*, Dirk had tried, in the shower, but John hadn't been listening, of course not, what did he need to listen to any warnings. And then he'd snarled at Rose and stormed off like a dick with a lifelong love affair with dramatic exits -- only whoops, turned out he was the one who was wrong and he'd just proved it to them.

*Life sucks, John concluded. I want to be back in space. Flying so free, so free, I miss that. It just feels right, you know?*

He got nothing but a buzz of depressed agreement, echoes of weightlessness, stolen moments of fun, of freedom.

You always had to land back down, though.

At the same time, with no conscious agreement, they pulled off their headsets, set them in their laps, and reclined against the table together, watching the empty sky.

Chapter End Notes

So basically when I was writing this fic Burt and Noir kept clashing. And then at some point I was daydreaming, I mean plotting out srs plot-things, and one of the alternate scenes I was thinking about was another Jack Noir intrusion in the kids sanctuary. Only this time Bro Strider was there and then they have a totally sweet Knives VS Swords
fight full of badassitude and sexy slashed clothes and artful blood splatters.

And Karkat reads it as completely caliginous, of course.

And all the kids are like "what NOOOOO ahaha oh god YOU CRAZY ALIEN you so silly XD XD XD"

BUT, as my brain gently informed me, **FOR ONCE KARKAT WAS TOTALLY RIGHT**.

and then i was like "HNG SO HOT WHY" and well, from there on it was my headcanon that Jack and Bro were hate-banging in the background.

And then this happened: **The One Where Bro And Noir Hatefuck**.
Yes, it's pretty much as the title says. 9__9

And one AMAZING fan-fanfic by Horchata: **Battlefield Mentis** => it's this chapter during the trip through the hospital wing, Karkat's POV. It's not considered canon for my own fic (also she wrote it before she saw the end of the chapter, so IDK if everything would jive with my fic) but it's GORGEOUS anyway. Go forth and read and commentlove it!
In the last week John had started collecting objects he could afford to see brutally destroyed. Not for Karkat's weirdo nest, but to throw over the foot of his bed and wake him up when he was in the middle of a nightmare, before morning-zombie Dave decided to stumble out of bed and wake the alien up his own special way. They did not have enough towels on the whole island to sponge up that much blood.

(John had made the mistake of lobbing his own pillow exactly once. Jake and Dirk were still finding bits and pieces of memory foam in their sheets four days later.)

He heard things rustling brutally, saw a black mop of hair come up fast over the footboard. He waited a few seconds, squinting through his eyelashes, caught a glimpse of huge red eyes, irises blown wide enough to eclipse the yellow for barely a second before they started shrinking back. Okay; still shaken but awake enough. John flopped back on his mattress, face down, arms buried underneath his replacement pillow. (It really wasn't as good as the old one. It smelled musty.)

He wasn't going to fall back asleep, not with the alien gasping not-silently-enough for breath at the foot of his bed. But he wasn't getting up either; Dave would be up soon. John didn't want to cross paths in the bathroom. The heights of awkward reached by brushing teeth at neighboring sinks while not acknowledging each other in any way were reaching unreal altitudes -- like they should be breaching the stratosphere already, but nope, still just enough oxygen to choke on.

A faint beep started, kept going for a minute, annoyingly regular even while muffled to the point John could barely hear it. Wasn't like there was anything else to listen to.

Dave eventually sighed and dragged himself over the guardrail, dropped to the floor. Stood there in silence for a handful of seconds. John kept his breathing regular and his face buried in his pillow. Nope, totally asleep.

Bare feet padded almost silently past his bed, cloth rustled its way out of a cupboard, the door opened and closed quietly. John kept pretending to be asleep, eyes stubbornly closed. Maybe if he pretended long enough it'd become true.

He could feel Karkat's own state of wakefulness without even looking, with something that went deeper than the five senses. It was just that kind of feeling where everyone in a room was still and quiet and it was too dark to check at a glance but somehow you could just tell they were staring at the ceiling too. Maybe breathing patterns, who the heck knew.

Too many thoughts. That was annoying. He was bored...!

Something landed on his head with a soft plop. "--Hey!"
Damn it, now he couldn't pretend to be asleep anymore. He pulled the worn-thin sole of an ancient tennis shoe off his head (it was now recently torn almost in two and the cloth top was missing a few chunks) and craned his head to glower half-heartedly at Karkat. The alien was sitting in his corner pretending to be interested in whatever random crap there was to see in the opposite corner at the foot of Dirk and Dave's bunk, though John caught him sneaking a quick glance his way. Grumbling, John crawled out of the blankets to sit on the edge of his mattress.

"I'm up, I'm up, princess, you can look, I'm not rubbing my nubile body all over a carnal platform of delights anymore."

Karkat likely didn't catch more than three words in the sentence, but what he muttered under his breath sounded sort of like "stupid." Someone had to tell Jade off about teaching an impressionable young man bad words.

Karkat threw a longer side look at John, eyebrows furrowed -- it was that oh-so-common pinched Karkatian expression that looked like he was calculating the precise amount of headbutts it was going to take to knock some bothersome wall down and how much it was going to hurt and how much it needed to be done anyway, and that was oddly hilarious. So serious.

"Hmm?" John prompted, elbows on his thighs, rounding his back to crack his spine back into place. "What do you want?"

"Nrrr." A sigh.

Karkat pulled himself up on his feet, wandered out of his corner, though he still carefully avoided looking at John straight on. It was weird, some times he was totally in John's face and glaring and demanding things, and some times he was doing that weird careful 'let's not acknowledge each other too much because you might idk frown at me or something' shy dance.

"Bathroom."

... Dave would still be there. Crap. "Can it wait?" John asked, sighing, and stretched his calves, bent over to grab his ankles until he felt the burn in his thighs, the back of his knees. He felt all creaky without his usual level of exercise. (Seriously, people were always surprised at what kind of shape you had to be in to pilot something that pulled so many Gs and demanded so much dexterity for several hours in a row.) He flopped backward on his bed, arms landing limply akimbo on the bunched-up blankets. "I don't want to get up yet."

A soft annoyed huff, silence. When he cracked an eye open Karkat was frowning down at him, hands on his hips. The old t-shirt he was wearing fit his strong shoulders fine but the ends hung low on his thighs, it looked too big anyway. Short torso. (Short legs too, heh. Okay, no, John was just tall.) John only saw the very edge of the shorts Karkat slept in.

"Zhann?"

He picked up his pillow and pressed it to his face. "Aw, nooo, don't wanna."

A quick, incredulous huff. "Zhann."

"Noooooo."

"Zhann bathroom come with me."

"Nope."
The next tirade, John translated in his head as 'I will piss on everything you own so help me John Egbert and it will be your fault.' He reluctantly peeked out from under the pillow and glowered, knowing full well that he looked childish and sulky and still going ahead with it.

Karkat looked incredulous and yet unsurprised for about three seconds, hands opening like he was considering grabbing him by the ankles and yanking him off his bed and it’d be nothing that wasn't well-deserved when he made a rough butt-landing -- and then the alien sighed, shoulders slumping imperceptibly. Victory! Now John could stay in and... brood into his mattress. Yay.

While the guy he was supposed to babysit died of an exploded bladder.

"I am the worst pet owner, it is me," he mumbled, smothered in blankets, and pushed himself up with a heavy sigh.

When he straightened up, one hand scratching through his hair, he caught a quick glimpse of Karkat. He was standing all hunched and grabbing one elbow with his opposite hand, forearm across the stomach, like maybe if he only did it on one side he'd look less like he was hugging himself. Fuck.

He saw John looking and jerked into a more neutral position. For less than a second John wanted to reach out and touch his shoulder and say he was sorry and also an assbutt and of course they could go.

He reminded himself he only wanted to pet and soothe Karkat so much because of the telepathy thing, anyway, and just went to the cupboard and got two changes of clothes.

When they reached the bathroom, the sinks and toilet stalls were empty of Dave -- good, some reprieve -- and the shower running. John started brushing his teeth as Karkat disappeared into a stall, bracing himself for the brief awkward of his teammate brushing by on his way to the door without saying a word. Surely the guy would be done soon.

Karkat came out, washed his hands, and turned to him, head tilted in question. There was a little worried furrow between his eyebrows; he glanced at the shower room and then back at John pointedly, mouth pursing a little. Of course he'd picked up on the tension, days ago even. It was so thick it choked everything.

John just as pointedly ignored him to stare at his own reflection; he was shaving, okay, he needed to pay attention. Alright, so he had nothing much to shave yet at his age, especially not that needed shaving every day, but still.

When he was done shaving Dave was still in the shower, and he was out of excuses. Damn it.

Okay. Okay. It wasn't like they were going to argue or anything. They didn't have much to say to each other. It'd just be... um.

Okay, no, fuck that noise. None of the girls were around! John went to his locker, same as always, and got undressed and towel'd, same as always, and when Karkat started toward the shower room he caught his wrist and started towing him toward the other door.

"Anhg--"

"Shh!" John hissed, leaning in, one finger across his own lips. "Come with me. Quietly."

He was totally not being a wuss -- and a totally transparent one at that -- and he was sure Dave wouldn't figure it out and laugh forever about it. Nooo, totes wouldn't. Did John care?! No. He tiptoed back around the lockers to stay out of sight of the boys' showers, one hand on the towel tied
around his waist and one around Karkat's wrist. Karkat followed in silence, but the look on his face could have been subtitled 'I Am Embarrassed To Even Be On The Same Planet As You.' John grimaced at him and slipped into the forbidden territory of the girls' shower room.

The setup was mirrored, with an identical bench running along the wall opposite the showers, only because they'd never gone through a phase of climbing everything (John, Jake, Dave) and breaking the hell out of it by horsing around (John, Jake) and braining themselves on the floor tiles falling off (John) the girls still got to have stalls. Karkat blinked at them, gave his wrist a pointed little shake -- oops, John was still holding on; he let go -- and went to peek inside one.

"Zhann?"

"Yeah?" John prompted -- quietly -- as he got himself some shampoo (Jade's this time; his luxurious mane was going to be so disentangled, baby) and chose another stall at random down the row.

"Here wash no why?"

Okay, that had come out confusing. Karkat had a crazy-good memory for words, even though he couldn't pronounce most of them quite right and paused in weird places as he hunted for the next piece of vocabulary, but the grammar tended to be a mangled mess. "Hm?" John prompted again.

Karkat grumbled at him, pointed toward the other shower room, then down at this one's floor, eyebrows scrunched in somewhat offended confusion.

"Girls' room, is why."

A vaguely baffled blink. Couldn't he ask questions and expand his knowledge when John wasn't trying to get a shower? Ah, whatever, it was fun some days. John pointed toward the wall standing between them and the other room, said, "John, Jake, Dirk, Dave, Bro," and then down at the floor of this one, "Jane, Jade, Rose, Roxy."

Still that baffled look.

John cupped sizeable, if sadly invisible boobs on his own bare chest, pointed down at the floor of the room, making a face. "Come on, what's the common point there?"

"... Zhann stupid dumb."

And he was still frowning at John, lips pursed, dissatisfied. Hn. "No, you," John replied, and disappeared in his stall.

Karkat muttered to himself in growlclicks and little huffs of breath as he locked himself away in his own. "Stupid dumb stupid bad no," he grumbled, barely audible over the noise of John's shower starting.

"No, Karkat is the one who's stupid stupid dumb," John replied intelligently, and started lathering himself up.

Scrub, scrub, scrub.

He had to admit it was much easier to concentrate on washing when he didn't have to make really sure he didn't accidentally show Karkat his dangly bits again, without looking like that was what he was doing. Because being embarrassed by an awkward situation was already bad enough, but being openly embarrassed was even more embarrassing.
(Also that way he couldn't get caught precisely at the wrong moment where his eyes strayed blindly over shit he wasn't even really looking at, seriously, that wasn't awkward at all.)

He had almost started to think he'd gambled and won when someone walked in.

"Heya! Janey, izzat you?"

Shit. Um.

John turned the shower spray down a bit. "Urr. No? Sorry." He paused, hesitating to say more. "I ... thought all you girls were out or asleep or something."

Roxy didn't answer him; John's stomach sank a little. He busied himself propping a foot on the wall so he could wash down to his ankle and between his toes. Man, balancing on one foot sure demanded concentration!

God he missed talking to his friends.

Even if merely thinking about it made him a little sick to his stomach with the apologizing he had yet to do, and how much of an asshole move it would be to just start chatting again like nothing had happened and forego the apology entirely. He knew they'd probably go along with it, too.

"Uh, if you wanted to shower quick... we won't come out until you're done. Or you could wait a few minutes, we'll hurry up."

Wow, look at that, maybe he ought to trim his toenails.

Still no answer.

Maybe she'd left already and he just hadn't heard her move. Girl was stealthy as a ghost.

-- Or maybe she'd just jumped to catch the top of his stall and peer in. "Holy shit Roxy!"

There she was, elbows comfortably hooked over the top of the stall door, blocking his way out with the weight of her body and leaving him just about nowhere to hide. He backed into the spray without thinking, and blinked furiously to clear his eyes of the water suddenly streaming across his face, hands welded to his crotch and suds everywhere.

"Nah," she said with a bright white grin, "you can take your time."

"Are you -- wh -- Roxy!"

She played with one of her curls absently, tugging and releasing it, still gazing down at him like he was a, a vaguely interesting TV series or who knew what the heck else, all thoughtful and lips pursed and absolutely not looking away. "Yuuup? Tha'ss my name, cowboy, don't wear it out."

John growled, cheeks heating up. "Cowboy what?! I'm gonna cowboy you right off the --" Okay, no, threats were not a good thing to do right now, not even playful ones. He breathed out, tried looking pitiful instead. "Okay no, but what the heck, seriously, will you get off the stupid door?"

Attempt not extremely successful. "... Please?"

"Hmm."

John eyed the towel hanging from the door just under her. Somehow it felt too far away. "Pretty please?"
"Hmmmmm..." She pursed her lips some more. "Nope!" John glowered at her. Roxy gave a little shrug and smiled, close-lipped. "See, actually I wanted to talk to you, and now you can't run away! Score for the amazing Ro-Lal."

"But I could hear you fine through the door! Do you need to look at me while you're talking?"

"Nah, that's just a bonus." She waved it off, airy. "So anyway, you remember when we were like thirteen, fourteen or so?"

John blinked. Okay, where was she going with that. Roxy tended to make confusing swerves in conversations and in piloting both; he knew to be wary either way. "Yes?" he replied cautiously. "Uh, depends what, I mean, if it was about some shoes you had back then..."

"Noo, way more memorable than that. Like, the Great EmoLonde Period of 2049."

... ffff. John regretted that he needed to hide his genitals, because this would have been the ideal time for a lot of 'sorry, was distracted by scrubbing myself clean. What did you say? Nothing interesting, I'm sure. Whoops, look at that, a speck of dust on my abs.'

"I mean not the Goth period, that one's still going on, but the really cringe-worthy floppy-fringed one that didn't suit her at all?"

Gnn. Roxy was still chattering from atop the door, hand waving aimless in the air, eyes roving sightlessly over the stall like she didn't know exactly what she was saying.

"You remember, right? She had on raccoon-levels of makeup and there was that huge T-shirt she dyed black in the sink and it clogged the --"  

"I remember!" John interrupted, and seriously considered turning his back on her, only then he'd be unveiling a lot of tush. And their flight suits might be skintight, but they weren't wedgie-tight and he'd rather Roxy weren't able to measure his butt-crack at a glance thank you very much.

"It really didn't suit her at all, right! Man, everyone was so happy when she, like, graduated to darque and spooky and she had on about three tons of smoky eyeshadow and everyone thought it actually worked better somehow?"

"Where are you even going with this!" John complained. Like he wanted to hear about Rose's fashion sense when he was naked in a shower stall! Or at any other time, actually. Mnrgh.

Roxy stared straight at him, eyebrows scrunching up and lips pursing in a supremely unimpressed, startlingly serious way. "I'm going to where the emo lifestyle didn't suit Rose much when she was thirteen, and it really doesn't suit her that much more now."

John flinched.

"I..."

Roxy tilted her head, gave a mild blink. "Hmm?"

"... Uh. I."

... Damn it. John slumped in his corner, shower controls digging into his side. Blah. He was aware of Roxy staring at him. He couldn't look up to meet her eyes, though. Damn it. Just damn it.

"Oh right! Jade should be back soon, gotta warn her there's naked boys in here!"
"Guh -- that'd be nice?" John blurted out, jarred into looking up. Roxy winked at him.

"She'd be sooo sad she missed it. Not you, I mean, because ew cousincest, but we've got a bet riding on the cuteness of Karkat's butt. Laterbye!"

She dropped out of view, waving her hand, and even let John hear her ringing footsteps on her way out. He was barely done yelling her name in protest that she was already out of the locker room. Argh!

"Karkat! Hurry up go go go!" He turned the cold water back on, rinsed his hair perfunctorily and too bad if some shampoo was left to chill there, his hair was already untamable anyway and he didn't have any meetings with outsiders planned or a helmet to prevent him scratching for hours on end. Towel, quick rub, wrapped around his waist, and he yanked his door open and went to pound at Karkat's door. "Come on, hurry up!"

"What?" Karkat growled from inside.

"Hurry hurry hurry, she will, she totally will, they both will and then you'll be traumatized and it will be my fault for not better guarding the sanctity of your butt. Karkaaat come on!"

"Hrrssst."

That, John had long since learned, was the 'I wish most dearly to bite you in the face, for you have trod upon my last nerve too heartily' noise. It was mostly a noise Karkat did when he wasn't going to go through with it, though.

"Karkat Karkat Karkat come out Karkat Karkaaat Kaaaaaarkat -- ah, finally."

He received a baleful red glare; Karkat shouldered him out of the way as he stepped out of his stall, claws grabbing tight on his towel and hair still dripping. John hurried to catch up and pass him, skidding on the tiles, threw himself at his locker. Karkat's clothes went flying over his shoulder for the guy to catch; John dropped his own towel on the spot as the alien was still swearing, and jumped into his underwear. Quick, quick, pants t-shirt tennis shoes glasses, but were they safe yet?! He turned around, ready to scold Karkat if he wasn't done already.

He wasn't, but almost, squirming his way in his own t-shirt. There were funny rough spots on his waist that John did not remember -- possibly other places too but the T-shirt finished falling into place and he couldn't really ask for a better look, that'd be way too weird. Maybe Karkat just felt itchy and had forgotten to mind the claws. Hm.

"... Zhann."

-- Darn. "Okay! Come on, we're going to the common room." He opened the way before any attempt at a discussion might happen. Seriously it was crazy the number of times Karkat managed to catch him looking at things for perfectly innocent alienpal-caretaking reasons in ways that made them look like not.

Due to his shorter legs Karkat had to walk really fast to keep up with John's pace, but he did, just so he could glower straight at him, brow furrowed deep, looking irritated all over. "Zhann what."

John gave him his brightest, most obtuse grin. "I don't get what you're asking about, buddy!"

Karkat obligingly rephrased. "Stupid dumb, what."

"... Did you just call me stupid dumb. Like, my name is now stupid dumb to you. Is that what you
just did."

Red eyes slowly, deliberately narrowed. "Yes." The tilt of his chin was 'got a problem with that' all over.

It would be really not fair to use one of the insults Karkat didn't know yet. John did feel stuck at about a toddler's level of maturity...

Helped keep him in relatively not-too-bad a mood though. It was just too silly not to. "No, you."

Karkat heaved out a loud sigh and rolled his eyes pointedly, started clicking away to himself. Blahblahblah John is a stupid dumb buttface, thousandth verse, same as the first. Well, at least he was distracted now.

Left John free to deliberately not think about all that shit he was trying not to think about. Like... oh... how his little hissyfit didn't get to keep being "just" a personal problem. He was affecting the morale of the group.

Their parents might let them muddle along for a while trying to sort it out themselves -- they'd always raised them to be independent and work seamlessly as a unit, not to become tools for the government to order around without a word to say in the matter in case Skaialabs failed or was outmaneuvered or when they got old (or assassinated like Nanna had totally not been hehe what are you saying it was a regrettable accident look at this official inquiry saying so) -- but if they didn't manage, it wouldn't be long now before John's dad dropped by for a long wise talk. John was already cringing.

And then if they didn't implement any actual solutions, the adults would.

What if they decided the root of the problem was Karkat, and removed him? Wouldn't that be good, John could go back to flying and fighting and doing what he'd been made for, what he loved, wouldn't it be, no, no, no it wouldn't, it really wouldn't.

This is exactly why they think you're compromised, he reminded himself, breathing through the spike of -- of, no damn it no. Surely, now that Skaialabs had proved they had the political upper hand, they could arrange some joint custody thing where Karkat's cell was big and nice and comfortable and he got to take walks outside and they didn't do any of the tests that hurt (no, no, no, you selfish asshole, no.)

"Zhann?"

"No -- ah. Sorry. What?" He blinked, turned. They were at the staircase, John down one step; Karkat had stopped still in the corridor. He was staring, irritated, horns forward like he planned to headbutt John in the chest.

"... Rhroz."

John breathed out loud and slow through clenched teeth. "God damn it, not you too."

Karkat flung his hands in the air. "Yes come with me Rhroz! Zhann n'rh 'weehh, weeeh.'" He faked a childish whine, turned it back into a snarl. "Dev no, Rokchi no -- hrrghn!"


He turned his back on him, because if he didn't he'd just do stuff that -- Karkat couldn't hit back, couldn't argue back, that made it not fair but he -- damn it, why him too, he'd been in John's head that day, why didn't he get it?!
And now he was growling behind John, low and animal and rising slow, a true threat. John stiffened his shoulders and started down the stairs, just fucking daring him to try.

"Zhann--"

"Just shut up and come on already."

Another low, vibrating growl, ending into a vicious snarl.

If this ended in a fight, the officials -- no, to hell with that, if this ended in a fight then good. "Damn it, Karkat--"

"Zhann!" Karkat yelped. Claws raked the floor, noisy. John jerked around, only to see a big white shape lunging for a Karkat already halfway to the ceiling.

"Whoa -- Bec, no, down!" He jumped up to the landing, tried to snatch the dog's collar, but the big mutt dodged, leapt for Karkat again who was... somehow not coming down.

John elbowed the dog aside as he jumped again; Bec landed easily on his paws, turned on him growling -- the alien's scent on John, but enough of his own seemed to be coming through that Bec didn't attack John as well. After a couple of tries John managed to gather a big fistful of fur at the dog's neck and hauled him farther down the corridor.

Only then did he allow himself to glance over his shoulder.

Karkat had ditched his flip-flops on his way up. It wasn't hard to figure out how he was defying gravity, even without the series of holes in the plaster of the wall, right through to the cement underneath. All twenty of his fingers and toes were still stuck in the ceiling knuckle-deep, and he stared over his shoulder at John and the dog, the red part of his eyes so blown John could barely see any gold.

"Bec, sit! Sit."

Bec, of course, paid him exactly zero attention. There was an alien boy to snarl at!

"Whoa, guys! Bec, heel! John, let him go, it's okay."

Jade sounded so sure of herself that John did, despite himself. Bec snarled again and made to lunge, but Jade snapped a threatening "Bec" that had the dog turning around and making his sullen way to her side. She caught a grip on his collar and hauled him close. John straightened up, nodded. "Uh. Thanks. Hi, sir."

He couldn't help but stare. Hass Harley had been away "on business" ever since John crashed Karkat's monster-mech and Warhammer, by which John was never sure if people meant he truly did have a ton to do at the other end of the globe, or if they meant they were just not going to allow a guy with his level of clearance to even step foot on the same island as a so-called telepathingly-grabby alien.

But he didn't even have any bodyguards with him. (If one didn't count Jade and Bec. John did, but he couldn't imagine anyone not one of them doing it.)

"John, my boy! Long time no see. You might want to tell your guest he can come down before he brings the ceiling down with him."

"--Oh! Right." When he turned around, he saw a fine trail of plaster dust and small chunks sprinkling
gently from spreading cracks in the ceiling. "Karkat? It's okay, come down." He reached a hand up, crooked his fingers. Karkat threw a long suspicious look down the corridor, and a little wincing glance down under him, neck craned. The movement was enough for another crack to form and a hand-sized chunk of plaster to fall on John. He batted it away from his head before it touched him, but... Urk. "Buddy, hurry up!"

With a wince, Karkat yanked his claws free and fell, managing to twist somehow to land in a crouch. He was a little off-balance and stumbled to the side, almost falling on his ass. Graceful! John chuckled and held out a hand to help him up. Karkat growled and batted it away, and almost fell on his ass a second time when he stepped on an unexpected chunk of plaster. Snickering, John offered his hand again, which this time was grabbed with a huffy little mutter.

He hauled Karkat to his feet. His gray forearms and legs were white with dust; his t-shirt wasn't much better; John batted some off Karkat's shoulder and the green slime monster on his chest and then realized he might be alien-feeling him up again considering the weird side-look Karkat was giving him. Um. Dang it, aliens were just too weird!

"Okay. So. Err. Did you want an introduction...?"

Feet planted, General Harley stared at Karkat for a handful of seconds. He looked a little bit like a wall, thought John, trying to see what Karkat saw. In his eighties, peppery hair steadily going white (somehow not falling all off, God and Doc Lalonde willing John would get the no-balding gene from him and not the balding one from Nanna's side that Dad was camouflaging under his hats) but shoulders still strong, back still straight; he was still in shape. The thing that aged him the most was the stupid fat, twirly-ended moustache, which hadn't been in fashion even when the General's grandparents still walked the Earth.

Of course, he was in uniform, even if the collar was undone and most medals absent.

"Be a right pleasure," the General said eventually, and took a jaunty step forward. Karkat's back went rigid, not that he showed it much on his face. John elbowed him lightly, winked to reassure him things were still cool, and snapped a salute.

"General Harley, sir!" he barked out, looking as humorless and drone-like as possible.

"Don't even, you little rascal, if we so much as tried to put you through Basic you would leave the base in shambles and with not a drop of good Army feeling in you."

"Pff." A grin. "Hi, Jade."

"Hi, John," she replied, and then made a grating, snap-clicking noise that had Bec's ear flip back doubtfully. Karkat's lip quirked minutely in what might perhaps in another dimension have become a smile; he replied in kind. John's back teeth vibrated a little.

"Anyway, Karkat, this is General Harley. Call him General. General."

"Dze-neral," Karkat repeated, enunciating cautiously, and bowed his head in salute, eyeing him warily from under his hair.

Jade nodded in approval, and said, "Grandpa, this is Kh'rkth. (Or something almost like that.)"

Bec was still growling quietly. Karkat didn't inch back but John caught him throwing a glance like he was calculating how fast he could dodge behind John if need be. John shifted forward a little to make that easier. "Only we call him Karkat because no one but Jade can say it right and she'll walk away with scars on her vocal chords, mark my words."
The General's eyes brightened, his moustache flipping up and the severe line of his shoulders relaxing just enough that John noticed exactly how militarily perfect his stance had been. "You have been calling him... Car-cat."

Said Karkat was still standing too-straight like he wasn't quite sure whether to go for the full 'inspection' stance, eyebrows twitching minutely every time his name came up. John smiled. "Yup! Vroom vroom meow. Only we camouflage that with Ks because it's just too silly otherwise."

The moustache flipped a little farther up.

"And Bec drove him up the wall into the ceiling..."

"... Yeees?"

"So... would you say that he was a ... ceiling kat?"

John blinked. Jade tilted her head. "Um. Grandpa?"

"Hehehe. Never you mind this old fogey, kids." He patted Bec's head, eyes still crinkled up as he looked the alien up and down. "Well! I do believe you were on your way down to breakfast?"

"Yessir. Are you... uh. Coming with?"

"Hm. You know what, I do believe I will. For a little while, at least. Too much paperwork to indulge, alas."

Alright, John was a little surprised. He'd really assumed alien plus high command--

"Karkat, give me your hand," Jade said. She was holding out her hand, fingers wriggling. "Hand."

Karkat gave her a wary look, and a warier one at the dog she was holding with her other hand. Bec stared back, black lips curling half an inch up along glistening ivory fangs. "... Stupid no."


Karkat muttered something under his breath that sounded like Karkat sitstay hssst, but reached out, reluctantly. Bec started growling.

Jade thwapped him on the nose. "No! Bad dog."

"Pff. Let me help." John pressed his palms to Karkat's shoulder, rubbed up and down, grinning when that got him a baffled look as Karkat stumbled sideways. He offered his hands for Bec to sniff. More growling, but as it slowly shifted from threat to grumpiness he moved his hands a little closer, trusting that he wouldn't get bitten anymore. "Good dog. Karkat?"

He heaved a sigh, but not as huge a one as John had expected. Sneaking a wary little side glance at the General, he reluctantly moved closer, allowing Jade to grab his hand and bring it in range. "Bec, stay. Stay. There, good boy. Nice. I know he smells weird and it's really funny to tree him but you can't bite him, okay." Her lips quirked impishly. "He's not actually a cat."

John snickered. He wasn't sure if Karkat got the words or just the tone, but he glowered sullenly anyway.

"Hand my. Tug, tug. Not actually hard enough to free himself, though that wouldn't have been too difficult. "Giiv."
"Give back," Jade corrected patiently, as John was still trying to translate. "Give back my hand."

Karkat pursed his lips, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. "Giiv back myhand. Zheyd."

"Okay!" she replied brightly, and let go. "We'll teach you please and thank you later, that can wait a bit."

John snorted. "Hehe, good luck actually making him use those."

"Would you say he is a rude young man, then?" the General asked, looking interested and not annoyed at all about the wait. When he started for the stairs John fell into step with him automatically, abandoning Karkat to Jade and Bec.

"Uh, not like hostile, rude, but more like he hasn't got much patience with simpering and beating around the bush, I guess. He's really frank. Not mean, just, he'll tell it like he sees it."

The General hmmmmed thoughtfully, clasping his hands behind his back and looking over at Karkat again and John paused, wondering whether to say more. These were things he knew because of the telepathy; no one else had ever heard Karkat speak, when he wasn't constrained by all of the twenty words of vocabulary he had to his name at the moment. It felt weird sharing those. Yep, he was the expert in Karkat. Because of the telepathy, being in each other's mind and heart, sharing memories and feelings like they were becoming one person at the edges, and then having to verbally dissect that for intel.

He thought Harley would find it funny, though.

"But he swears like a whole ship's worth of sailors! It's almost more funny than offensive. No, actually it's pretty hilarious. I don't think he ever really uses the same combination of curses twice."

The old man's eyes crinkled. "Hoho, I see."

They reached the common room. John wandered toward the kitchen corner to get some food, remembering to ask if anyone wanted coffee or what. Karkat trailed after him, picking things up that John piled on the counter and bringing them to the table. They'd fallen into that routine in the last week, there was no need to ask or mime anymore. Though it was funny how he was going around the table to the General's side rather than brave Jade -- and, more importantly, Bec. Heh.

"Does he eat toast, now?"

Huh, guess he'd read the initial reports, then. "He eats everything. The Doc was telling us not to try feeding him stuff that wasn't like pure sugar or pure protein with zero additives of any kind!, but like we can pay attention all the time! Turns out he really takes this omnivorous thing seriously."

"He still needs more protein and less vegetables than we do," Jade added, accepting a coffee cup with a smile. "Thank you, Karkat. And I think he mostly eats toast to have something to nibble on, but at least it's not making him sick yet."

From the way Karkat eyed them in turn under his fringe looking displeased, it was visible he could tell they were talking about him. "Food," John told him, pointing at the alien's chest and then at the things he'd dumped on the table during his last trip. "Food that makes Karkat go bluaurgh is bad."

Karkat rolled his eyes at the gargle, but more discreetly than he would have if the General weren't there. He turned to eye the chairs, a little worried frown on his face. Either he sat in front of the General, and beside Bec, or right beside the General. Dilemma!
"On the whole I am less likely to take a bite out of your calf, young man," Harley said, eyes glinting in amusement, and patted the table at his side.

It was a little like a dare, that look, like he wanted to see what Karkat would do. When Karkat glanced at John, John shrugged to indicate the choice was up to him; Karkat went, back stiff, not saying anything. Bah, he'd figure out Jade's grandpa wasn't going to order him flayed or anything eventually. John dragged a box of cereals in reach and sat.

Munch, munch.

"So," he ventured eventually. "Why are you here, really?"

"Hm?" the General hummed back, looking up from his cup of coffee.

"I am so not going to believe you if you say you had a day off and why not."

The old man chuffed out a laugh. "Pierced by the keen blade of your sense of observation! I shan't, then." A quick glance at Karkat, who was staring down into his plate and prodding away at his bacon with a great deal of concentration. "I'm assessing the situation."

John made a doubtful face, glanced at Jade who was sighing and rolling her eyes. "Urr... By yourself. Alone."

"Here I was under the impression you children were with me!"

"Yes, Grandpa, we are, and we could have written you a report," Jade replied, and let out a loud, pointed sigh.

"Bah. Reports are boring! I read forty reports a day and sign twice as many, they're coming out of my ears and there is no escape, it is worse than a double case of dandruff and the clap."

John choked on a mouthful of toast crumbs trying to go down the wrong way.

"I'd think the clap wouldn't be that boring, actually," Jade said. John choked a little again.

"Well, getting it, perhaps, but dealing with it afterwards..." A blink, moustache shifting as the man pursed his lips underneath. "But a young lady should never go out without her protective gear regardless!" the General finished, furrowing his eyebrows forbiddingly.

Jade nodded politely. "Of course not, Grandpa."

John was pretty sure they were in league to break his brain. It was working. He tapped his own chest with a closed fist, coughing and laughing. "You guys are horrible."

Karkat was sneaking them little side glances in between attempts to murder his bacon politely. Bit hard to do when he wasn't using either knife or fork, which he'd been doing just fine (well, mostly fine) only yesterday. John gave him a curious look, eyebrows arched, pointed at the unused utensils he'd apparently sneakily moved to the middle of the table. Karkat frowned at him, uneasy, and gave the General a pointed look, which the man caught with a little curious "hmm?" that had Karkat's head bowing back over his plate damn quick.

Jade leaned in on her elbows, tilting her head, made the screech-click noises that John thought were Karkat's name followed by an alien "what."

Karkat muttered back, sullen, something which didn't seem to come through to Jade much, because
she still looked puzzled.

"Knife, Karkat." She pointed. "Knife. Yes?"

"... Nnh." Karkat bit the inside of his lip, oddly tense. "No."

John quirked his eyebrows, looked at the old man, shrugged. "Ookay, and today, showing at the Weird Alien Stuff theater..."

"So usually he ... ah." The old man stared at Karkat for another few seconds, and then calmly reached for the utensils, picking them up by the middle to hand them to Karkat handle first. "No, it is quite all right, lad, this is barely more than a butter knife."

Blink, blink. Karkat took them from his hand, once again being really obvious in how much he was not pointing his claws anywhere close to General Harley's wrist. John suspected that for people who were never unarmed unless they were literally de-armed it was just a way to be polite.

Or, uh, maybe just a way to avoid being counterattacked against when they hadn't been attacking in the first place.

Karkat busied himself with his fork and knife, ears gone ruddy at the tips in embarrassment. John kind of regretted that he wasn't close enough to ruffle his hair and nudge an elbow in his ribs.

"Man, I didn't even think of it. See, you should have come with real bodyguards."

"And had they taken his eating utensils from him, I would have been most displeased." The General gave a sharp snap of his fingers. "Jade, table rule number seven."

She rolled her eyes and sing-songed it, but she was smiling even as she did. "We do not eat with our fingers, unless we are in the field and being bombarded and have used all the cutlery to line tiger traps already. Rule seven, codicil A, a deliciousness-based exception shall be made for breaded products such as sandwiches, buttered toast and pizza."

"Pfft hehehe."

It was so nice to be able to relax with family. He'd missed that so much. Just being a kid and joking around and he almost, almost decided it was a day he could call Hass Harley Grandpa too, because he was, okay?

In the end he didn't, because Karkat was there with his little gold-tipped horns and his slate gray skin and his mouth full of fangs.

"But really... That's maybe a little too trusting?" He fiddled with his toast before shoving it whole in his mouth. Chomp, chomp, not at all a technique to pretend he wasn't embarrassed by the topic and trying to delay it, damn Rose for pointing it out to him so often he was pointing it out to himself now. "And I'm the one saying that, Dave would cry over how ironic it is, so you guys know it's true."

Jade and her grandpa exchanged a long look.

"I mean, I can think of it, so I bet you and your advisors could too. Like, what if he's biding his time, and whoops a guy who looks important, I could take him hostage! But you're just... sitting next to him. And handing him pointy stuff, even."

"Umm... John," Jade said around a wince. "You know, that stint in Black Ops that definitely never happened?"
"Uh?"

"Well, it really did not happen,' if you see what I mean." She even did the finger quotes.

"Huh."

The General's hazel eyes were clear as they gazed at John, but cool, a little distant. "I've never taught you children anything because I am, alas, getting on in years, and Mr. Strider was more than up to the task, and most of my tricks are, sad to say, more suited to assassination than to frontline combat, which did not seem to be extremely relevant. Should your esteemed guest decide to attack me there is an even chance he would be dead before he hit the ground."

John stared at him, briefly at a loss.

It always felt like tearing a metaphorical piece of his brain (his heart) when he had to see both My Buddy Karkat Who I Promised I'd Protect, and My Family. Because... family.

"Yeah, and he could also not be, and you could be. You can't just -- he's quick, okay? Not Roxy-quick but more than human-quick. And he doesn't even need a knife, and he's sitting beside you and we're on the other side of the table and--"

"And you didn't think of it beforehand and it's bothering you."

"... Mnh."

"I do read some reports, John," Grandpa Hass assured him in a softer, gentler voice, one that wasn't military or bombastic at all. One that held none of the distance it had only a minute ago, like... John wasn't sure. (Like My Grandson John instead of The Warhammer Pilot.) "But if it'll help we'll go over it now."

John speared and chewed on a piece of bacon that had the misfortune of being at the edge of Jade's plate and thus in stealing range. He wasn't moved at all, for the record.

Hass smiled, eyes crinkling. "There's a point, you know, at which you've milked all the data dry and you have to put your theories to the test in order to move forward!"

Move forward... toward what? The way he'd stared at John had been a little insistent, like he meant some specific thing, but John was alas not a mind reader yet. Where was a telepathic headset when you wanted one. "Pff. You're just saying that because you're bored at the office."

General Harley grinned. "You say that like it can't be both. So! How is the cohabitation going? Cabin fever set in yet?"

"Oh god yes. I mean, we've got a daily routine now but I really hope Mr. Strider can set something up for the gym, I can feel myself getting rustier by the second. Also it would help keep Karkat calm if he could get some exercise! The most we ever get is to, like, go up to the roof and walk around. We don't run because then the government snipers on the next buildings over would think he's chasing me or we're trying to jump or whatever. Also his world's a little higher gravity-wise, he's gonna lose all his muscle tone soon."

The General hummed thoughtfully. "Would he be willing to spar? That'd provide interesting data, so even with the risk it should be easy to push that through. Ah, second question, do you believe him willing and able to stop sparring before any real injuries occur?"

John gave Karkat a pointed look. Karkat who still held his fork and knife gingerly, like he wanted to
be able to drop them in a second just in case that looked vaguely threatening. (He was also glowering at John, probably still knowing full well they were talking about him and by now frustrated to hell and back about it.) "Um, yeah. He's still persuaded that if anything happened to me he'd land back in deep crap. Actually it'll probably be a bit difficult to talk him into sparring with me in the first place."

"And if anything happened to someone else?"

"Hm. We did tell him he couldn't hurt people, and even if we hadn't ... I don't think it's his thing anyway, outside of battles I mean, he doesn't feel like he's physically aggressive or anything, usually, but that's just a feeling I get." John shrugged. "So long as he understands it's just play-fighting and he isn't fighting for his life it should be cool. He's probably frustrated enough that he wouldn't even mind letting us watch his fighting style at this point. I'll ask?"

"Hrrm, hrrm." The Moustache apparently needed stroking. "Any aggression issues?"

Wow, it really felt more and more like he was just going through a checklist now, like he was just making stuff extra-clear that he understood fine already. John frowned, trying to give the question the thought it deserved even so. He wanted to say no straight away, but maybe he should think about it more so he would look at least vaguely impartial...

"Well, he argues. And you gotta be careful when he's asleep because he still has nightmares and he'd probably savage you before he's even awake -- but it's not like he means to have them..."

"Is it still daily?" Jade asked, eyebrows furrowed in worry.

"Yeah." John sighed, eyed the alien. "He seems to get over them pretty fast, though, and he doesn't look exhausted or slow or anything, so possibly he's still getting enough sleep. Just, not a morning person."

"Dirk said it didn't take him very long to transition between that sleepwalking nightmare state and being fully awake, is that right?"

John was a little torn between annoyance that Dirk had talked (of course he had) and gratitude that he'd been saying good things. "Couple minutes. You just have to stay way out of range until he remembers where he is, and then he calms down."

"Well, that's still fairly tolerable. Nothing else?"

John bit his lip. Well. Bec had arrived in the middle of a pretty bad argument, and if they had not been too far to hear or see some of it...

Argh. No, bad John, no thinking about maybe omitting stuff, that was the kind of bullshit thought that had landed him in deep shit in the first place. John the Transparent, that was him from now on. Yep.

"Sometimes when we argue he gets pretty loud and snarly, and then he'll start ... like, talking with his hands, and if someone accidentally walked into that they'd probably come out with pretty nice scratches or a black eye, but ... no, it's not really dangerous otherwise, I don't think. He doesn't get in my personal space or threaten to punch me in the face or anything. Well, perhaps verbally, I dunno." Argh, John, just shut up while you're ahead, he reminded himself.

"He's always pretty nice with me!" Jade piped up. "Calm, even. I think John just pisses him off for the fun of it, sure looks like it some days. Maybe if you didn't tease him so much..."

"I don't tease him!"
"Nag?" Jade asked innocentely, eyes bright and wide open. John slanted her a sideway glare. She turned to look at Karkat, leaned in. "Hey, Khrk'th. John is hrrrn'ghssst, yes?"

Karkat blinked, and cracked a microscopic smile. He sneaked John a look, hesitated, and then leaned in toward Jade, even though he had to know it was pretty doomed as far as discreet whispering went. "Yes. Zhann stupid dumb."

"Hehehe."

She grinned. He smiled back, the faint quirk of lips quickly gone as he glanced at the amused General and wiped his face of all expression. John glared sullenly. Traitor.

"If you want he can come sleep in your room and you can babysit him and I can go back up to fight already! And you can have all the language lessons you guys want."

The General put his cup of coffee down, a bit too slowly, bushy brows furrowed. "Ah. I take it you haven't checked your messages yet today."

John stared back. That? was not good news. Nobody announced good news like that, with that expression.

He raised a hand to his glasses, clicked them online, glanced his way through instant messenger windows and the inevitable spam that even a government email seemed to gather, and then...

From: f.d.dicalcini@skaialabs.net
Subject: FWD: Expertise Report MA-WRHM-1.45 (Sorry John)

He felt his stomach fall.

Last he'd checked, the repairs had been going decently well. Eight days ago, when he picked up Karkat from the labs, they were talking of maybe ten more days, maybe two weeks tops. Today though...

Diagrams and stress test results and scans and a lot of synopses. Computers were fine, weapons were fine, sensors were good and could be improved on with the latest advances, oxygen generator had not been hard to replace...

... it is our conclusion that the nonessential components can be restored to approximately 85% of functionality. However, even after extensive repairs, the frame will withstand a level of battle stress estimated to be 13% lower than optimal levels. As we cannot project with any kind of certainty how long and under what kind of assault MA-WRHM-1.45 (WARHAMMER) might keep its functionality and ensure pilot survival, the recommendation of this commission is that it be replaced in its entirety.

That was a joke, right? He used his very limited hacking knowledge to trace the message back to the source. Nope, he knew that woman, didn't have a joking bone in her body. He knew the guys and gals who had cosigned on the message. A couple of them worked in the hangars, joked around with John whenever he dropped by to help, taught him job tricks.

They knew how much he loved his mech. They loved it too.

"Could I have some good news for once?!!" he shouted, standing. He wanted to flip something -- his breakfast plate, the massive oak table, his own lid. He threw his hands up, raked them through his hair. "God damn it, this is not fair, what'd I do to deserve this load of bull? Step on nuns in Warhammer? Flash preschool kids?!!"
Karkat had stopped eating, was staring at him in total bafflement. Jade sighed, said "John," wearily.

"What?! No, seriously, is it too much to ask that at least once something good happen?! I swear Karkat's cursed, I've had nothing but shitty luck and bad days and--"

Someone slapped his head from behind. He caught himself on the table, whirled around on his assailant. His sister stood there, staring at him and supremely unimpressed. He growled, rubbing the back of his head.

"Now what is going on?" Jane asked, hands on her hips, lips pursed.

"John finally got around to checking his email," the General informed her, and calmly took another sip of coffee, faint disapproval oozing in John’s general direction like a cloud. "Which I plumb thought was a standard routine for all of you!"

"Aw, I'd have nothing to do anyway, why'd I have to check first thing?" John scowled and kicked lightly at his chair, which skidded along the floor, ricocheted off the table leg, and went careening off at an angle, crashing to the ground. Whoops. Jane pursed her lips at him until he went to pick it back up.

"Is that all? Honestly! You're grounded anyway and it's not like they don't keep replacement parts ready to go, it won't take too long!"

"Repairs would have taken two weeks! Piecing a new one together will take at least one month! That's not too long to you?"

He righted the chair. Jane kept glowering. He sat, scowling.

"... Oh hey, sis, you could let me have Poseidon! It's not like you even like flyi--"

Bam, another slap to the back of his head. "John, I love you, but if I catch you trying to borrow my mech I might do something irreparable to your anatomy and my prawn desheller. Now finish your breakfast."

Pouting, he started prodding at his food again. "Dunno if you remember but you're two minutes older, mom."

Jade grimaced. "Ugh, gross. Could you please not remind us?"

"Wh-- I was saying she acted like my mom, not that she -- uuuugh." John eyed Harley sideways. He had one hand covering his moustache and his eyes laughing, though rather ruefully. Always weird to remember that if they did a DNA analysis on the people in this room, John and Jade would come out as the General and Jane's lovechildren. Most of the time he honestly did forget, because it really didn't matter. But Jane had gotten a bit touchy about it when she hit her teenage years and he had no idea why.

Karkat was staring at them all in turn like he was wondering why he'd even been startled and also oh god why did I have to fall in with lunatics. Made John's lips quirk up some, but then he remembered his mech was going to be stripped for parts. He shuffled toward Jade to let Jane make herself a spot at the far corner of the table and poked at his food, head hanging. Fuck his life.


"Yes, Kark-- oh! Pfffhehe."
John glanced up. Karkat was staring dubiously at the floor on the side of his chair opposite from the General.

Bec was staring back, sitting there, jaw open just enough to pant and let a red tongue loll through white fangs. Hunggrily.

John *might* have snickered a bit. That sure explained the betrayed look Karkat flicked him.

Jade waved her hand, laughing. "No, no, it's okay."

Karkat did not seem to agree. Like, at all. "No. No no no. Bad no."

"You've got to learn to get along!" Jade replied, nodding enthusiastically. "Also not to show fear. That's critical. Be brave!"


"Ah -- Karkat." The alien blinked up; Jane pointed at his half-full plate, then at the dog, not quite meeting Karkat's eyes. "He wants your food."

Karkat looked at her, at his plate, and then at the dog, whose tongue had unrolled in a somewhat mocking-looking, anticipatory grin.

The alien's eyes narrowed, and he stabbed all his bacon in one go and stuffed it in his mouth.

Munch.

"No. Hrrn." The look on his face could have been subtitled 'So There.' Pffff.

Bec tilted his head. Whine.

Karkat stared back.

Bec looked at the food meaningfully, back at Karkat. Back at the food. Back at Karkat. Whiiine.

Swearing under his breath, Karkat speared and offered the last of his egg, smeared in bacon juices. They were inhaled in less than a second.

"That dog's way too smart for his own good," John commented, snickering a bit.

"You should tell him to sit next time," the General said, immediately yanking Karkat's attention back to him without even trying. He smiled at Karkat's mildly nervous attention. "Like this. Bec, *here*. Good boy. Sit." Bec sat immediately. Funny how John could yell *sit* and *no* until the end of Time and the dog would just keep doing as he willed, but with Hass and Jade he just plopped his ass down straight away. "Shake hands." Bec raised a paw to shake. "Good. Have some bacon."

Dog fed and dismissed, the old man rose, pushed away from the table.

"And on that no doubt vital note to future relations I'll wander off. My babysitters are beeping my earbud off, this is becoming a right nuisance, and it just so happens I am done with my evaluation and breakfast both! Remarkably efficient. Let us hope our next meeting will occur in a timely manner, and in much better circumstances for all involved." A nod to each person present, a quick ruffle to Jade's hair and Bec's ears, and he strode off, boots striking the floor militarily as possible. Karkat watched him go, still looking a bit disoriented.

"You did good," Jade assured him with a smile. "Good boy, Karkat."
The alien blinked at her, shaking his head a little in brows-furrowing bafflement, muttered something under his breath, and mime-grimaced a request for seconds. John let Jade serve him and went back to his own breakfast.

--

Three hours later they were still in the living room and John was about to jump for the ceiling lamp and do crunches from up there just out of sheer boredom. Perhaps see if he could swing from the lamp to the counter (several meters) and escape out the window without touching the floor once.

Karkat and Jade were having another alien language lesson, Jane taking notes on bluh bluh alveopalatal consonants and epiglottal what the heck ever. He wasn't allowed to watch what he wanted on the TV for fear it would distract Karkat from the lesson, or reveal something to him that he shouldn't know, or confuse him about how things really happened on Earth because wow was daytime TV not a good representation of healthy interpersonal relationships. Or so John was told. He just wanted to watch one good brain-killing action movie! Just one! He'd even allow them to bargain down the number of explosions! But nope.

"I can't even hear any difference," he complained, flopped across the table. "You're cheating, Janey, I know you are, your ears aren't freaky like Jade's. You're making it up, aren't you?!" From his point of view it was a lot of fairly identical throaty growls and chest humming and snaky clicks, and the vowels were mostly breathy absences of consonants.

"Congrats," Jade replied with an eye roll. "Ten minutes without whining this time! You're about to beat your record."

"Should I get you a coloring book?" Jane inquired, side-eyeing him.

Bluh.

He couldn't even nag Karkat or anything, since he was busy doing productive stuff. Then again that particular pastime had lost its charm somewhere last Wednesday. Karkat couldn't answer him, and making up translations for his outraged snarling and put-upon grimaces just got old without any new material for inspiration.

"Nr. 'ch. Zheyd, aghain?"


"Woo, break time!"

"Like you were even working, John!"

Jade didn't stop him dancing to the fridge to get them all drinks, he noticed.

He sat beside Karkat, pretended to offer him a coke, was snorted at; Karkat bumped his shoulder against John's and sneaked his arm behind John's back to grab the apple juice he was keeping hidden there. Somehow Karkat had developed a totally unfounded grudge against carbonation. Just because John hadn't warned him once! Okay, twice. Maybe three times. Now he kept to beverages he knew for sure weren't going to fizz up his nose. No sense of adventure.

John wrestled him a bit before he surrendered the can to him; Karkat let out a self-satisfied little hiss and popped the can open, giving him a sideways challenging, smug look as he sipped.
Like they didn't both know John had let him win. Heh.

"Alright," Jane said eventually, and clicked something open on her laptop with that grim determination which she often approached anything Karkat-related with. "My turn. John, please?"

John never knew how he was supposed to feel.

He took the telepathic headset from Jade's hand anyway, stared down at it. He was just supposed to play interpreter, no personal comments interjected, but there always were some. It wasn't possible to mindmeld and not get personal.

Fifteen minutes a day, no more, sometimes less because Karkat still didn't want to share a lot of things about his people, his command. Mostly they talked about his biomech, because it still needed repairs, but even that came out choked through with guilt and self-accusations of selfishness, and it didn't help when John couldn't keep his thoughts off of all the viruses and gene-engineering the human scientists were probably already toying with.

Fifteen minutes of concentrating like he was in flight, mission objectives to check through and nothing else. It was doable.

Karkat's loneliness was killing him.

Karkat understood, though. Of course he did, he'd been in John's head that day, of course he got the reasoning.

John put on his headset.

(what else today what else am I going to give (traitor coward traitor) hate this (need this) hate--) hey John.

hey Karkat. (I'm here) (not my place shouldn't be.)

(it's okay.)

Fuck.

Okay. Mission time. He closed his eyes, curled his fingers. Cockpit, toggles and levers, joysticks in his hands, EMP rocket right there under his thumb. Three, two, one, ignition.

"Jane, on your mark."

She nodded, breathed out. John concentrated on rethinking her words, nothing more, nothing less.

"Command structure. Who's at the top?"

Impossibly long spear horns and a cloud of hair and a slow, sensual, terrifying smile. Power beyond telling, so high above, a magnificent soaring eagle to his ridiculous, landbound chicken. "She who deigns to lead us into conquest," John said, haltingly, as he hunted for the best way to translate the words Karkat said out loud for Jade to transcribe. "By right of blood."

"She was born into the position?" Jane asked, eyes fixed on her file. John and Karkat nodded. "Queen then. No, wait, empress is a better fit, one difference between a kingdom and an empire is that an empire is ever-expanding, and a kingdom has fixed boundaries."

(she's nervous. babbling.)
Jade gnawed on the edge of a nail. "Wonder if she's the same caste as Karkat? I mean, they've got some pretty insectoid traits, right, so I wonder if they're all the same kind or if there's, like, worker ants, and soldiers and drones and things."

"No," John replied, and then "Yes, but she's not, she's the same type he is. Only female, obviously. Huh, really?"

"Quite interesting. Are the biomechs a caste then?"

Karkat let out a vaguely, bitterly amused laugh.

"Kind of, half way. Not naturally, they're gene-engineered, we knew that. Huh." A flash of the white monster, Karkat himself, and a black-armored, spiky, terrifying creature, yet humanoid, too, if much less than Karkat himself was. He tried to untangle it but Karkat buried it with a faint mental hiss. "I think they're partly based on Karkat's caste."

"Yes, we found quite a lot of Karkat's own genes floating around in his biomech," Jane confirmed, reserved; Karkat stared back stone-faced, unsurprised yet swearing a little bit, of course they'd have figured that out. "Fragments of other mechs we brought back had similar but different genes in those places. One working theory is that it's used as a sort of genetic password, and there would only be one compatible pilot per biomech."

"Yes."

Jade hummed under her breath. "A human couldn't make one move by accident, then. I don't know whether that's good or not, it's good for our tech guys in case there's an oopsie, but I kinda wanted to try one on!"

"Jade," Jane reprimanded.

"Kidding, but still, later on it would reduce the possibility of--"

"Maybe it would move," John said, because Karkat was dubious but wasn't dismissing it out of hand either. "If it wanted to -- urgh, that's creepy, do they ever want anything? Really?"

(yes. no. I want to believe/it's stupid to. who knows.) The set of coincidences I'm seeing it working in would be vanishingly unlikely. Might eat you alive first. Some are crankier than others.

"So it would obey a human if it felt like it, if it could feel anything at all and if that feeling it could feel wasn't hostility and-or a craving for human flesh. Okay. Wow. Noted."

Jade and Jane grimaced a little. He wasn't the only one to find partially sentient, literal "ghost in the machine" bioware creepy.

"Never had the brilliant thought to pop a fucking alien in and see what happens, somehow," John said, and then arched an eyebrow at Karkat, who arched an eyebrow right back and then smirked. Pay more attention. "Oh, fudge you."

No, fuck you more. (heh win.)
"Let's go back to the empress," Jane interrupted. She was staring down at her laptop again, eyebrows drawn. "She's the same caste you are."

... yes/no/yes? nothing is like her, special pure unique/could breed with her if hahaha yeah fucking right. Biologically sort of yes?

"I think that's a yes. With a lot of caveats. Biologically, Karkat."

Get killed out of hand for even thinking it much less doing/if it didn't work would be on me not on her/my allyfriends could at least?

"Okay, it's a yes. But there's other castes?"

Black and spiky humanoids that somehow reminded him a little bit of the biomechs, but smaller, maybe tall as two Karkats. Many of those. Huge things, so fat they probably couldn't move under their own power, some black and looming and terrifying, and one with several disgusting hungry maws and ridiculously atrophied wings which Karkat blurred out of John's mind in a hissing, protective hurry, one that came tinted with a strange kind of devotion.

"At least three. One's roughly person-sized but kind of spiky, one or two are closer to mech-sized -- holy crap, I can't imagine how that's the same species."

... you guys are all the same size? That's weird.

Your face is weird.

No, yours. Hornless white-eyed flat-toothed twit.

"Boys."

John guiltily stopped shoving at Karkat's shoulder and trying (not very hard) to push him off his chair. "Whoops. Yeah, sorry, sis."

"Why does she get to be the empress? How are they even chosen?"

John blinked a little under the sheer "... duh???" Karkat was emitting. It was like Jade had asked why the sun rose in the East.

(Because "east" MEANS "the direction the sun rises from," stupid, no you cannot have a planet that has sunrises in the west if you do it's just that you accidentally switched the north and south poles tags on your viewport you incommensurable moron oh fuck me you're holding it upside down of fucking course. Dear shitfucking space lords I am ashamed of being a newbie same as you.) John get out of my random-ass memories what next the first time I tied my shoelaces (the first time I saw my planet from orbit oh.)

"Hehe, sure."

Fuck, he was leaking again. Cockpit, mission. Concentrate. It ached, slamming the door on Karkat's background memories, even though Karkat was somewhat grumpy about him seeing them in the first place. He minded them being seen, but them being rejected...

Sorry.

I know. Stupid. Work.
"I dunno, Karkat's blasting me with how can a question so stupid even exist and won't actually answer." He shrugged. Jade pursed her lips.

Jane was still going through her checklist, expression bland and serious. "You said some aliens of your species were psychic. Is she psychic?"

"Uh, no, like she even needs to be; what next, a sword on an imperial cruiser? Several swords? Ooh, scary now."

Jade was staring at him. Whoops, he'd gone Karkat-sarcastic once again.

He was about to scratch the back of his head sheepishly and say something glib about haha mind contagion surely you jest, only Jade and Jane froze together at that point, raised hands to the side of their glasses.

What? tense wary scowl why?

John clamped his teeth on his lower lip. Priority update. (shit. oh shit.)

"Sorry guys, gotta go!" Jade threw over her shoulder as she shoved away from the table. She barely paused to give John and Karkat a quick, unconvincingly reassuring smile, and then she was gone at a run, mane of hair flying behind her, eyes hard.

John's glasses stayed blank, of course.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

(my people they're fighting my people up there)

(Jade might die they called her up they said don't leave Karkat alone with Jane ever but she went anyway oh Jane fuck, davedirkroxy fuck)

(Jade's nice but my people) (but Jade) (not my friends please not my friends)

(I want to go up there I want to go I want to go please let me go)

He wasn't even sure who thought that last one; both of them, most probably. Shit. Just...

"John. ... Karkat. We still have work."

When John looked up Jane wasn't looking at either of them, jaw tense, shoulders a block of wood. He wanted to reassure her that it was fine, things would be fine, they were going to win up there and Karkat wasn't a danger to her and never would be, and yeah, that sounded like a super smart thing to bring up.

"Yeah, okay," he said, even though he wanted to answer anything but. He was becoming an increasingly big fan of 'fuck that, I'm going to help!', for example.

"The empress," she said briskly. "Anything else?"

John wrenched his mind away from the battlefield up there in the sky, closed his eyes, visualized, trying to solidify all the little things Karkat had let slip about her. A lot of his response was emotional -- awe, respect, fear, a strange bitterness, a seed of doubt. The thought of how impudent he'd ever been thinking to call her attention onto him. Thinking he'd survive it. If she could have granted him
his boon he almost wouldn't have cared he'd be killed for it, if she could have granted him twin-horned tangled in vampire guts ropes of devouring flesh caught and not dying it'd be better if he were dying a clean end and that'd be it --

"Hrrst." Cut that the fuck out!

"Give me intel and I will! -- Oh. Oh, that's why he thought pink was a girl color, it's the color of the empress! She puts it on everything."

"Interesting. The color of her... sigil? Crest?"

"I think so." He tried to find something funny/stupid to say, so he'd stop thinking about Karkat's friendallygone. "Matches her eyes, too, heh."

Karkat's mind was one huge, confusing morass of contrary feeling, quicksilver thoughts. Things he wasn't sharing, but in the middle there were the things he meant to convey, and those were easy to translate.


Jane stared at Karkat, then, but not for long before she switched back onto John. "... Does every empress use the same color? The way purple dye used to be so expensive it was reserved for kings?"

"There's only ever been one empress," Karkat/John said.

Silence. Jane stared. John breathed. It was this weird, immense non-surprise. Of course there had never been another. Of course.

"... Let's go with units of time measurement. Is one day longer or shorter for you?"

John waited for Karkat to think it out. "Longer, a little bit, maybe by a couple of hours at most."

"How many days in a year?"

"About eight hundred." A blink, clarifying the number in his head, why did they count in base twenty for years, honestly. "Seven ninety?"

"Do you count your years in centuries?"

"Yes."

"How far does your written history get?"

"Millennia. She was empress even then. Even so. She took us -- them to the stars. Been reigning ever since."

"Propaganda," Jane immediately bit out, but it came out a little brittle under the harsh. "Adds to her line's mystique."

Even if that were true, the empire itself had endured that long.

It was the first time in his life John's hair had ever gone up all the way down his spine like this. It was kind of fascinating, if he could detach far enough.

Karkat was musing about how it was funny in a pretty sad way how all the aliens he'd ever heard of apparently reacted the same way. Denial, terror. Despair.
Fuck that noise, she must be decrepit by now, just you wait and see.

... heh good luck with that. (I need to stop liking you, asshole.)

Good luck with that, John parroted immediately, and then regretted it. It was too much, acknowledging this, just too much. He closed his eyes, went through a take-off sequence in his head. Good, now an Immelman, attack from the left, parry, kick-slash, let the hammer's momentum drag you, hole in defenses there fire.

(shit, why are you good) came wafting through from Karkat, not even jealousy really, just resigned admiration.

Was made for this, he admitted, even though he was trying to cut it off, stop the bond. They took little bits of awesome people and tinkered made them awesomer heh I'm kinda like your mech like that.

... oh.

He could tell he'd caught him by surprise, that Karkat didn't know how he was supposed to react.

It's fine, they love us treat us well respect us and we get to be badass, I'm fine with it! All of them were, more or less, though some of them thought a ton about it, and John himself had never bothered. He was like this, because of that, okay, cool? Now he was going to be awesome at it. (Jane was probably the only one who actively wasn't fine with it.)

It'd be so good if I could hate your stupid face even a little bit, Karkat mused. So good. Universes of good.

Jeealous.

Fuck you very much.

D'aww. I don't hate you too.

Stop being such a ridiculous mushy sap I will heave so hard it'll bring up all the contents of my digestive track in a glorious smelly geyser of computer annihilation even the stuff that was about to come out the other end. I'll make sure to aim in your direction. Smile, motherfucker!

Hahaha you're so gross.

"... John!"

"Sorry. Yeah?"

Jane breathed in, nostrils briefly flaring, stared back down at her computer. Her lips were still pinched, unhealthy white. Here he was goofing off to forget his scare, and here she was actually thinking about what it meant. Should he reassure her? He didn't know how she'd take it. He knew she wouldn't believe baseless reassurances, anyway, but... maybe a hug?

Her fingers were shaking.

"Anything else about that queen?"

If he tried to hug her now when she was trying so hard to keep doing her job and be a professional about it she might kick him. He'd probably ruin her too-tightly-wound composure to hell and back. He pursed his lips, thinking. Hm. What else, Karkat?
Guess it won't hurt to give you her sigil.

He reached for a loose bit of paper, handed it to Karkat wordlessly as Karkat picked up a pen. It was the wrong color; he knew before Karkat ever started scribbling and frowned, displeased, was already finding him a box of old, well-chewed rainbow markers in one of the drawers along the wall behind them. Karkat took it over his shoulder without looking, flicked it open, fished out the raspberry.

Two shallow arcs, back to back, barred through by a single straight line.

"That's her," they said in two languages, pink and gray fingers trailing on white paper, unwilling to encroach onto fuchsia lines. "She who condescends to lead us."

Something came flying at them/Karkat.

They didn't think; Karkat threw himself back, John threw his hand in between, slapped it away, ow. Jane's laptop. What?

The table was next, massive oak, tipping hard, going flying, pens scattering -- trapped against the wall, shit; John braced against the wall to kick it back, Karkat banged his shin, ow shit, leapt on the bookcase behind him, perched there on the chest-high edge, the fuck, the fuck?

Jane stood there, shaking all over, breathing like an exhausted racing horse, eyes wild.

Up until they found Karkat, and then her hands stilled.

Fisted.

"Jane no!"

John rammed his sister in the side, deflected her momentum hard; Karkat leapt from his perch and over the tipped-over table to get to the wider-open spaces of the TV corner, pens crunching and rolling under his feet. Jane kicked off the bookcase (wood cracked) and almost managed to yank herself free of John's hold.

"GET OUT OF HIS HEAD! I'LL KILL YOU!"

John what?!

John couldn't think anything back except but she was better, oh fuck oh no.

She dragged him across the floor; their feet skidded and scrambled in opposite directions on the tiles. "John you need to let me go!"

He shook his head no, biting his lip. His eyes prickled.

"I need to kill it, I need to, need to save you, need, let go, you have to let me, get out of their fucking heads, get out of my head, get out, get out, oh Lord get it out--"

Offensive telepath, Karkat thought/realized, either from her words or John's mess of thoughts. John snarled back at him. No fucking shit! Get out of her sight or something -- "Janey! Janey you're safe, we're all safe, you need to breathe! We're home, you're safe -- ow, fuck, ow, stop kicking-- it's just Karkat!"

"I don't care it's Karkat! I don't -- I, John it's in your head, I need -- I need to save you I need to --"

She'd slowed down, trembling anew; he wrapped his arms tight around her and arched back to lift
her feet off the ground and held on with all his strength. Jane struggled against him, elbowed him in the ribs hard enough to bruise to the bone (she didn't have enough space to break any of them; he couldn't tell if she was far enough gone that she would have.)

He retreated, wobbling under her struggling weight, to the kitchen corner; she kicked against the wall, forced him to put her feet back down on the floor. He dragged her behind the high countertops. Once there she was the one who yanked him down, shoved him bodily into a corner, braced her back against him to make a wall of herself; he could have cried.

"At least you, at least -- we're home, right? John? We're home? I'll save at least you, I'll -- where is it? Where are they, John, I can't find my --"

*(What's wrong with her is she crazy what happened oh lord if there was one of them I didn't expect to be insane--)*

"Shut the fuck up!" John growled at Karkat over the countertop, not that he could see him. Jane had gone silent, but she was still braced tight against him and wouldn't let him get up, kept making a barrier of her body.

"I know it's just Karkat," she said, like she was trying to convince herself. "I know it's him, he's in your head, he needs to stop being in your head, I know we're home and it's safe, no, no it's not, I -- I know --"

"We're in the kitchen, Janey," John said, hugging her around the waist, and wishing Dad were there, wishing Dad could hold onto her and fix this somehow, because Jane was like John that way, it didn't matter how much physically weaker Dad was, she'd never believe anything dangerous would ever get through him. Dad wasn't here, he was -- he didn't know, maybe his bedroom but more likely in the office in which case they were fucked. He pressed the side of his head to Jane's hip to start up his glasses, glanced his way through his contact list. No Dad. No Mr. Strider, no Doc Lalonde. "We're in the kitchen, it still smells a bit like breakfast, can you smell breakfast?"

She elbowed him in the temple, hitting the headset and the branch of his glasses both. Pain exploded in his head.

He was still shaking his head to clear up the light show when he felt a flicker of determination from Karkat. The headset had moved; he pressed his head to Jane's back as she apologized frantically, rubbed to put it right.

Karkat wasn't thinking of anything, was just thinking of his path, a clear shot to the door, the code that John knew without thought, easy as breathing, and Karkat knew where to go from there, the whole building.

"No!" John yelled. *No stay we both promised don't be stupid--!

Karkat kept running, his footfalls rapidly growing silent, his presence in John's head fading out with the distance. John breathed out slowly, still incredulous, and let himself slide to the floor. Jane yanked free. He started reaching for her, hesitated when she didn't charge out of the kitchen corner to give chase; she hesitated on the threshold, shuddered briefly, and then retreated and started pacing back and forth before him, head twitching this and that way and that way as she feverishly scanned all possible directions.

John closed his eyes and selected one name on his roster he'd never used in his life.

JH: karkat's loose in the building. need lockdown starting now.
J.Noir: done.
J.Noir: what the fuck did you do now. you little asshole.
JH: i did fuck you. fuck you is what i did.
JH: jane's with me in the kitchen. pilot quarters otherwise empty.
J.Noir: got him on infrared.
J.Noir: perimeter up. get off my line.
JH: thanks.

He logged off; he wasn't going to get a reply he'd want to read, if he got one at all. Thanks for doing
the job I couldn't? No problem.

It was stupid to feel so betrayed, so disappointed, because he'd been so sure Karkat had zero interest
in leaving his custody and attempting to escape, even now he was still sure Karkat believed it was a
hopeless endeavor, but if he'd just tried to get away from Jane then a little farther down the corridor
would have been fine, still technically close enough to keep tabs on, and now the stupid asshole was
forcing him to call Noir's people on his stupid gray ass, shit, shit, shit.

He touched Jane's hand as she paced past him. He didn't take it, in case feeling restrained set her off
again.

"Janey, can you tell where you are?"

"The kitchen," she said. "I know it's the kitchen, I just--" Her fingers kept twitching like they wanted
to toggle between, oh argh, between infrared and the nuclear warhead's targeting module. Fff.
"Keep -- keep talking to me, please, John."

"Yeah, sure, what do you want me to talk about? Heh, we should spar again one of these days, urgh
not a great topic. I hope the table isn't broken, okay this isn't a good topic either, uh. This morning I
showered in the girls' bathroom, are you scandalized?"

"Yes," she said, like she barely knew what she was saying yes to, just knew that she should. "That's
off-limits, it's very naughty of you, buster. It killed my men, John, I was escorting them and it killed
them. One, by one, by--"

"Janey--"

"--one, it was such a hoot, they kept coming, hoho, so hilarious--"

John got up and cupped the back of her head and forced it down before she could start laughing
herself breathless. Her face was streaked with tears.

"--it wasn't funny, did you know, John, it wasn't! I was right, it wasn't me who laughed so why do I
still find it funny?!"

"Because the son of a bitch in your head thought it was," John said bluntly, because he was out of
other ideas. "It wasn't you, Jane."

Only back then they hadn't known about the telepathy. She must have thought her mind was
cracking down the middle.

He'd hoped it would help, telling her that. He'd... he didn't know what he really hoped for, some
kind of miraculous revelation that would fix everything, but she only snorted. "I know it wasn't. I
always -- I always knew, only I didn't believe it." She took in a shuddering, wet breath. "And now I
believe it -- or I believe that I should believe it? -- and it doesn't change one single piddly thing."
She chuckled to herself. John pulled her into a hug. She kept laughing in his shoulder.

What now?

J.Noir: incoming.
JH: what?

... really what John wanted oh fuck I hope, can't believe he hasn't killed me yet --

Karkat?!

He was in the corridor, jogging back; when John closed his eyes he could almost feel the impact of the floor traveling up from his heels, his uncomfortably clenched toes, dull claws digging into the soles of his stupid flip-flops.

*John I -- (embarrassment confusion contrition shame, did I do wrong, didn't know what else--)*

"Son? What -- oh."

When he tilted his head to look past Jane's messy hair for a second he got a visual echo, Dad running toward and away from him both. Karkat had stopped just past the doorway, invisible from where John and Jane stood, but John could tell exactly where he was.

He was so relieved when Dad walked into the kitchen corner and enfolded them both into a hug, he almost forgot the rest. Jane melted against Dad, fists clenching on his already wrinkled shirt.

"Did -- did Karkat get you?" John asked quietly.

"Mmh. Burst right into my bedroom. It was a bit of a surprise! I wasn't too sure what he wanted."

His father gave him a small, *I've got this* smile. His chin was stubbly. Had he been asleep? And then dragged out of bed by a lone, likely agitated alien, and who knew how well Karkat had made himself understood.

John pulled his way out of the hug. "Sorry, I've got to -- I mean, Noir's --"

"Yes, of course. Go."

It was shameful how relieved he was to abandon his sister to their dad, no matter how much he wished he could fix this for her somehow. There was no punching someone in the face and fixing it.

He walked out into the corridor, found Karkat sitting a few steps away from the door, his back pressed to the wall, arms loosely draped over his pulled-up knees. His mind was still so full of confusion John didn't know from which end to start unraveling it. He leaned against the wall and let himself slide down until they were sitting side by side, his knee bumping Karkat's ankle.

*You left her alone* was the thought that echoed back most strongly, so utterly baffled.

*Dad'll calm her down. I don't know how/I can't/I suck at it, want to kill things for her and it's so not what she needs. He sighed, closed his eyes. Guess he still had something else to take care of.

JH: lost t-rex chick came back to roost, i repeat lost t-rex chick came back to roost.
JH: sorry for the bother.
JH: thanks.

"Thank me for doing my job a third fucking time and I'll see if nanites will fucking regrow your
tongue, little brat."

John had known he was there before he spoke; Karkat's sudden tension was hard to miss, though the faint echo of silent but heavy footsteps through his horns that had provoked it only became clear if John pushed. He opened his eyes, gave the man an ironic salute. "Sure thing."

Noir stood at the corner of the corridor for another few seconds in silence, body armor strapped on over a wrinkled vest, bracketed by two armed men, gun in hand. He wasn't aiming, though.

"Good call, calling it in. I would have killed you, I don't fucking care about your diplomatic immunity. Next time try to be less of a fuckup."

As they turned on their heels and collectively ghosted away, Karkat shuddered.

Oh damn they were tracking me almost all the way through didn't notice why didn't they intercept --

Didn't want to hurt Dad is my best bet, too close to take down safely. John grimaced a little. Now wouldn't that have been a pretty clusterfuck. They wouldn't have kept Karkat contained in the building, they'd have brought him right back to "real" secure facilities, and then good luck getting him back. Nrggh. ...I'm sorry, handled that like shit. (I thought maybe you left wow I really feel like an asshole now.)

... probably should have. (knew I'd probably fail should have tried anyway scared of failure is cowardly wrong death-deserving.) I -- you kept thinking I want him I want him I wasn't sure don't get why but...

Thank you. He bumped his shoulder against Karkat's. Karkat sighed, eyes closing, and bowed his head to massage the root of his horn, where the headset pressed against it.

What's ... wrong with your sister? If I can ask?

John let out a humorless little snort of a laugh. "Sure, ask away."

Karkat winced. Fine no need to be an asshole, asshole.

One of your buddies peeled her out of her mech and used her as bait is what happened, whole platoon got itself killed trying to get to her. She was the one supposed to escortprotect them only they saw rarepilot higherranking youngernicegirl, not expendable.

Karkat blinked at him, red eyes entirely, utterly baffled. His mind was the same way, a big great what.

I suppose the mindfucking telepath keeping her from fighting to save them didn't help! he added with vicious glee. All like look isn't that funny they keep coming and dying because of you. Yeah, hilarious, the best joke. I want to meet that guy and kill him I don't care if he's your bestest friend I really want to kill him he should have killed her clean killed them all clean but no! was having fun!

"... Zhann, shh."

Karkat's palm hit him in the cheekbone, not very hard at all. His expression was weird, sad and maybe guilty, and maybe just tired.

Sorry (whoa overstepping my bounds there) but seriously hush. Your sister is kind of busy (with that adultpersonwhothehell?) and I'm not calming your shouty tits if you freak out.

"Mnh."
They settled back against the wall, sighing in accidental unison. John let Karkat's weary, vaguely guilty relief smother the rest of his anger. The guy who'd hurt his sister was out of reach right now and anyway he'd had that talk with Rose before (several times) about how stealing her right to take revenge wouldn't somehow magically fix her, and he had to handle it how Jane wanted it handled and not otherwise, else he'd be a selfish little fuckhead who believed his feelings about her assault were more important than her own.

_Succinct and blunt as all motherfucks but yes I agree. Taking revenge for her you're saying she can't and won't ever again. A thoughtful, muted pause. So she's... damaged/combat-broken?_

"Yeah."

"Huhn." _(_Can't believe no one put her out of her misery yet. Humans are so weird._) John lifted his head off the wall, turned it slowly. Stared.

_You might want to explain that one real fast._

Karkat stared back, eyebrows furrowed. _What? She's cracked/dangerous/in pain. Baffled here I mean okay her brother wouldn't want to admit it that makes sense and I guess she's strong means useful (table flying, so heavysolid in the horn sense, striking the floor deep shaking thud), but she's not the best pilot by far? (not like my lovewreckmine such gorgeousterrifying devastation to make it worth it) No one tried to go over your head?_

John kept staring, torn between the sudden desire to punch Karkat in the nose and the just as mystifying desire to ... he didn't know, pat his head and be sorry.

Karkat bristled. _What the fuck can that shit I don't want it from you! _

_Yes well you stop being such a sad sack of emo woes first! You just-- _

"John? Khrkat?"

Rose stood in the middle of the corridor, white-blond hair mussed and skin shiny with sweat, breathing too fast. She'd probably just landed, and then she'd run--

"John, Mr. Noir forwarded us--" 

John dragged himself back up on his feet, embarrassed and guilty. "No, it's fine, Dad's handling it. How'd it go up there?"

Rose glanced at Karkat, but when she looked back at John she took a second to just look at him, and then the set of her shoulders loosened a little bit. "Ah... Fine now, assault repelled. No loss of life on our side. We have nineteen casualties amongst the Marines but I'm told they'll live."

"Oh, that's... Good. Uhr. Yeah. Good. Uh. Jane had a combat flashback and tried to brain Karkat with the dinner table."

"... Oh."

"Yeah."

Karkat snorted under his breath behind them, still sitting on the floor and making no move to get up. John grimaced at him over his shoulder, and then kept grimacing as he had to admit the rest of it to Rose. "I think Dad must have been asleep, I couldn't contact him, so, err, Karkat went to fetch him.
Alone. Without warning me first. Hence Noir. Kind of embarrassing."

"I see."

"Yeeep."

"Mnh."

_Oh my cock-chafed dribbling asshole will you just fucking talk to her already come on it's not hard you open your big flat-toothed maw and you flap your pink tongue and **make meaningful sounds**. (no wait I'm sorry that's just about impossible for the likes of you.)_

"Oh my god will you shut up."

_No. Talk to her talk to her talk to her fucking talk to her or I'm sitting on you and handing her my headset next talk. To. Her._

"John?"

He breathed in, breathed out. **Yeah shut up Karkat I was going to anyway.**

"You were right and I'm an assbutt and I'm sorry."

Rose stared at him, blinking, and then lifted a hand to her mouth, though that didn't block out the sudden giggle. "Oh, John."

"No, really, you were right about the telepathy and all. I mean. The... caring too much thing. Karkat told me you were."

"Yes," she replied drolly, "your strict self-limiting use of the headsets all this week pretty much confirmed that you agreed with my assessment."

As he winced, Rose took a step closer, rested a hand on his forearm. John sighed, leaned in for a hug.

_Huzza, forgiveness for all, and a huge helping of inappropriate touching on top, dear lords of the Abyss I thought cat-ear-horns/giggly/feral/friend was clingy think about my poor virgin eyes seriously John._

_Shut up or I'm hugging you next._

_That's blackmail you repulsive fiend. A feeling like a fleeting smile. Now stop broadcasting your happyforgivenglee it's disgusting. (no it's not ahh cute but uh Jane next door?!)_

John and Rose dehugged, shared an embarrassed chuckle.

"So Karkat confirmed, hm?" She gave the alien a speculative, secret little smile. Karkat sneaked her a quick awkward look and shrugged, staring at the floor.

_Just because I couldn't lie mind to mind, wasn't trying to be helpful or nice or anything. (ngh hurt-betrayed-alonehurting John ngh.)_

_Hehehe you're right you really can't lie worth crap mind to mind. "Yeah, he felt sorry for my manpain or something. Or he wanted me to stop whining about how wronged I was. Probably that one."_
Rose ruffled his hair. "There, there."

Don't you guys have any social construct at least vaguely mimicking shame I'm still here!

John tilted his head into Rose's hand, just to annoy him. I can't believe what a prude you are dude she's just petting my head! I pet your head!

And if you ever do it with half that much tenderness I'll have your finger bones for a necklace.

Rose dropped her hand, smile mocking but in that affectionate Rose way. "If I may venture a theory... Since Karkat feels things more powerfully than you do, or at least takes them to heart more easily, you feel what happens to him more strongly than you would had it happened to yourself, is that the issue?"

John made a face. "Bluh. Yeah, I suppose. There's some things he just... gnh." He tried to tune out Karkat's quiet mortification and litany of unconvinced denial about what a stone-cold badass he truly was thankyouverymuch and the aliens were totes wrong wrong wrongity wrong. Yeah I believe that, buddy. You're a marshmallow.

Karkat tried to think a vicious threat of ass-kicking and utter ruination at him, but couldn't even solidify it before it fuzzed out into some more mortification. He dropped his forehead on his knees and groaned. John snickered at him.

"So... You were otherwise occupied, and he chose to leave your custody... Was he aware...?"

"That he shouldn't and he was gonna get in trouble?"

Karkat winced under Rose's look, gave a tiny nod, shrugged, mind locked up.

She smiled at him. "Thank you, Karkat."

Rose held out her hand. John knew Karkat would have refused the help coming from him, but from her he didn't dare, strangely shy; he took her hand and allowed her to tug him up on his feet, though he took as much of his own weight as possible.

"Let's go back inside."

She tucked her other hand in the crook of John's elbow, and it was funny because Rose wasn't very touchy-feely usually but John got it, because man had he missed her, too. It was just wrong to be so at odds. They were co-team leaders, damn it, it'd been wrong of him to desert her like this.

They were friends too. They balanced each other. Rose needed unpredictability injected in her plans and her life both, and he needed to be reined in pretty much everywhere and okay why was Karkat feeling all flustery-alarmed now.

Uhh Jane???

What about Jane?

She wasn't there anymore, at any rate. The kitchen corner was empty; Dad had probably brought her back up to her bedroom. John went to wrestle the solid oak table back on its feet, Rose and Karkat picking up the things scattered around. Rose checked the laptop and put it back on the table, turned it back on.

"Good to know that when we paid for anti-shock technology we were not stiffed," she mused, and
went through to save the last-used files properly. John chuckled. Karkat kept feeling awkward and confused in the background.

*Is it because you're kind of a temperamental douche that you need two people to keep you in line?*

John sent him a confused blink over his shoulder. "Uh. What."

Karkat rolled his mental eyes at him, with a feeling of "yeah, yeah, I'm totally not seeing that denial, mister smooth" all through the background. *I'm telling you now, I'm not joining your harem. I'm the monogamous type fuck you very much.*

"Whaat." John stopped in the middle of the room; Karkat deliberately walked into him, bumping him aside with his greater mass and lower center of gravity.

*Yes I know that word already you don't need to repeat it I promise now stop gaping like a hungry amphibian and also fuck you I'm not short-legged and fat you're the ladder beast here. Now who was that man anyway?!*

John stared after him as Karkat went hunting for an eraser under the coffee table. *Dad? But you've seen him around, you know him?*

No! Who is he to you, that you let him handle your sister! I don't get it! It's just too fucking weird and wrong and what the heck were you thinking he's an adult why are aliens so fucking weird!

John just kept blinking. And choking back laughter, but he could feel that one was a losing battle. *'He's... my... father?"*

Incomprehension. John visualized himself small and chubby and Dad carrying him around. *'My dad, dude!'*

Nope, still not getting through. "... Zhann stupid what. Whatisthis dad what!" *Give me an explanation that makes sense and I'll take it but this doesn't! What's the relationship between little you and big him?! You knew him as a child okay but??*

John froze there, a bunch of pencils in hand, mouth moving soundlessly for a couple of seconds. He turned pleading eyes onto the other human. *'Rose. Rose.'*

She was better than him at keeping from laughing, but he could tell she was close, too. "Yes, John?"

*Rose Karkat just asked me where babies come from. I. I can't.*

Rose cracked up. "Oh, that's terrible! Good luck."

"You traitor." He turned to Karkat, helplessly waving his hands around to describe things he couldn't even visualize himself. *'He's my father? My genitor? I sort of actually not but socially it's the same as if I come from his loins?'*

He made sure to visualize that one. Not too realistically, that was gross, a caricatured drawing style was fine, but the, ahem, interacting groins, the bulging stomach area, the big arrow pointing out of a lady crotch and toward a brand new baby, oh yes.

The sputtering *horror* he felt from Karkat...

Okay, fight lost. John plopped his ass on the chair Rose had just put right, almost toppling it right back down, burst into a torrent of giggles. Half of it from all that long-held tension, finally snapped,
finally gone.

The other half was pure what the hell Karkat hahaha.

"He said... he said..."

There was no way to appropriately convey the depth of that baffled shock, but he tried it anyway. Rose was waiting, biting on her made-up lip in a vain attempt to keep from smiling.

"--Oh my god, you're a mammal."

When Dad walked down the stairs five minutes later, he found John and Rose both still gasping for air, and Karkat glowering down at them with his hands on his hips.
If you're interested in fanart for Battlefield terra I would advise you to go look around this tag on my tumblr. It's got fanart for all of my stories but a majority is BT. My god I love everything. *twirls with happies* (if you've got anything for me on tumblr, tag it asukaskerian and i should ideally see it! If I haven't responded in two or three days either i'm on vacation or tumblr ate it.)

An especially big shout-out to splickedylit who managed to boost me past my writing block in a couple of well-placed, gorgeous fanarts. *rolls in them*

JN: Hi, John.
JH: hey sis! wow, been a while since i saw you online. how's it going? :B
JN: Pretty good, actually. I foresee my visit to the dumps being nigh on over. :B
JH: woohoo! :BBBB
JN: That is the goofiest smiley yet.
JH: nope, this one is: 8B-b
JN: Dear Lord in Heaven. Indeed. What on Earth is it supposed to represent?
JH: it's me with dave's beach shades on giving you a thumbs up.
JN: Ghastly.
JH: hey, that's so mean! this totally counts as sibling abuse.
JH: it's not ghastly, it's totally sweet!
JN: :B Like that cake I am planning to make for you.
JH: D:
JN: Just... for... you.
JN: Brother dearest.
JH: can i have a steak instead?
JN: That depends on whether you plan on helping me in the kitchen.
JN: I might be tempted away from cake mixes by lemon and meringue tart. What say you?
JH: from scratch? sure, can do.
JH: only, um.
JH: uh.
JN: I'm sure there will be no cultural landmine to be found in teaching Karkat how to handle a lemon, John. At worst someone will squirt a few drops into someone else's eyes. That's hardly a drama bomb.
JH: you say that because we both have glasses to hide behind. :B
JH: but. err.
JH: argh, why is being serious so hard.
JH: /puts on rose headband and scarf, strokes closest cat thoughtfully
JH: miss egbert. please make yourself comfortable on this convenient plush couch.
JH: disregard the manacles.
JN: Isn't the closest cat your alien guest, John? How positively forward of you. :B
JH: har har har.
JH: whyyyy does everyone keep making pet jokes about me and karkat.
JH: or gay jokes.
JH: or gay pet jokes. it's like this is turning into a trend or something. adopt a stray alien, then do x-
rated things to his bumhole!
JN: ...
JN: I sense a lot of repressed frustration in this sudden ramble explosion.
JH: hey, i had the rose headband, you can't thieve it off me!
JH: stop sidetracking me, as if i can't tell what you're doing, you fiend.
JH: /rose mouthpinch+squint combo
JN: That was a subtle hint to PLEASE STOP HANDLING ME WITH KID GLOVES! Fer chrissake, John.
JH: okay, okay, but there is precedent.
JN: ... Just quit while you're ahead, buster.
JH: i am mister zipperlips.
JN: *sigh*
JN: I feel much calmer about everything.
JN: And I am damn well done with tiptoeing around Karkat, so yes! Bring on the alien! Let us talk, and cook, and break bread, alien and human hand in clawed little hand!
JH: ... :X
JN: I'm not saying I'll be his best friend, John, but I at least wanted to apologize for unwittingly throwing the table at him.
JN: If one day I clock him in the head with solid oak I want it to damn well be deliberate.
JH: this is very reassuring and i am very reassured. i now totally cannot wait to take my alien catboy lover into your clobber radius!!
JN: You are so infuriating. Why do you insist on poking my good mood full of angry holes??
JH: bluh bluh.
JH: i have a responsibility to the both of you to keep you guys in one piece, okay! i'd rather avoid having to put myself in the middle for that, because between the two of you i'll be the one who ends up as a shapeless pile of lego on the floor.
JH: all dismantled out!
JH: i was such a sweet lego house, janey, and now look at me. all the L pieces are gone under the couch.
JN: :B The great Scattercalypse.
JN: I promise you I'm calm, and even somewhat positive. That'll only last as long as you stop questioning it at every turn, though!
JH: okay, okay. will take your word on it.
JH: um.
JH: if it helps karkat thinks that was a dick move too. it's not an all aliens are assholes thing. not like that other thing that i
JH: just remembered you might not have read about! haha. maybe later.
JN: Was it in a report?
JH: prolly one of rose's, i told her about it.
JN: About?
JH: urgh.
JN: John, now that I'm going back to work I *will* come to read it.
JN: Wouldn't you rather present it to me with your own words?
JH: okay um. rose agrees with me it's cultural and he wasn't trying to be an ass.
JH: apparently when someone gets ptsd in alien land they don't really believe the guy can ever get better. :/ 
JH: they also practice mercy killing. look at that pretty math.
JN: I... see.
JH: it sounds like a really asshole place to live. :/ between that and his pal getting tortured for a reason i don't even get and his pet monster buddy being turned into a mech and being exiled from his boyfriend because he's not jetset enough or i don't even know what!
JH: ...
JH: i'm being compromisy again, aren't i.
JH: gah. sorry.
JN: The lack of effort devoted to mental care dovetails nicely with the wasteful way they throw so many new fighters at us.
JN: The one conclusion most of the analysts keep coming back to is that they have so many bodies at hand that merely weeding out the weak is more cost-effective than putting time and effort into training up the weak or fixing the broken ones.
JH: huh.
JN: Indeed.
JH: woo job security. XB
JN: Heh.
JN: Do you know, up until at least 1960 mental trauma was seen as a mere weakness of character and not as an actual wound that actually affected mental processes and required actual healing?
JN: Humans used to think like this at some point. It's no surprise aliens might as well.
JN: Though for all we know it might be true for them and I am merely jumping the gun, we have so little data on their brain architecture.
JN: Call it an initial hypothesis based on observation of one available subject.
JH: i will totally call it that. :B
JN: You were right, it does help. Thank you, John.
JH: success!
JH: me and karkat will be down in two minutes. i gotta pry him off dirk's my little pony comic book first.
JN: Beg pardon?
JH: i think he's rooting for flutteryasshole and applebutt to hook up. :B
JN: ...
JN: ......
JN: Hohohoho. X'B

--

The second lemon and meringue pie turned out to be delicious.

The first turned out to be really sticky. John pretended Jane didn't see him furtively licking his fingers as he scrubbed it off the floor, Jane switched to the stove to heat some more butter, and everyone pretended Karkat wasn't side-eyeing the apparently evil microwave in case it tried to startle him again, or attempting to be subtle about basically sucking on his shirt.

--

BR: Hey, brat. Get your lazy ass to the gym post-haste.
JH: YEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEESSSSSSSSSSSS.
JH: official permission?? :D
BR: Official permission.
BR: An alien is fine too.
BR: Each second you're late is another ten crunches. Countdown starts from "get your lazy ass to the gym post-haste." Tick tock.
JH: ALREADY OUT OF THE DOOR, SIR, MR STRIDER SIR. :B

That was a lie as he typed it, but only because he needed to haul Karkat up from the couch by the wrist. The alien had been vegetating in front of yet another nature documentary, and went from bored to death to ball of knives in about two seconds.
John was too excited about getting to leave the living quarters and do productive things to even flinch, and never mind how close Karkat's free-hand claws got to his arm before the alien pulled it. "Come on, Karkat, come on come on come on!"

Karkat let himself be dragged through the front door at a run, slowed down by his flip-flops in a very annoying way that only made John haul harder. "Zhann whadafuck!"

('Fuck' had made its appearance in Karkat's vocabulary sometime last week; it was getting more deeply entrenched every day.)

"Come with me come with me yeeeesss oh my Lord yes--"

Down on the ground floor, and Karkat would have veered left toward the exit, though with great confusion, but John (slightly regretfully) went right.

He banged through the fire doors keeping them from exercise!! with great justice, and let Karkat's wrist go to pump his fists at the high domed roof of the gym that took up half the building. Long skylights lined half of the roof like ribs -- sunlight! Almost as good as being outside okay no but he was being optimistic. Space! There was the sparring area on the right side with the climbing wall overlooking it, and all the training machines on the left, and the cases with the training weapons lining the bottom wall. After the smaller, people-sized rooms he'd been locked in for too many long days, a room that might need at least a hundred steps to be crossed felt huge.

Mr. Strider came out of an office by the machines, in a tanktop and sweatpants, sneakers. He eyed John's clothes and quirked an eyebrow pointedly. John grimaced down at his jeans. "Aw, come on, don't make me go back and change--"

"Go back and change."

"Aw."

"Karkat, stay with me."

"Aww!" Then again dragging him back up when the alien was in sweatpants already would be stupid, John supposed.

Karkat's brow furrowed. "Uh -- sir?"

"He's coming back. C'mon. Let's find you better shoes."

Sighing, John went racing back up to change, and then raced back down. It wasn't even a warm-up, but it was nice to move fast once again, to turn on a dime and jump down flights of stairs and rush. He came back to find Karkat sitting on a treadmill, trying on sneakers.

"Aren't his toe claws going to poke out of the ends?"

Strider shrugged. "Got other pairs." He put the spare, rejected shoes back in a bag, gestured at Karkat to get up, and demonstrated the treadmill for him. "Wanna try?"

Karkat shrugged, climbed on. John walked up to the second machine.

Strider's foot caught him in the ribs, almost under his arm, shoved him to the side and right off his feet.

He'd been taught how to fall ten years ago; he rolled with the momentum, absorbed the shock,
flipped himself back on his feet in a low crouch -- only to get shoved on his back via another foot to the shoulder.

Okay, if the dude wanted to play it like that. John lashed at his ankle -- Strider jumped over it, of course -- and moved in close for a punch.

Bam, on the floor again. John choked as his chest impacted with the floor in a nice flat *splat*. Guh!

"Dude. That isn't even rusty anymore. You been taking your vitamins, grandpa?"

... Okay, it was *on*.

"

"Didn't know the floor was *that* dusty," said Dave a little eternity later. John lifted his head just enough to glare at him. "No, but don't let me stop you from a life of exalted broomdom, I wouldn't stand in the way of your happiness."

"Fuck you so much, dude. Like. A full rugby team of fuck yous."

"Kinky. I like. Where's my cheerleader outfit."

Dave was still in his white and red flight suit, unzipped and peeled off to the waist, sleeves tied around his hips. He had on another bright red tanktop underneath, which bore no trace of sweat at all.

John hesitated to ask, for a second. Mr. Strider wasn't prodding him to keep fighting, so it seemed okay to chat, but he hadn't shot the breeze with Dave in... it seemed like ages. He pushed himself up on his hands and made himself ask. "Patrol was boring again?"

"Boring like a politician schmoozefest." Dave took a couple of steps away from the door, glanced at Karkat who was still jogging away while craning his neck to see who'd come in behind him, then at Mr. Strider, who stood hands on his hips and watched him back blandly. "Hey, Bro. You called?"

John wasn't too sure how to feel. When things were great between them they could yammer on for hours; that Dave had cut it off to talk to someone else after two sentences didn't fill him with hope. Meh.

"Yeah, need you to take over beating Egbert back into shape."

Meh and bluh.

Dave didn't react, just gave a grunt and tied his flightsuit's sleeves around again so they wouldn't dangle. "Sure. Hand to hand?"

"You can have a wooden sword."

"Aw, come *on*!" It wasn't like John had never beaten Dave when Dave was armed and he was not -- if he could catch his sword he could break it or tear it out of his hands, easy -- but Dave was a fast little bastard, and John was already tired.


He dragged himself up, waited for Dave to come back with a sword. (Those wooden things weren't that great for training with microfilament blades anyway! When they hit something, there was an
impact, and then they stopped, and they were heavy, the fighting style wasn't the same at all! But blahblah honored family tradition. John was sure Mr. Strider was pulling their legs.)

Over by the treadmill Mr. Strider was gesturing at Karkat to follow him. Karkat sent John a wary, dubious look -- should he? John could only shrug.

Dave prodded him in the side with the tip of his wooden sword. John jerked with a gwack and tried to grab at it, only to get rapped on the fingers. Damn it, was even Dave mocking him for his rustiness now okay who was he kidding, of course he was. "Blargh. Don't you need to stretch or something?!"


They started dancing around the room, John trying to avoid getting smacked and to get under Dave's guard and Dave smacking him liberally, the asshole.

When they circled around each other John could see Karkat standing on the mat, hands fisted but hanging at his sides, as Mr. Strider gave him a "come at me, bro" flick of his fingers.

"Whoa, your bro wants to spar with Karkat!" He dodged under a horizontal slash, knocked the weapon upwards, and missed Dave's stomach when Dave somehow hula-hooped out of the way. Goddamn slippery Strilondes.

"There a problem with that?" Dave replied, entirely neutral -- which despite what he thought about his amazing poker face wasn't actually a common occurrence.

"Um."

John could think of a few. (Karkat might refuse! Was Mr. Strider even allowed to take the risk? What if someone got hurt?) They were all silly though. Surely there'd been permission given, and even if there wasn't who would tell on Mr. Strider, and he wasn't going to beat Karkat black and blue anyway. John risked a quick glance over his shoulder. Karkat was still hesitating, shoulders and back tense, head turned just a little bit toward John like he wanted to call to him but knew better than to take his eyes off Strider.

"Nah. Go for it, Karkat!"

He threw in a thumbs up and a campy grin. Dave groaned quietly.

"You wink or even start to shape a pistol, I'm breaking all your fingers."

John waggled his eyebrows at Dave and mimed shooting him in the chest with both hands.

Dave sped up, and John got a little more serious, and for a while the gym resonated with smacking sounds of wood on skin and little grunts, a single "ha!" when John managed to trip Dave (who then came up swinging, but.)

On the next turn he could see Strider pointing at Dave and him, and then making a you-me gesture at Karkat. Karkat breathed in -- John caught Dave's foot as he tried to kick him in the knee and shoved him off -- and nodded.

Dave twisted around him, whacked him in the calf -- John had jumped up to save the back of his knee -- and forced him to turn his back on the other fight. Damn it.

And then Dave went on the defensive while throwing little glances over John's shoulder.
"You asshole!" John hissed quietly, and lunged. Instead of dodging to the side, Dave took a couple of steps back. "I want to watch too!"

Dave shrugged at him. John kicked the sword out of his hand. Whoops! Punch to the chest -- pulled before any real impact, of course.

"One for me!"

Dave lifted his hands in acknowledgement and ambled off to pick his weapon back up. "Good job, Egbert. What does that make, six to one?"

John grumbled, but didn't bother to answer, watching the other match from the corner of his eye.

If it could be called that. So far Mr. Strider was testing Karkat's defenses with careful little jabs, all in a predictable pattern, like he didn't want to spook him. Karkat wasn't doing too badly blocking, and was already less tense than when he'd started out. It was still the If I Fail I Will Be Thrown To The Crocodiles face -- gack!

"Dave!"

"Whoops, stole the good spot again."

Dave's face had gone bland of the "laughing at you inside" variety. John couldn't keep from grinning. They might be needling at each other but it didn't feel quite so distant anymore. Maybe Dave really just needed to beat him up a little...?

Well, try to. John still wasn't throwing a match, damn it! He let out a war cry and charged.

(Besides if he did throw it Dave would be more insulted than grateful, so it'd be a bad plan anyway.)

A wild grab for Dave's trailing sleeve-end as Dave dodged again and they were rolling in a ridiculous ball of teenage pilot limbs, heads knocked against each other and on the thankfully padded floor. All technique had flown away, it was now a matter of squirming and shoving each other back down and attempting to find a good hold while having your hair pulled and fingers smudged evilly over your glasses.

They only saw the tail end of it, a wild lunging slash, blood smearing from three scratches down Mr. Strider's forearm.

Dave went stiff; John's hand clenched on his shoulder and he flipped on his side under Dave to see the scene better. Karkat had gone into a low, tense crouch and while John couldn't see his face it was obvious he was trying to circle so he'd stop being between John and Dave and Mr. Strider. The scratches weren't bleeding much anymore -- nanites for the win -- but they went from wrist almost to elbow, cutting through a burn scar and narrowly missing that weird teeth-shaped scar on the inside of the man's forearm where it looked like he'd been trying to choke someone out and they'd bitten him really fucking hard.

Strider started smiling, a barely-there slash of thin lips.

John nudged Dave to get him off him and sat up to watch, all pretenses of sparring gone as the other pair circled slowly around the room.

Another pass had Strider avoiding two wild slashes of claws and hooking Karkat's nearest horn with two fingers to throw him to the ground; Karkat landed a bit hard on his shoulder but rolled off in a scrambling hurry, though Strider wasn't pushing the attack to axe-kick him in the stomach while he
was down like he would have with Roxy.

(Mostly because Roxy, he would have missed. John only deserved that kind of follow-up when he was being a dumbass, and even then the man usually pulled his kicks.)

"Hey, we don't know how easily they break off," John threw anyway, maybe a bit worried. Karkat's tiny gold-and-rust horns weren't much of a lever, but out of all the masses there was only a single troll with a broken horn in Karkat's memories, so either they were really hard to snap, or really easy and therefore not to be targeted.

"Actually, we do," Strider commented lazily, eyes not leaving Karkat's face for a second. (Karkat kept retreating around the room and he didn't look like he was having fun at all.) "Labs did a few stress tests. Structural integrity's about the same as thigh bone. Solid shit."

...They'd done stress tests on Karkat's horns. Neither of them was splintered (there was just that nail-sized bit shaved off the surface) so they had to have stopped when it started deforming under pressure.

John thought of sitting there as someone tested how far they could bend his fingers before they started threatening to come out of their sockets, and felt sick.

They'd slowly moved closer to Dave and John as they feinted and tried to grab each other, and John was pretty sure he and Dave should move, because Strider would totally kick them in passing for taking an unplanned sparring break if he got that close, but before John could move Karkat was breaking the standoff and running full tilt for him.

"Whoa, hey--" John leaned back, started to dodge -- those flying knees looked especially face-unfriendly -- but by then Karkat was already jumping over his leg.

Strider followed, slapping John's head in passing. Ow. John turned just in time to see Karkat vault over the arms of one of the running machines and slip underneath the next.

All the weight lifting machines and the gymnastic equipment had been parked to the side to free the middle of the room. It made a tangle of padded benches and bars and balance beams and vaulting horses. Strider came to a stop before them and then set his hands on his hips; Karkat had already negotiated his way through to the higher of the uneven bars, and the way he climbed -- the sense of balance he had, huh, by the time Mr. Strider caught up he'd already be exiting the mess by just about any other end, parkour style.

He was really not having fun. Crap. John climbed to his feet and joined Mr. Strider, winced at him. "I... don't think he gets the point of sparring. Like. Uh."

Strider sighed. "No fucking kidding." He stuck his hands in his pockets, tilted his head; it was like he was trying to telegraph harmless but in John's opinion he mostly managed 'still deciding whether to bother hunting you down.' "Karkat? What's up, dude."

"... Nnh."

Dave ambled up to them, crossed his arms pointedly as he looked up at the alien. Karkat's eyes kept twitching from Mr. Strider to John himself, like he wanted to tell John something but kept stopping himself. (Maybe 'help me already!!' Yeah, maybe that. Um.)

A slow shake of Dave's head. "What the heck, he's so goddamn high strung. You do a sucky job of keeping his tits chilled, Egbert."
John huffed. "I'd like to see you in his place, wow. High strung. Okay, he's kinda twitchy but--"

"No, twitchy is for Jake after a battle. This is hair triggery." Dave's brow furrowed some as he looked things over. "Bro, sit your tush down maybe? Far as he knows you'll pounce the second he comes back out."

John blinked at him. Since when did Dave try to help smooth things over with Karkat, seriously.

"Yeeeah," Mr. Strider drawled, and went to recline very pointedly against the running machine. "See, the thing is, I'm pretty sure he thinks Imma beat his face in if he comes out. Sitting's just gonna look like I'm trying to lure him out. He ain't gonna do that on his own anytime soon."

"Huh. You want we go get him?"

Strider snorted. "Cornering the freaked out dude with the butcher hooks on his hands. Sounds like a plan."

John couldn't help but snicker at the way Dave almost pouted. "I meant if John went first and played nice, he won't claw him up."

Karkat was still watching them from his perch, but he seemed to be deflating some. John tried an encouraging smile. "Karkat? Come on, buddy. C'mere."

The look he got was 'are you fucking crazy'; he kept smiling, head tilted.

Karkat took in a deep, bracing breath and let himself slip to the floor, picked his careful way through the machines' legs. He emerged off to the side, past the corner of the second running machine. He walked upright pretty normally, but his expression -- wow, no, yeah, still freaked out, the red part of his eyes was huge. John reached out to put a hand on his shoulder.

"You okay? What's--"


Karkat walked the rest of the way to the man, eyelids at half-mast, carefully expressionless.

Strider lifted his injured arm -- Karkat winced imperceptibly, aw, dude -- and brushed the flakes of drying blood off, smearing the rest some; underneath he still had pretty long, raw-looking red lines, but the slices were closed up already.

"It's fine. You did pretty good with that one. Be better if you'd stood your ground, but I guess you ain't too used to sparring."

Karkat's eyelids twitched. "... Good?"

"Mhn. That slash--" he mimicked it; "--good. Running -- well, in a real fight it's also good. In here it's not."

He stepped to the side, bent down casually to rummage through a backpack, emerged with baby wipes which he applied to his dirty arm. Karkat was still tense and looking confused, staring down at the man; John stepped up to him and gently knocked his knuckles on the alien's shoulder.

"Karkat? It's okay, you're fine."

Karkat blinked up at him, red irises slowly going back to something closer to their normal size. "Ah - - nhh."
"Okay?" John prompted, eyebrows arched doubtfully. Karkat grumbled at him, eyebrows furrowing.

"Mnkay."

"Oh, come on, I know you know how to say that one."

"Fuck you Zhann kay."

Dave cleared his throat in a way that only accidentally resembled a laugh. Also, John had a bridge to sell in London, real old and pretty grungy, real cheap.

"Now who taught him to say those bad, bad words. They should be punished." Dave waggled his eyebrows, mouth pinched in a not entirely convincing straight line.

John considered it. "Pretty sure it was Jade."

Karkat growled under his breath and sidled closer so he could kick the side of John's foot. "Fuck and fuck you. It's word good. And fuck you again."

"It's so sad how I know what you really want to say involves probably a crapton of body holes I don't even have and like half the contents of this room," John commiserated, nodding sadly. Karkat kicked his foot again.

"Zhann you dumb shit stupid face."

"He's got you pegged, though," Dave said. John grabbed for him to administer a well-deserved noogie.

"Kids," Mr. Strider said, which brought everyone from a mildly guilty (John) to frankly stiff (Karkat) stop.

He was standing again, tugging his gloves back in place; John leaned his shoulder against Karkat before Karkat could stare at them too much. Seriously it was like he expected the dude to beat him half to death with his fists.

"Try again?" John asked, nodding toward Dave in question.

"Hm. Nah. Dave, run through the third to sixth kata. John, Karkat, you're sparring. Come on."

They went back to the middle of the room; Karkat looked briefly relieved when Strider stood off to the side and John lifted his fists instead, and then worried again. At least not about to freak out, though.

"Little fight! Nice fight! And no scratching my face, please, I like my eyeballs."

"You're wearing glasses anyway, worry more about shards," Strider commented. "Go."

They went. John kept it cautious, playful, a smile firmly affixed to his face. He had to bop Karkat's nose before he got a response, an annoyed hiss and slash that would have flayed the inside of his elbow had he dodged any slower. Whoa. He tripped Karkat and landed him on his butt in retaliation, and then he was on the floor being kicked at while his leg was trapped in a bear hug.

"You're dead," Strider commented placidly. "He gutted you and slit your throat. Karkat, your nose is broken by his knee in his death throes."

Karkat startled and blinked up at him, hearing his name, went tense when Strider went around them.
to John's side and guided his knee forward to illustrate the theoretical impact with John's knee. John 
obligingly gurgled, trying not to laugh at how silly it was, acting it out; Karkat considered the both of 
them with a little thoughtful frown for a couple of seconds, then cautiously nudged the ball of his 
foot on the underside of John's jaw. John groaned and rolled loosely on the floor in surrender, 
playing dead.

"Bluuurgh. He's wearing shoes!" John pointed out, rolling on his back so he could look at Mr. 
Strider, who had stepped back out of range. "I'd just be bruised."

"Cotton tops? He pushes a bit, his claws pop through like a dream. Also... hm. Get him to do it 
again."

Rubbing his hipbone, John climbed back up on his feet. "Why?"

"'Cause if my theory is correct he was trained to fight with blade-tipped boots. He didn't expect your 
rib cage would stop him. His claws aren't that sharp."

"Charming," John groaned.

Even Karkat was beating him today, blurgh. But he didn't want to fight more seriously against him. 
Like, really not. Karkat really was no good at playful roughhousing.

He tripped Karkat again, but this time the alien rolled away and bounced back into a crouch, started 
circling. He was still wary, though mostly of Strider, who he kept glancing at nervously, as if to ask 
if he was doing it right yet. Strider, of course, was wall-faced as usual. John huffed out a rueful laugh 
and charged again.

Ten minutes later they had learned that when startled Karkat went for the arteries with disturbing 
proficiency, and that the next time John grabbed him by the wrists and refused to let go he needed to 
be wearing a cup.

Fucking ow.

"Bud?" Dave asked, half-horrified and half-laughing, the asshole.

Karkat had basically used John's hold on him for support to jump up and double-kick him in the 
junk. John had dodged some.

Some. "... ffff thank fuck for nanomachines," he managed to groan, still curled up on his side on the 
floor.

"Uhn. Zhann? You -- urr. No good?"

"No shit I'm not good." John let out a half-faked whimper. "Mean. So mean. I will never have 
children. No Little Johns. Never!"

"We don't need to know what you call your junk, bro, for serious. It's so unimaginative it makes 
mine curdle, for one."

"Karkat?" John asked, breathing carefully. The pain was getting more manageable already, but he 
still didn't want to move, though it was mostly psychological. "Kick Dave. Dave is stupid dumb. 
Kick him."

Karkat snorted at him, and leaned over him, hands on his knees. "Uh no. You kick Dev. Da-yve. 
Him."
John narrowed his eyes and uncoiled, swiping Karkat's ankles and yanking him down on his ass. He rolled off after that -- no pinning the alien, he was *not that dumb* -- and punched his shoulder, not too hard. Karkat hissed between his teeth and sprang back up.

What they learned next was that Karkat didn't do boxing. Outside of kicks, tripping, and clawing, he mostly tried to grab John's arms to throw him to the ground, and his technique just wasn't good enough; John could throw him two times out of three. (The third, he escaped, though his shirt made a nice tearing noise that had him swearing in alienese.)

"Hah! You should have kicked Dave. Kiiiick Dave. You owe me!"

"Rhhshth kick you!" He did. Nowhere near John's crotch. John was understandably cautious about that one, but he didn't even try for it. Good; John was willing to forgive him once for that one, not twice!

It was getting weirdly fun, actually. John was enjoying himself. Karkat was still frowning a little, but he frowned all the time! This one was a little furrow of concentration, not so much of the crocodile face. And he didn't glance at Mr. Strider to check he wasn't doing anything wrong half as often now.

"Hehe, gotcha! So slow, Karkat, so slow!"

"Shit-ass face-- hah!"

"Ow! You dick."

"You dick."

"Are you guys done goofing around yet?" Strider drawled, and took a couple of steps closer, making them both stop moving right where they were. "You're leaving enough openings to drive a mech through."

He took John's arm, repositioned it, circled behind him and kicked his heel a few inches to the left. "Okay, Karkat, do it again." Karkat did, dubiously, much slower. Strider guided John's hand through a parry. "See? Now his claws are facing away, you grab his wrist and high-kick at his face. No space to dodge."

They went through it another three times until John felt he had it, Karkat going along with it with his 'I am Having Thoughts but I will Not Show Them Shut Up I Am Not Transparent As Shit' face on. He went straight to 'I am Having Thoughts and all of them are Oh Fuck' the second Strider circled around to him, predictably.

"And here's your parry -- hm. Can I touch you?"

A little twitch, a quick inhale. "...Yes."

John watched as Strider placed a hand on Karkat's shoulder and one on his wrist, slowly extending his arm into a punch, then testing how far his elbow could rotate in full extension.

"Huh. Muscle's not attached quite the same." He traced a line along his own shoulder muscles, left arm extended parallel to Karkat's right to show him what he meant. "Interesting. Okay then, try it like this..."

He made them continue like that for a while longer, fighting at half-speed and then pausing, rewinding to fix a mistake or use a less dangerous counter, seeing what would happen differently. It might allow John to breathe more easily than the earlier sparring matches, and it was pretty
interesting, but he was still getting kind of tired.

"Alright, we're done sparring for today. Walk around for a while, wind down."

He shooed them off. John stepped back and stretched his arms overhead, bent over to grab his ankles and round his back, groaning a little. It was mostly pleasure; god had he missed the nice warm ache of a good training session.

Though now he kind of wanted to get on one of the training machines... Maybe tomorrow.

"C'mon, Karkat, let's walk."

Karkat grumbled half-heartedly, but followed, steps a little dragging, rolling his head on his shoulders cautiously. "What do we... r'ht? What word. Rss't."

"What do we do... now? Later?"


John chuckled. "Dude, don't ask me about grammar, it's just how it is. Now we walk, and after that we... I don't know. Watch some TV?"

Karkat glowered at him, eyes big and scowly in affront. "Oh no. No. TV fuck you no."

"Hey, fuck the TV, not me. I didn't do anything to you!" John snickered. "Okay, no, don't fuck the TV, you'll hurt yourself. Hehe."

Karkat predictably punched him in the shoulder. Not very hard; John felt honor-bound to shove him back anyway.

"Hrrm. What is fuck mean? What do fuck mean. ... Do...z?"

John cleared his throat pointedly. "Oh look, Dave and Mr. Strider, that's badass!"

"Zhann! What doz mean fuck. Zhann -- hrrst."

John whistled innocently. With a last harrumph, Karkat relented.

They spent the next two minutes walking super slowly along the side of the gym and watching the Striders fancying it up with their swords and their unfair bursts of speed everywhere and their spinal-column-optional moves.

"Shiiit."

John nodded. "Yeah, I'd say."

He sneaked Karkat a look. The alien was watching intently, red eyes flicking fast to try to take in every single movement, analyze them. It wasn't really possible; at this speed it was mostly ingrained reflexes and by the time conscious thought unpacked what had happened and why they were already three moves ahead.

He caught Karkat's hands twitching, claws curling, smoothing out, aborted karate chops.

It made sense when he imagined them as biomech moves, Karkat's hands as huge crab's claws, trying to figure out counters with weapons he was used to.
Dave was suddenly chucked ass over teakettle into the closest pile of mats. Mr. Strider propped his wooden sword on his shoulder and drawled something that made Dave huff and flip him the bird. The second he was upright again he was pulled in for a noogie.

"Ow, ow, bro, not cool. Damn it, you'll mess up my 'do, no seriously stop. Can I be done now? Like, can I go eat something and maybe piss, or probably piss first, that'd also be cool -- ow."

Strider released him. "Yeah, no, shower first, you're rank. I did not raise a gross little asshole."

"Said the biggest, grossest asshole -- ow. Okay, okay, Jesus."

Dodging a last sword swat at his ass, Dave went to the bag to get a towel and wipe his face dry. Strider turned to them, arched an eyebrow. "Still here? Want another round?"

"Fuck no," said Karkat, with feeling and without any prompting. John had no clue if he'd understood all the words or just a few key ones and extrapolated from realizing Mr. Strider was a sadistic bastard, but it had John laughing either way.

"Yeah, no kidding. We're just -- uh, Dave, you gonna be ready to go soon?"

It had just occurred to him that maybe Dave didn't want to walk back with them. Um.

Dave straightened up, a towel around his neck, and watched them (John presumed? hard to say) in unnerving silence for a couple of seconds.

"Yeah, okay, why not. Not like I could lose you in the corridors, hardly a proper maze, we should mention that next time we renovate."

John gave a bright, wide grin. "Buddy, it's too late, I've got your scent now, I will track you to the end of the universe."

Halfway to the shower room it predictably turned into a shoving contest, and then into a race. Karkat ambled after them, and sighed and rolled his eyes at the ceiling a lot.

--

Scrubbed pink, they wandered down to the kitchen, still as a group. It was barely seven PM, and John and Karkat usually wouldn't eat for another hour at least, but John had to admit that the exercise had sharpened his appetite. Plus he totally had the excuse of keeping Dave company.

Mr. Strider was seated at the table with Doctor Lalonde; John's dad was in the kitchen corner, puttering. There were no plates in front of Dave's Bro and the Doc, though there were some laid out, probably for the three of them.

"Hey, Dad! Do you need any help?" he asked, going to the counter. Dave seated himself silently by Mr. Strider's side; Karkat, when John turned around, was gingerly taking a seat at the farthest corner, head bowed.

"Still thinking I'm gonna kidnap his gray butt and stick it full of needles, huh," the Doc mused into her coffee cup.

His dad shooed John away empty-handed, so he wandered back to the table, pulled out a chair between Karkat and the Wicked Witch of the West. "Well, can you blame him, really?"

"Nah." A little shrug. "Weird from my side too. But we're totally going to have to put him through a
checkup soonish. Like tomorrow or the next day soonish. Try to make sure he understands it's not going to be anything all that invasive, yeah?"

He was not going to like it either way. John sighed, sneaked Karkat a look. Yeah, he'd have to explain that really well. "Can we have the checkup here? I mean, not in the labs. I think it'll really help with everyone's stress levels."

"Hm. Should be doable."

His dad left the kitchen corner, carrying heavenly-smelling pans that had John's stomach suddenly waking up and groaning. He still had to suffer through his dad serving Dave first, since he'd been up in the air, and then Karkat since he was kind of like a guest if you squinted, before his plate was filled in turn.

"Thanks, Dad!" Mmm, Beef Wellington and baked potatoes.

Dad must have had some free time this afternoon; he rarely had time to cook like this outside of weekends. John was too busy eating to wonder much.

"Aw yess, this is fuc-- fantastically delicious, Mr. Egbert, I mean, yeah. I think I'll probably need seconds," Dave said after a while, and then tried to look regretful. (He failed.)

"Finish your plate first," John's dad advised with a chuckle, and went back to the conversation the other two adults were having.

It took John a couple of seconds and a mouth full of delicious potato to register that they were talking about Karkat.

"...not that he's exceptionally skilled," Mr. Strider was saying. "Not a lot of formal training past the basics, though he's got those down pretty good. He just doesn't fuck around. Gets into a fight, he's planning to end it, permanently."

"That is pretty dangerous," the Doc replied with a little frown. John blinked.

"Well, he's also of the school of thought that says there ain't no shame in running the fuck away if the other guy's meaner, and I haven't heard of any aggression issues with people closer to his weight class. Still not advising letting him run around with civilians, mind."

John swallowed his mouthful, and leaned in a bit to listen. Dave didn't seem interested, though it was always hard to tell with him.

"He gets sparring, but only just. Kept expecting me to pull a dirty trick, and he's got no reason to expect me to hurt him, so. Experience."

John's dad hummed thoughtfully, fingers tapping at the table. "So he is not physically aggressive unless attacked first, chooses avoiding fights over, ah, salving his honor, or venting his own anger, but on the other hand he's also fairly defensive..."

"He's probably killed in hand to hand before," the Doc pointed out. "If his fight-or-flight reflex is that hair-triggery, someone must have triggered it before. And in space? I don't care how aliens set up their ships, I really doubt there's a lot of wide open spaces to escape through."

John winced. He'd never really seen that in Karkat's mind, but there were whole swathes of memories Karkat wanted him to keep a wide berth from, so who knew. It... it seemed a little bit likely, anyway, considering that John kept feeling like maybe Karkat didn't have a whole lot of
friends, and a lot of the other people he’d been saddled with were kind of assholes to him. The way he thought of cat-ears girl and broken-horn dude and that other dude with the four little pig-sticker horns had an undertone of I have no one else.

"...enough control to rein himself in, if he knows it wouldn't be tolerated?"

"Yeah, I ain't worried about that."

"So we're agreed. I'll email Hass."

"What are you guys talking about?!" John finally sputtered, leaning in to stare at them all in turn. They were deciding something about Karkat, okay, yes, but what??

"Wipe your chin, John."

John wiped his chin. Then he frowned. "Hey, come on, Dad, answer me!"

The three of them exchanged super-annoying speaking looks. Argh.

Then his dad gave him a patient little smile. "Well, Karkat has been behaving, so we were discussing allowing the two of you to leave the building."

John stared for a second, and then fist-pumped with both hands and went "YEEEEESSSSS."

"We still need to--"

"Oh my god. Oh my god, it's Christmas. Karkat, it's Christmas."

"Son. Son. We still need to determine which areas of the island he'll be permitted to--"

"Christmas!"

"--and of course he still cannot be alone--"

John pushed himself up, chair making a loud noise against the floor as he shoved it back. "I don't care! Oh my god, we can leave the building. This is the best day ever. Karkat, we can go outside."

Karkat and Dave were both staring at him with identical tired oh-John-what-now faces.

Also his plate still had some garnish and meat left. It called him back with sad unloved whimpers. He sat back down to wolf it down, though his leg kept twitching in impatience. "Seriously! Outside! Hurry up, we're going right the hell now."

"Language, John."

"... Right the heck now?"

His dad sighed, shaking his head.

Karkat cleared his throat, cautiously leaning in so he could look at the adults. "Out... side is what?"

"Do you remember when Jade taught you right, left, up, down...?" the Doc asked, fingers elegantly flicking through indicative motions. Karkat gave a cautious nod; she drew a square shape on the table with her nail, tapped the wood. "In-side. Out-side."

"Oh." Karkat blinked once, then again. "Oh." He looked up at John, eyes a little wide, back
straightening out of his wary, depressed slouch. "Out-side now?"

"Hell yes." John did a little shimmy-dance along the table, and did not let the Striders' bland looks deter him any. It totally was a victory dance occasion, okay.

"Nowhere near civilians, John," his father repeated, insisting. "Can we convince you to wait until tomorrow?"

"Uh sorry no. We've been doing nothing for ages and it's like not even seven thirty, there is totally time for a nice long walk." Or a race. Or rock-climbing. Oh, rock-climbing. Swimming?

"...Very well. Strider, if you wouldn't mind warning Mister Noir he needs to be ready to move his men..."

John beamed, and started gathering his empty plate and cutlery. Karkat was on his feet imitating him in the next second, even though he wasn't quite done emptying his plate. All the meat was gone, at any rate. John figured he wasn't gonna die of hunger from missing a couple of mouthfuls.

It needed to be a party. A celebration. Freedom for all! Okay, just for the two of them, but still. He fired up his glasses' instant messenger.

JH: beach party right the heck now!! shuffle your big fat butts, everyone who can!! :D
JH: people who can't, no whining, you did so go out without me i don't know how many times and damn straight i am going to be remorseless.

"Dave, you coming with us?" he called back as he went to stuff his armful in the dishwasher.

"Eh. Maybe for a walk, but if you drag me into another stupid puppy fight I am taking my beach towel and swanning home. Too tired for this bullshit."

"Yeah, yeah, okay!"

"I'm serious, John, you shove me in the water or anything like that..."

"I would never," John lied, and picked the glass Dave had just finished emptying right out of his hand to cart back to the dishwasher. Karkat hurried by him, a sponge in hand to clean the table.

JK: Well john that sounds like a frabjous idea!!
JK: Sadly im about to pchoo off our dear old dirtball for the moonbase. But next time i will totally be your man!
RX: lolololollo taht sounded kinda SALACIOUS
DR: I will miraculously happen to be free in another fifteen minutes, if my predictions hold. Bring drinks and I might consider joining you there.
JK: Madame lalonde that was a totally unfounded accusation! Im extremely shocked where did that allegation even come from??
JH: consider drinks brought! what kind though because i'm pretty sure the parental units are watching the beer levels. /
JH: and sorry jake, that was totally salacious. shocking amounts of salacious actually. i am completely aflutter at your shamelessness.
RX: omg aflutee means blushy means... ........ .......
RX: twinceeeeest?? :D
JH: eeeewww. dude, you really need to find yourself some good porn already. or failing that go to the mainland and twink-watch for a while, idk.
DV: rox for the last time the only torrid incestuous affair not happening in this joint is mine and roses...
secret longing thing that none of yall know about

DR: You mean the one where you keep playing gay chicken with your biological sister who also happens to be at least 65% lesbian?

RX: im prity sure tats still called bein bi doofus XDD

DR: And *losing*?

DV: our nonlove transcends all gender biases and societal norms

DV: ur just jelly

JH: man, do we really need to socialize with people our age who don't share, like, half our genes at a minimum, or what. :/

DR: Amen.

DV: amen

RX: afukkenmen

RX: lolololo fukin men inDEEDS

JK: I dont want to imply i dont enjoy socializing with the lot of you upstanding citizens but ill have to chime in with another regretful amen there.

RX: whoops gotta rendezvous w/mariens big ..... ship thing

RX: mmmm men in unfirom

RX: SEE U GUYZ LATERH DONT DRINK ALL TEH BOOZE W/OUT ME

DV: yeah bye rox have fun smacking privates butts

JH: bye, maybe next time!

JH: dirk, i am totally going to sneak a few beers out like a sneaky ninja right past my dad and your bro, that is a thing i will do just for you!

JH: but probably some other day because karkat's about to catch my hair on fire with his glare. :B

JH: ALL ABOARD THE BEACHHAMMER, DEPARTURE IN THREE... TWO... ONE...

PCHOOO!

The thing with brain-typed conversations was that typing happened almost as quick as thought. It hadn't lasted that long! Karkat was glaring anyway, toes curling to grip the edges of his flip-flops with his claws.

Laughing, John went to pick up a pack of soda cans in the kitchen, and threw his free arm around his shoulders on the way back to the door. "Okay, we're going!"

"Take beach towels, John."

Argh damn it they were almost free! "Aw, Dad! We're not gonna swim--"

"Towels anyway."

"I'll get 'em," Dave offered, finally lifting his butt off his chair.

"Thanks!" John threw back, and then "we'll wait for you downstairs!" because, seriously, outside.

He hauled Karkat to the stairs and Karkat didn't even protest, only elbowed him a little when John started dragging him down the stairs which okay was a little dangerous. They stampeded down like a very small herd of buffalos.

"Outside!" Karkat yelled at him as they raced down the last segment of corridor.

"Booyah!" John yelled back, and borderline rammed the door with his shoulder.

That would have broken it, though, and they might have gotten stuck inside, so he only bumped it some, and opened it normally after that. Karkat stepped on the back of his heel and jumped over the last two steps to plant himself on the packed earth of the courtyard, feet set apart like a conqueror. He
scanned the courtyard -- ground level first, then the rooftops, the couple of men with rifles Noir was letting them see. They were pretty much always there whenever they went to the roof anyway, so it didn't really surprise either John or Karkat much; Karkat just noted them with a little grunt and then took a few slow, aimless steps forward.

"...What now?"

"We wait for Dave, and then we go to the beach."

"We, go, to, the..." he repeated slowly under his breath, and added a few alien words that were probably a translation. "What beach?"

John grinned wide and devious. "Wait and see, hehehe."

Karkat turned to stare at him, eyes gone narrow. "I want kick you on the face."

"I want to kick you in the face," John corrected as innocently as possible, and took a bouncing step backward when Karkat shifted his weight all on one foot menacingly. "But that was pretty good!"

"Fuck you good."

"Huh, talking about salacious... Should I come back later or something?"

"Dave!" John exclaimed. Dave closed the front door behind him. He had a couple of towels draped around his neck, over his tanktop, and he'd changed his combat boots for ratty old sneakers. He did look kind of tired; John managed somehow to rein himself in and not start dragging him around like an overexcited puppy on a leash.

"I think he was more, like, getting annoyed at the 'you did good' thing. But yeah wow, did that come out wrong."

"I think he came out just right."

John narrowed his eyes at Dave and swung the pack of cans at his legs. Dave ambled bonelessly off the steps, dodging effortlessly. Karkat was watching them in irritated confusion, as he so often did.

"You know he actually, legit does have a boyfriend, right? He is totally alien gay. I think that makes it off limits to joke about."

"Alien, alien," Karkat grumbled from John's other side. He had his hands stuffed in his cargo pants pockets, and it was a bit hilarious to see his grumpy face over the smiling green ghost slime logo on his shirt. "Alien no. K'hrkat."

John winced a little. "Aw, no, not alien-Karkat. Alien-your people?" he said, waving at the slowly darkening sky overhead. "I guess that's rude maybe."

Karkat was still frowning a little, but then they turned the corner and there was a slope to look at, a path in the shadow of the building with grass and vegetation trying to grow back over it. Karkat had seen it from the roof, but -- obviously -- never from this angle, and the air was so nice in the shade with the sun going down, so oddly still, like it was waiting for something.

They were almost to the far corner of the building when John's glasses beeped.

JD: wait for me, im coming too!!!
JD: im finishing breakfast STAY WHERE YOU ARE!!
JH: OH HELL NO, WE'RE NOT WAITING A SECOND LONGER!!

"Hurry, Karkat! Jade's coming for us!"

He started to run, pack of soda in hand. Karkat followed half out of being too startled to question it; Dave groaned. "Hell no, I am not running from Jade, I'm not running from anyone-- ack!"

John caught up to Karkat, Dave thrown across his shoulders, and kept running down the path. Dave pounded weakly on his shoulder and wheezed.

"What?" Karkat demanded as he paced him, throwing Dave little glances that looked almost worried. "What -- Zeydh?"

"Aha!" she exclaimed from above, just as they turned the corner where the path led off under the trees. The fiend!

"That's cheating!" he protested; she was at his dad's window! So unfair. He kept pelting down the path, but he knew what was going on behind them. Jade would be swinging from the windowsill for a second, and then letting go and jumping for the rain pipe at the corner and shimmying down it like a squirrel going in reverse. He hadn't been able to do that for a couple of years now -- he was too heavy for the pipes to take his weight -- and his father's room being above the gym floor, the drop straight from the window was a bit too high to land safely.

The path was downhill from there but there was also a lot of twists and turns, and Jade would cut straight through. John was hindered enough by Dave's weight already. Eyes narrowed, he leapt over a huge crawling root and charged through the bushes.

"Egbert! -- fuck's sake -- hate you -- put me -- put me down -- gonna die -- gonna throw up -- gonna piss on you I swear to fuck your shoulder's in my bladder ow ow motherfuck--"

"I'm coming to save you, Dave!" Jade yelled somewhere far too close behind them.

"Help, help, I'm gonna piss--"

Behind him Karkat suddenly jumped aside like a startled deer and went low, yelping something in alienese. Jade swiped at the back of Karkat's t-shirt and missed. John put on a burst of speed, jumped like a horse across a Bec-sized root and the murky hole full of rainwater behind it, and even mostly cleared it (his sneaker was gross now, who cared.) He could see the beach...!

Five seconds later he was seeing it super closely, because Jade had just tackled the shit out of him right into the first sand dune.

"Oof."

"I win!" Jade hopped off John, and then grabbed Dave under the armpits and hauled him off, helped him back on his feet. "Dashing rescue complete."

Dave mock-swooned back into her. "My prince."

John spat out some sand and threw a handful at their legs. Jade stuck out her tongue at him.

J.Noir: if you don't stay where you are for another two whole minutes i will shank you.
JD: :p well go slowly!
John snorted under his breath and sat up. Like they didn't have infrared scanners locked onto their body heats already.

Karkat was standing at the edge of the woods, massaging the bridge of his nose and muttering to himself, flip-flops dangling from his other hand. "How big, you," he growled.

Jade nudged Dave off her and grinned back. "How old are you, Khrkat. Not very old! Not a lot of old."

"I know. I know a lot."

"Buuuuurn," Dave muttered, and made an explosion noise.

"Pff," John and Jade went together.

Jade started for the water line, Dave ambling after her after a few seconds. John looked at Karkat, pointed at the sand stretching around the cove. "Beach. This is the beach. Sand, water, beach."

"Huh."

It was a really nice beach. The sand was a really pale blond and trees and huge ferns stretched over it some to provide shade, there were some big rocks here and there to clamber on... The waves lapped tirelessly at the sand, and then there was the cove their island stretched around, and the temple island peeking out alone in the middle. It was all, in John's admittedly biased opinion, super pretty.

He took off his shoes, went to walk in the foam, smiling at how ticklish it all was. Karkat paced him, walking gingerly toward the top edge of the wet, packed sand, head lowered as if to watch his footing.

He looked oddly sad.

John wasn't supposed to notice when it happened. He'd been trying not to. Karkat had been trying to hide it, too, and -- and.

"Karkat?" he said, quiet enough that the sound of the waves would hide it from Dave and Jade.

Karkat jerked, stared up at him -- those eyes, shit, wild grieving beast.

John opened his mouth to say -- he wasn't sure what, what was there to say that wouldn't get him clawed up? What was there to say that would help? Karkat turned his face away, shoulders stiff, and stomped ahead.

Argh.

J.Noir: in position.
JH: awesome.
J.Noir: he gets more than ten feet away from the beach, i'm sending divers after him.

They didn't even know if Karkat knew how to swim. John sighed and sped up some to catch up. Jade was splashing around in the shallows, on her way back to the bank, hands cupped. "Look, Karkat, a starfish!"

John stood ankle-deep in the waves and watched her drag Karkat to the damp flat sands and find an abandoned bit of shell to draw with. She plopped the starfish down in Karkat's hand, who blinked at it in wary bafflement when it moved a bit, and she bent down to start sketching out illustrations for
her words. "Starfish are awesome. See, you can tear them in two -- like this, right down the middle -- and then they're all, oh, try harder, was this supposed to hurt? and bam! some time later you end up with two starfish."

She added gleeful eyes and smug grins on the twin starfish at the end of the line. Karkat snorted, caught by surprise, pressed his lips together to contain a smile and failed to get the corners of his mouth down far enough to make it in any way convincing.

"In conclusion," she finished, straightening up and slapping her palms together to get the sand off, "starfish are badass. Roar!" Grinning, she took it back from Karkat's hand and flung it back in the water.

"Zeydh you're dumb."

"No, you're dumb -- oh, I bet there are more beasties in this pool, come on."

John watched Jade hijack his alien and did not pout at all.

At least he'd stopped looking so sad.

A few minutes later Dave decided he wasn't walking any farther and threw his towels across the sand, and then himself across the both of them. John snorted at him, checked on Karkat -- still poking around in the rocks with Jade -- and stripped down to his underwear. He left his glasses on top of the pile and went to swim a few lengths. The water was nice and warm, the waves lazy.

(He needed some time alone, too, some time just to be by himself and not have to keep track of anyone else.)

He came back ashore to the sun half past the horizon, shoulders pleasantly tired. Jade was pulling Dave by the hands in the shallows and she glared menacingly at him when he made to swim up behind Dave. Oh well. Dirk was sitting in the sand beside Karkat, a soda can in hand, and he supposed that Sneaking behind them might be fun too.

"--Zehk is rhhst."

"Yeah, sure, but we're not talking personality here." Dirk tapped the sand between his feet. "This."

Karkat let out a short, chuffing laugh, just a little self-conscious. "This yes good. Hmm... Zehk, Zade."

"I'll take your word on Jade. Next?"


Dirk snorted, recoiled just a little bit, deliberate. It was weird to see any Strider using body language to communicate, but then again when the verbal language wasn't there John supposed there was little choice.

"I will really take you at your word for--"

"Zhann."

"Oh?" There was something amused and low-throated in Dirk's voice.

Karkat hissed quickly, pointed behind him. "Zhann here."
Dirk threw a look over his shoulder at John, and quickly moved his foot to erase the drawing he'd made in the sand. John bounced forward, planted both hands over his shoulders and dragged him back to stop him.

It was just vertical parallel lines with weird bumps in the middle, though. Boo.

"What were you talking about, guys?" he asked with a grin, and released Dirk's shoulder before he could decide to kick John in the face. (Okay, probably just the chest, but still, ow.)

"You don't want to know," Dirk replied, and reclined on an elbow like he'd decided to lean back and not like John had pushed him down, so he could look at Karkat past John's legs. "Anyway, yes on Jake, Jade and Bro are no for me."


"Why's the right one." Dirk gave John a pointed look. "Don't you have sandcastles to build or something? You're really not going to enjoy the conversation."

John narrowed his eyes and sat down between them, his back to the sea, and grabbed and opened a can pointedly. "Just try me."

"Okay. Don't say I didn't warn you." Back to Karkat. "Jade is a girl. I'm meh on breasts." He mimed chest bumps. John coughed on his first mouthful.

"You were checking people out?!"

Dirk ignored him royally, and Karkat only flicked him a weighing glance before he went back to frowning at Dirk, puzzled. "Breast meh? Ne'h ass."

"It's still a girl ass. Not my thing."

"Oh my god you guys are talking about Jade's ass."

"According to Karkat standards, it's on par with Jake's, and according to my standards that means she should be hella flattered. Stop derailing, John."

"And Striderr no what? ...Why?"

"He's old!" John protested. "Seriously, he's old! And you have a boyfriend! That's bad, Karkat, that's super bad."

Dirk shook his head slowly. "I was more concerned with the fact that he doesn't seem to have an incest taboo but thanks for your opinion."

"Oh right. Karkat, Dirk can't look at his bro's butt, that's gross! It's his bro! No no no. Forbidden. No."

Karkat kept staring, eyebrows quirked doubtfully, awaiting a better explanation.

"Hey, guys!" Jade called out as she approached, dripping everywhere. Dirk handed her a towel; she started rubbing briskly. "What are we talking about?"

"Incest, clonecest, and whether I'd tap Bro's ass."

Dave stopped walking to stare. Jade just nodded cheerfully. "Okay!"
John was surrounded by deviants. "That doesn't even surprise you?!

"Of course not, he didn't even know we were mammals!" She dropped the towel on the sand and sat cross-legged, started smoothing down a wide arc of sand. "Karkat, remember Dad and John? Dirk and Mister Strider are the same. Sex things between them are eeuurgh."

"Anyone teach him what sex even means," Dave drawled, "like, the word?" and hip-checked Jade's shoulder so he could perch a corner of his butt on her towel.

"Sex is fucking," Dirk said calmly even as John was hesitating between panic and making up something outrageous to see if Karkat would believe it. Dirk then made an obscene gesture with a middle finger and his other hand's fingers in a circle that John's dad would have totally grounded him for.

"--Oh. That. Okay."

Meanwhile Jade was drawing lines on the sand. "Look, this is Nanna, and this is Grandpa -- General Harley." She traced a line straight down from Nanna, called it Jane, a line from her grandpa and called it Jake. "Those are weird. Normal people don't do it like that. What they do is... Grandpa and Nanna --" she patted her belly, mimed it swelling; Karkat grimaced but nodded, leaning forward to watch the sand and her face more closely. "--made John and Jade."

"Hrrm."

"Not clear? Okay. Mister Strider, Doctor Lalonde. We take Mister Strider, make Dirk -- you understand this one?"

Karkat nodded, like he got it just fine, and then blinked. "Na'l Dzeneral -- Zake?"

Dave snorted. "Yeah, that one baffles everyone."

"Huhn. ... Huhn. Who Nanna?"

John gave a little, awkward smile. "She died. Gurrghgh." He swooned against Dave, head lolling.

"Oh. Okay."

"Nanna and her first husband--" Jade traced the lines, scowled. "--Mister Egbert. This one is really confusing. We should have started with the Strilondes, it was less weird! Okay, so, Mister Strider, Dirk, Doctor Lalonde, Roxy, and the Doc and Bro together made Rose and Dave. I have no clue how we're gonna explain adoption in the context of incest taboos, guys!"

Karkat meanwhile was staring at the family trees in the sand. "Rhoz -- Stri-der and Doct'rr? Hfff." He nodded slowly, whistled something that sounded impressed.

"Oi, oi, I'm made of just as many bits of Bro and the Doc as she is," Dave grumbled. Karkat arched an eyebrow at him, shrugged his disdain.

"Small bad bits. Rhoz get big al'thsk fuckbits."

"... Say, do you know how to swim, dude, because if not it's time you learned."

John was laughing his ass off, but he still grabbed Dave's arm to keep him down in case he did start trying to drag Karkat into the sea. Not that he was even moving, but it'd probably end in really unfunny ways, so... just in case.
Jade was laughing too, but she tried to restrain it. It did not work super well. "Anyway! Anyway. Where there's a line, or a person in common, eeuurgh, no, no, no. No sex. Ever. Ewww. Me and John, nooo, me and Jake, no no no, me and Grandpa, super no. Do you understand?"

"Hm. Yes? Yes. Dirk... Rokchi, yes?"

"Uh. There's only two people between them -- Mister Strider, Dave -- so it's a bit close. Maybe, but a little eww."

"Maybe not at all, Roxy's a girl."

"Dirk weird?"

"Yeah, Dirk's a weirdo!" John said with a grin. Boy was it strange to be reminded that Dirk was into dudes, it was so... irrelevant, like wow, when did it even have a reason to come up in daily life. "But across family trees it's alright." His grin widened. "Say, Jade and Dave. That's okay."

Dave glared at him and curled up around his own knees, like that could be enough to pretend he hadn't been leaning against her side a tiny little bit. "John, shut up, Imma punt you head first into the sand."

Pff. Like no one had seen them wading together with Jade dragging him by the hand. "Come on, man, she saved you, she's your dashing knight in shining armor, she's entitled to makeouts now."

Rolling her eyes, Jade slapped him on the back of the head.

"Gather I missed something," Dirk said, "but I am surprisingly happy about never finding out what."

Karkat was poring over the family tree and muttering to himself under his breath, only giving their shoving and teasing quick cursory glances. He still found the time to mutter in aside to Dirk, "Zhann, Zeh -- Zade, Dev, not a lot old."

"How right you are."

"So sayeth the guy talking butts with an alien," Dave shot back.

"Dude, butts are plenty mature. The appreciation of a fine ass is a turning point of one's growth."

John was sure Dave would have shot something back, only he yawned, which killed any chance at a snappy comeback. Grumbling, he looked away, and blinked at the horizon. "Shit, what time is it? The sun is down and I'm not in bed, what is this witchery."

"Poor little chicken," Dirk said blandly. Dave kicked his hip, got up.

"I've got to go crash. 'Night everyone."

He wandered off, waving lazily over his shoulder. It wasn't dark at all yet, maybe a little dim, and they all knew the path by heart anyway, but Jade still hesitated for a minute before sinking back down in her butt hollow.

John's resistance to the call of heckling was plain heroic (no it wasn't) but in the end, alas, he fell. "So are you guys trying to get back together or what?"

"Argh! It's not any of your business, John. We're just hanging out. I don't know if you remember but we used to be friends before we dated!"
John nodded, hands raised in surrender. Yep, they were totally flirting.

Jade busied herself shaking sand off her towel and setting it for maximum sprawling surface area, and then flopping on it to look at the sky, eyebrows furrowed forbiddingly. John decided not to poke the dragon. Maybe Dirk...? Hm. Nah. Dirk wouldn't have known to play along if a Playing for Dummies manual fell on him from the sky.

He still wasn't stir-crazy enough to try to roughhouse with Karkat, even half-seriously. With a little sigh, he reclined in the sand as well, feeling it stick in patches to his still vaguely damp skin. The temperature was lowering, but not much yet; it was nice. The sky was an explosion of pinks and purples, rapidly darkening.

It was so good to be outside. He chafed at the bit wanting to run up and down the beach (he wanted to run to Warhammer and fly) but it was still nice as it was.

He was still insane amounts of grateful when Rose wandered in from the forest.

"Rose! Hey, Rose--"

"Hello!" She smiled, eyes crinkling. "If you drag me down, I will do my utmost to land on you."

She was carrying a little cloth pocket thingie, and both the telepathic headsets were draped around her neck. John could see Karkat noticing; his back stiffened a little and he threw her an apprehensive side-look.

"Not for you, Karkat," Rose said, and looked across the group. "Dirk, sorry for asking during your downtime but I don't know when I'm going to see you next. Roxy was trying something back up at Tycho Base, but she didn't have the time to finish, if you could...?"

Dirk sat up straight and patted sand off his hands before reaching out for the -- oh, that was Roxy's little tool satchel thing, John recognized the stitched cartoon cat on it. "Yeah, sure. Did she--"

Rose tapped the frame of her thin glasses. "Forwarding you the instructions."

"Mkay, thanks. Huh, I see what she wanted. Yeah, that's easy."

He bent his head over the headsets in his lap and started fiddling; Jade rolled onto her side and propped herself up to watch. John could see Karkat throwing them curious little glances, but he didn't move closer until John nudged his side with his elbow and pushed him. He leaned in a tiny bit and peered over Dirk's fingers, eyebrows going through an interesting series of contortions.

"Is it okay to let him see?" Jade asked, pursing her lips in thought. "Not that I mind personally but..."

"He's not gonna learn how to handle miniaturized tech just from getting one look at it," Dirk replied absently, and selected a needle-thin screwdriver. "And if all he wants is to neutralize it, a good stomping will do that whether or not he knows what the inside looks like."

"What is it supposed to do?" John asked idly.

"Stabilizing the signal, less noise to--" Dirk interrupted himself, eyed John over the rim of his shades, and concluded, "basically, it'll work from farther away with less signal loss. Not a huge difference, relatively speaking, we can't do miracles with the transmitters at hand at the moment..."

"Uh. I'm not sure I want it to be even clearer from up close, though, is it gonna do that?" John asked, eyebrows furrowing. "Because the deliberate talking bit works fine already, and I really don't want to
find out that we're just getting more subconscious chatter instead. Seriously, it is **not broken**, do **not** fix it."

Jade snorted loudly and rolled her eyes at him. "It's not the jello interface or the encoders he's improving, you dumb butt, it's the transmitters, and they don't decay at any measurable level for at least ten feet. There'll be no difference."

Dirk nodded his confirmation as his fingers fiddled with impossibly tiny things that John would probably have reduced to dust already. "It'd be neat if the science dudes figured out how to only transmit some kinds of brainwaves, though. So you could filter out the irrelevant noise and all the personal stuff. I've got a few ideas but..."

Jade's eyes brightened. John groaned and threw a fistful of sand at her legs. "No nerdiness on the beach! None. I will throw myself in the sea and drown, you mark my words."

"You say that like it's supposed to be a deterrent," Dirk deadpanned. "Anyway, it's done, time to test it. Who's up for it?"

John knew Dirk meant them, because seriously who else used it enough to notice any difference. He almost talked Jade into trying it just to be an ass, but then he remembered he still had Doctor Lalonde's heads-up to pass along. With a sigh, he held out his hand.

"Oh by the way." Jade was telling Rose, "we told Karkat about our genealogy! He was very impressed by yours. Apparently you've got all the good genes and Dave all the bad ones."

Karkat groaned, a hand pressed across his eyes. "Fuck. Zade bad, stop."

Rose laughed, cheeks dimpling. "No, I'm flattered, thank you, Karkat. Not that it was in any way a surprise, mind..."

John nudged her in the side, and stretched across her lap to hand Karkat the other headset. "Stop bragging, I'll tell Dave on you."

Distracted from the banter utterly, Karkat watched it for a long second before he took it, and looked up at John in a way that was almost pleading. It made John wince. "Zhann -- fuck no."

"Just a little bit." John finished settling his into place, grimacing in sympathy. "Doc Lalonde wanted me to tell you something."

He could see resignation and a touch of apprehension on Karkat's face the second he heard the name. The alien slid the headset into his thick hair, tugging thick locks out of the way, flipped the temple bits in place, and ... Nothing.

They blinked at each other, eyebrows up.

"Uh, Dirk, did you break -- oh!"

**Whoops forgot it had an off switch now. Haha.**

**Damn too good to be true should have known.** (Karkat touched his own headset discreetly, verifying what John already knew -- that his didn't have a switch. No surprise there.) **Hi.**

It was such a mess in his mind, he didn't know where to start, and from Karkat's unimpressed moue the alien was getting fuckall with a side of jack shit in matters of useable data as a result.
"Hey, we're supposed to be conducting a range test right now," Dirk reminded them. John could feel the strange echo as Karkat heard Dirk's words from him; he smiled, a bit crooked.

"Karkat says thanks ever so much, that's more useful info than could be found in John's morass of a brain, and now how about you buzz off for two minutes, haha, yes, of course I totally told him you said that, buddy, no, you can't stop me. Bwahaha!"

You little shitsucking ass-licker. I'll kick you so much harder next time we play-fight.

You'll try yeah I will win so hard (unless you kick me in the junk again can you please never do that again like seriously that hurt and was really mean.)

(yeah count on that now I know it works) (no just kidding so long as you never--) Fuck's sake stop fluttering! Doctor Lalonde!

Yeah okay. John breathed out, brought his thoughts back into order somewhat. Tomorrow doctor visit (feeling you up cold instruments brr) just little things not bad hurting things (it's okay I'll be here it'll be at home safe safe safe--)

Karkat didn't pale, but John was pretty sure it was because aliens didn't.

(no.)

It was such a small, hopeless no. John knew he shouldn't reach out like that, shouldn't open himself up, they had enough trouble already with all the overlap and the unwanted, unnatural sympathy and, and, shit.

You'll be okay she won't hurt just weight and height, healthy now, safe now--

(hurt scared for so long the worst was the waiting, anticipation wait for pain wait for it, watching touching invading, no get out of me, I don't want that.)

"John? What's--"

"Not now," he growled, not even sure if Rose or Jade had been the one asking. He reached across Rose's lap -- (miss home miss my friends miss him, hand on my face so safe) -- gave Karkat's jaw a soft, cautious pat, nudged his face up so he could see his eyes.

I'll be with you. Karkat? Karkat. Hey.

"Don't touch me," Karkat rasped in alienese, but his mind was full of the badly repressed, uneasy relief that being touched gave him, full of a brouhaha of not quite what I need/don't want, not quite there, almost rightwrong.

John tried to smile, encouraging. I am so not putting my hand over your nose dude that is just weird. (come on don't get a flashback now please I'm so bad at handling flashbacks (Jane, so bad at helping her always doing it all wrong I'm her fucking brother why can't I just know--))

Karkat twitched, lifted his chin to stare straight at him. (Jane yes right fuck.) I'm not (combat-broken memory-lost) not quite that bad it's just normal (shitty runny clinging) memories. I'm fine. (I'mfinelhavenotobefine) I'm not like --

"If you were like Jane that'd be okay!" John cut him off, before he could wind himself up into a bout
of panic. It's okay. Keep you heal you we know how it just takes time is all. even if you had that kind of PTSD it would be fine.

...oh.

You already have like a ton of other symptoms anyway hehe.

(oh.)

They stared at each other for another few seconds.

... Why is your hand still on my face.

It was so grudging and disgruntled, not panicky anymore, the fear fallen in sad clumps at the bottom of his brain like a failed soufflé; John lifted his hand off him immediately, grinning his relief.

"Next on the list of inventions," Dirk said, "a brain convo transcriber. Karkat, status?"

"He's fine, he might have to get a checkup tomorrow or the next day and, well, doctors are not his favorite people. But it'll be fine! We'll do it at home and everything -- and we can go on a walk around the island right after if you wanna, it'll be a ton of fun."

"Or I'll hide in my pile and bite anyone who comes close (that means you seriously can you be any more obscene why not watch me sleep while you're at it you fucking voyeur.)"

"That would also be okay. But you could make a pile in the woods, wouldn't that be better?"

Do I look like a caveman to you -- don't you dare answer that. A sigh. Yeah, okay let's. decide tomorrow.

Sure thing, buddy.

"Is John bothering you again, Karkat?"

Shit Rose is here fuck. fuuuck. What do I answer either one is a trap shit shit shit. "Uh. N...o? Yes? No."

John started snickering. Why does she freak you out that much, I don't get it. She's nice! (Okay she's also terrifying and she can tell way too many things about someone at a glance all of them things you were hoping no one would ever know but...)

Karkat growled at him, eyes narrowed. Oh my glorious shitfuck just shut your gushing word trap.

"Well, if you guys have it sorted out, maybe you could do that distance test?" Jade suggested pointedly.

"Yeah, yeah, okay." John climbed to his feet. "Stay here for now, Karkat, you just tell them when it starts breaking down."

Karkat sighed. Sure. (still guards even here where would I go it's an island right.)

John started walking toward the edge of the woods. Yeah, it is. Sorry, Noir would have an apoplexy. We wouldn't want that to happen, right? (hehehe.)

A feeling like a narrow-eyed, suspicious glower. Fuck no we wouldn't, (weaponsmaster/older/scars) Strider would kill us.
... Whaaat?

He'd want to be the one giving him a ragegasm duh. (John why are you so dumb it's terrifying how someone who breathes and stands upright and operates machinery can be that dumb.)

Oh right, I guess. They really don't get along, huh! (haha, fuck you.)

He'd reached the trees -- ten feet -- then kept going along the edge of the beach. At twenty feet it was still feeling normal; he still caught Karkat's thoughts about the group of humans he was sitting with, the strange, echoing, mildly dizzying way he hunted for vocabulary. For John, meaning came through first and foremost, and it came attached with Karkat's impressions while learning it, and all his uncertainties about whether he truly was using the right word. Language was so hard!

Also John really was getting the impression that Karkat was, like, pathologically attached to using the precise shade of meaning he wanted for maximum effect; having to approximate grated about three tons. (what's the difference between moron and moron?)

Dude they both came out as the same word here, I have no idea which one you mean. Moron, idiot, stupid...?

... wow I am so surprised they all came out as a muddle of the same things over here too, that is something neither of us could have predicted. Teach them to me later.

Sure thing.

To be honest he wasn't even entirely sure how to explain the differences. Maybe he should start to think a bit on them.

Listen to me not commenting. All those things I am not saying (about your hugemonstrous illiterate ignorance holy dick tickling what.) Impressive. I am impressed at myself. Jolly good show, Karkat.

Pff, shut up (dick tickling???) (also why do you sound British?)

I sound what?

John took another couple of steps, trying to visualize the clichedest Englishman from the 19th Century for Karkat's education, but the echo he got in return was confused.

Snooty? Yeah, that's what I

What you what?

What I was trying for! Are you brain make more lines? bluealienfriend?

Uh. Okay what the heck was that?

??

Aha. John stopped walking, looked back. Looks like you can tell Dirk--

TELL. DIRK. Oh you know what, never mind. He stuck two fingers in his mouth, whistled. That made it, what, sixty feet? Seventy? It was getting pretty dark on the beach, the distance was a bit harder to judge. Sound resonated really well after dark on a beach, though. "Signal breaking down, guys!"
He wandered back toward the little group, feet dragging in the cooling sand.

... okay how do I convey telepathic headset -- brain, no... mind? I don't know that word, HEAD, (not working? static-stopped? communication breakdown?) NO, okay, let's go with pointing at my own skull and twisting my face into hopefully meaningful if ugly shapes I am the best at alien communication bar none.

I would totally understand from that much!

Yeah you're good at making the best out of low-tech brainmeats must be all that life experience (argh slipped out shit sorry I am an inflamed pustule on the ass of the universe.)

(gross!) It's fine it's funny. Cranky? "Come on, get up and let's walk a bit. It's all nice and cool now."

He drew near the group, where Dirk shushed him and pointed at his shades in the absent-minded way that meant 'I am juggling all the equations right now Egbert if you make me mistype a variable with my brain I will misplace a foot up your delicate behind.'

"Sorry, John," Jade said with a little frowny pout. "I've got to be at the hangar soonish for my shift."

"Rose, you wanna walk around for a bit?" John asked quietly as he hunkered down beside them. Karkat had buried his feet in the rapidly cooling sand. He didn't feel like he minded, exactly, more like he was similarly uncomfortable everywhere anyway. He was thinking about something but John couldn't tell what.

Stop poking yes yes I'll come admire your beach in the dark wow magnificent jack shit to see.

Pff your eyes are fine in the dark. (Well fine-ish. Okayish. Not as bad as mine without my (light-adjusting magic) glasses so still pretty okay!)

(My horn sense is not fine on sand asshole.) Any poisonous beasts out here?

Nah, Grandpa Harley weeded out anything that dangerous ages ago. At least close to the water. Plus we have the nanites... I guess you don't, but there's always -- uh yeah the sand should be safe (oh god let's not go there.)

Karkat squirmed a little, glared up -- not quite at him, as if he couldn't really meet his eyes right now. I maintain it's the most perverted way to heal someone ever. (John's mouth on -- ngh (pinnedstop) bruised lips why such stupid teeth ow)

Could be worse could be other body fluids OH LORD I asked you not to go there!

Auuugh. Now his brain was stuck. He whimpered, laughed nervously, scratched the back of his head. Karkat was groaning in shared shame.

But why kissing are we in a fairytale now! Space explorer wakes cryofrozen crew of lost vessel with their warm lips?? What the fuck. Humans are so what the fuck.

"No, buddy!" John protested, and tried to gather everything he'd been taught about how nanites and human anatomy worked and condense it properly. Human saliva would give you an infection if I spat it directly into a wound! It's full of nasty stuff like bacteria and everything.

So normal cleaning-licking would make things worse? Thank you for that glorious mental picture you are never healkissing me again not even if my dick is about to fall off okay this is so gross.

Haha yeah right I bet the second your dick is in peril you'd be begging me to smooch you oh Jesus
Okay, okay, shit. Uh. Shit. Okay, Jade was giggling and Rose was staring at them with both her eyebrows up but it wasn't like she could read thoughts (except for how he was sure she totally could and was merely keeping it hush hush). John just needed to throw thoroughly unsexy things at it until he could unthink it. Like, uh. Science! Yes, he was going to throw *all the science*.

(Karkat had a hand covering his eyes and was muttering under his breath. It was mostly plans to go visit the monster no doubt lurking in the lagoon in the spirit of neighborliness and plead with it for a swift death in exchange for his snackable body, make sure to chew properly okay thank you.)

Anyway you need to counter the mouth bacteria with your own stomach acid *(that stuff chomps down on almost everything)* or else things get way more gross! And cutting yourself open to bleed on someone, *eewww*. First it hurts and wastes nanites/body fluids and second hello viruses and even nastier stuff! Seriously for emergency nanite transfer mouth to mouth is usually better. Unless you need treatment like ten seconds ago then it might start being worth taking the infection risk to get the nanites in the wound faster but ew.

*That was very *(boringunsexy)* scientific, good job.*

*All in a day's work.*

"You two make the most hilarious faces whenever you get into one of your little chats," Rose commented as she watched them, fingers tapping her chin and eyebrows arched. John stuck out his tongue at her.

"I'm done," Dirk said, and allowed Jade to drag him up on his feet. John bounced up as well. Walk now? But then Dirk put his hands on the small of his back and arched his spine. "Going back home, I need a better computer. Rose?"

"Aw, man." John was a bit sad to see Dirk go, and didn't know if he wanted Rose to stay or follow him and Jade. It'd be nice to hang out. It'd be nice too, to have private time with Karkat *(private time outside of walls, where they didn't have to see the guards, where they could truly **talk**.)* But that was too tempting to be good, the unwilling empathy, wanting to just keep bouncing thoughts to each other about everything and nothing. He was sure he could do it for hours on end, easy.

He was sure it wouldn't be smart at all. Maybe they should go home too, or maybe he should at least hand Dirk the headsets back if he wasn't using them for a good, non-socializing reason.

"Rhoz," Karkat said, and John said "Stay, please" because that was what Karkat wanted to say and Karkat didn't want to mess up the words.

John had no clue on Earth why. He blinked at the alien, who was getting up as well, shoulders squared and face sober, thoughts locked up.

Rose paused, looked back at him, at John, quickly, as if to ask why. John shrugged helplessly. "I don't know -- ah. He has questions."

Jade's brows furrowed. "Hm? Anything important?"

"Uh, yeah, I think so."

"Aw, man." She tapped her glasses (probably checking the time), sighed.

Dirk and Rose exchanged a look of their own. "Want me to stay?" he asked. Rose looked at Karkat.
"No," John said, "you can if you want, he'd just rather -- yeah, I'm sorry you can't talk to Rose alone, I am the official voyeur, it is me." Why Rose? he sent. Karkat sent him back a burst of frustration and colors, of all things.

"Very well. I'll see you later, Dirk, Jade." She turned toward John and Karkat. "Let's walk, if you two don't mind. My legs are cramping from the cockpit."

John picked up the towels Dave had left behind and draped them around his neck, and they started walking off, John in the middle, Karkat wave-side (John noticed that because Karkat was thinking vague thoughts of being downhill and backed up against the sea. The beach was pretty wide; so paranoid!)

Spoken like a long-legged hopbeast. Okay, telling you now John, I didn't want to talk about this with you in the middle because it might hurt I'm not that much of an asshole yet. He sneaked John a glance, squared his shoulders. It's. About Jane sort of?

"Oh. Okay. He says it's about Jane." A pause, as the notions came clear. "About PTSD. About how we handle it. I could have answered that for you, buddy."

"Do you want a rundown on treatment options?" Rose asked, eyebrows arched slightly in surprise. "That's... Not really my domain, but I can--" Karkat shook his head.

"No, I want -- hnrr. What do we -- what do-you-do..."

"... With people injured... that badly?" John said, feeling his way through the notion. "Who can't hide it."

Rose blinked. "Well -- ah. Generally? Or the Skaialabs policy?"

The word ricocheted from Karkat as John's-people; the alien nodded. "Un. Sskaia."

"Mind, there's not much of a difference. Alright..."

She made another thinking frown, forehead briefly wrinkling, and smoothed her face into a patient, understanding expression that was more like her public speaking face than her real one.

"We consider that hiding it, while an understandable reaction, is counterproductive as it leads to reduced performance and prevents the person from being treated. The longer such issues are allowed to run unchecked, the deeper they may entrench themselves. So a lot of people don't hide it to start with."

"But can -- oh god, Karkat." John tried not to wince, and knew he hadn't managed when Karkat flinched, glared at him, defiant. "I thought we'd made it clear last time. There is never a time when we humans say okay, this isn't worth the trouble, we're just gonna finish them off. I mean some assholes might say or do shit like that but the point is they're assholes!"

Rose cleared her throat, looked straight ahead at the barely visible silhouette of the mountains over the sky, black on purplish blue. She still had her Professor Lalonde, PhD face on. "Actually. Euthanasia might be performed--" John frowned at her for confusing the issue "--but only in cases where our current understanding of medicine doesn't permit us to save the patient's life, and they are in the process of dying regardless of what we do, and dragging it out does nothing but prolong their suffering. But it has to be a sure thing, and they have to make the decision themselves."

Karkat was nodding slowly, and John could feel him slotting the info in his brain -- one piece here, one piece there -- but he wasn't allowed to see the big picture.
"It's the same with mental and physical injuries. Lifelong debilitating injuries are to be eased as much as possible. If necessary there will be painkillers and nurses and aides, but yes, there are humans who are so weakened they can't leave their beds and haven't for years, and we still, as a species, opt to take care of them." A little frown. "There are caretakers who fail in their job or who don't have the means to deal with such a strain, but as a whole, that's how it's supposed to go."

"Huhn."

They walked a little farther in silence.

"What if I was injured," John said without thought, because it was what Karkat wanted (him) to say.

Rose paused to stare at Karkat -- then John then Karkat again, eyebrows rising quizzically; it was weird because he was the voice but he wasn't the speaker. He pointed to Karkat in silence. Rose's brow started to furrow a little bit. "You would be treated until you are healed, of course."

"No, bad question. I'm -- he's unique." John stumbled a little, translating the rapid-fire notions Karkat was throwing through him, focused and locked down tight. John was finding himself saying things, and then feeling their emotional impact once they were already out of his mouth; it was strange.

"What if you captured a hundred of us, and some were injured."

"You would all be treated until you were healed. Even if there were a thousand of you. We wouldn't -- Karkat, if you leave an untreated wound alone it might kill them, it might not heal right--"

"I know!" the alien growled out of his own mouth. "I know but don't -- I, why --"

"Why do we care," John finished for him. "Uh. It's just -- you're sentient beings, dude. Killing in combat is, it's one thing, but once the battle is over then why -- there's no reason..."

But how do you even make sure what happens is everyone magically nicecoddling in alien land ?? you can't even tell me that, you don't believe it! How do you check what everyone's jailer/owner/taskmaster is doing?

"So your people do kill all enemy combatants then," Rose said, and stopped walking. "We weren't entirely sure. You've been cagey about this."

Karkat stopped in turn to stare back at her, a storm of guilt and frustrated anger at feeling judged rising in his head, too fast for John to sort out.

No, stop, calm down -- Karkat, calm down --

I'm fucking calm! -- no, wait, it's not your motherlicking fuckdamned business how calm I am in the first place! He turned to Rose, fangs bared, though his hands stayed fisted at his sides. "Yes. Kill. Kill and kill and--"

Karkat. "They don't have the resources onboard a ship, prisoners could fuck it up, too -- delicate? Balanced? Routines, uh, no space, sabotage, hard vacuum too close by -- Karkat, you're thinking too fast, slow down, man--"

I don't want to slow down, I don't even want you to know that! (yes I do, yes, no, fuck (you'll never get them back I'm sorry))

A message was blinking in his glasses. From Noir; John closed it without reading, he didn't want to think about what that asshole wanted to say, no doubt it wouldn't help anyone's blood pressure. He grabbed Karkat by the shoulder, turned him so they were face to face, forced away the awareness of
how close Karkat had been to slashing his wrist open out of pure reflex. "If you don't need me to calm you down then good! Calm your own tits, right now."

A long, low hiss left Karkat's mouth, but he simmered down some.

"Mnh." Sorry.

"It's okay." John let go.

_Sometimes good workers, they keep them for slave work on conquered/Empire-now planets, Karkat offered weakly, though it was followed with (none of your guys would be there yet you're too new no one'll check what uses we can get out of you until your planet's conquered.)_

"Oh." Rose was scowling at him and pursing her mouth, so he told her in turn, "He says they keep some conquered population for slave jobs sometimes but we haven't been conquered yet so they're not checking if we could be useful yet. Heh. Cool. So there's no way any of our men are still alive, then," he added, strangely disappointed even though he had known that was the most likely possibility from the start.

Hell, before they figured out the aliens weren't their biomechs they'd thought the mechs might be eating them.

_Same thing that almost happened to you, dissected alive until useless, discarded? John asked. All of them who survived the battles._

"Unh. Maybe. A-lot, no." Karkat looked away. His arms were crossed over his chest, high, shoulders hunched like he was cold. _War leader seen pretty one maybe? This one I keep for me. You look so much like us/people._

John sputtered. "Wait -- what? They can -- you're telling me some of your people keep, keep aliens, like, personally? To do--" he started to ask, stupidly -- he'd heard enough to know he didn't want to get more details.

He got them in the form of shreds of memory not suppressed fast enough, Karkat being led to a room full of (sex platforms lay down here good boy I foughtbled to havekeep you shh I'll be nice don't fight.)

John shuddered. _Oh god so sorry so sorry no never that I was just reallyreally stupid --_

_If you had, well, I do owe you, Karkat replied almost fatalistically, but behind that was a burst of something odd and warm, rueful; (of course I'm safe with you.)_

Oh.

Oh.

"John."

It -- was perhaps a good thing that Rose had interrupted him, because he -- that feeling -- he didn't know what to do with it.

"Uh -- yeah, sorry." He flicked her an entirely automatic smile. (Stuffed it down.) "Some of their higher-ups are allowed to keep personal prisoners? As. Uh. Staff."

"Bedroom staff?" she asked acerbically. John winced. Like there was any way to hide that bit from
her.

"Uh. Yeah. Not only, also as normal staff, if they can be trained. Or, uh -- shit, as gladiators? Well, hell."

_Treated better/don't live as long._ Karkat shrugged despondently, looked away. _They make their owners money so outside of matches they'd be nicer. Not on my ship anyway too small shitty but the more inner fleet maybe._

Squinty-eyed thoughtful, Rose started them walking again, toward a bunch of dark rocks emerging from the sand. John and Karkat followed on automatic, John's head bowed and Karkat kicking at the sand with each step.

_You look feel so surprised_, Karkat added tentatively a second later, and looked away.

"Uh yeah, buddy, I -- we don't do that stuff. I guess we -- used to? And some cultures, it took longer to stop in some places, and then some people pretended to stop and wriggled through legal loopholes and called it different things but it was really pretty identical, and I..."

A pause to breathe.

"It's been like centuries since that kind of thing was stopped, though." _You thought that's what I was doing with you._

Karkat growled, raked a hand through his hair, glowered at him. "No!" _--yes, at first yes, I, kind of yes but you were, I just -- I'm not insulting you damn it it's just different! You and your smugbarfing higher judgemorals--_

"Dude, slavery! Hell yes I'm judging!" Argh, now Karkat's mental wall felt like a porcupine, nothing coming through but spikes. "It's not like I mean to, okay, sorry, we're just taught that way." _It's bad so bad, bad everywhere, wars and racism and stuff --_

"Remind me to ask for permission to teach you two more about the Greco-Roman types of slavery," Rose mused. "Not that they were objectively good either, but. Regardless, we humans have a lot of higher morals that we do not actually manage on a day to day basis. Don't let John shame you. He's a bit too much of a hopeful idealist, and he doesn't know as much history as he should for a comprehensive view."

Karkat made a noise like "hah" mixed in with a horse's snort, and hissed something under his breath. John pouted.

_No but seriously just in case you still thought that, you don't belong to me no sentient being is allowed to own someone okay!! You're a prisoner you're not ..._

(War loot,) Karkat instinctively completed for him. John choked on nothing. Okay now he was thinking of pirates. _No shut up (why am I on a boat in a skirt??) I know you didn't think of me like that! I just -- I just thought you'd. Well. Finders keepers? And you captured me and back home once the Empire was done with me you'd have first claim? And your people would never recognize me as free/citizen anyway so being nice (pretending I'm free/lying like I'm your equal) was the best you could do maybe?_

"War loot," John repeated for Rose's benefit, a mite dazedly.

"Awrrghst!"
Whoops. "Okay, no, don't tear our your hair, there'll be a hole and your horns will be cold -- ow, you didn't have to kick me either!"

Karkat threw his hands in the air in frustration and kicked sand at his legs, glaring. *Did everything else I said just zap through your skull without encountering any brain matter at all??*

*Looks like!*

"Fffsst." (good jolly hornfuck do I hate you sometimes.) *If you can't own people/your first claim isn't worth jack shit then why were you even allowed to keep me??*

Huh, okay, yeah, that was a good question.

"I... think because otherwise you would have gone crazy or something? I mean, you were kind of catatonic and they couldn't wake you up and obviously if you stayed with them you'd never get any better and likely you'd get worse and die, and then everyone would have lost everything they could learn about you. Apart from, like, stuff about your skeleton. So there wasn't a lot to lose by letting me kidnap you?"

John frowned some more, lips pursed doubtfully. Either the adults had hidden even more from him than he already assumed they routinely did, or there *really* hadn't been much pressure to return Karkat to the labs once he was awake and emotionally stable again.

"Rose, why did they let us keep Karkat? I mean apart from the technical reasons like political head games and probably General Harley blackmailing people and things like that. Well, I'm assuming. I don't know."

Rose had her hand over her face and was groaning quietly. "Yes, John, this is indeed the conversation I wanted to have with someone whose security clearance was revoked on an unsecured beach surrounded by government officials. However did you guess."

"Aha, so there *is* another reason!" John said, as Karkat's attention perked up like a hunting dog finding game.

*Good. Not perfect generous altruistic reasons then. Good.*

*Good why?*


"Why don't you ask me the word?" John grumbled.

"No, a lot fuck you."

Rose chuckled. "That's not polite."

Karkat grunted at her. "I know."

"Do you know how to be polite, though? With us it's alright, as we aren't very formal at the best of times, but with others it wouldn't be."


"I will *need* to know," John said for him; it was about the only thought surfacing clearly enough.
Good alien best dictionary.

Haha, fuck you. "And no kidding you really do."

"Fuck your shit face -- no Zhann, stop. No." I'm warning you --

John started wagging his eyebrows, but Rose beat him to the punch. "Mmmm, kinky."


You were right she is evil. Why did she give you/us that mental picture (now I know what this shit word means for sure wasn't sure guess that's good??)

"See it as gentle corrective punishment for continuing to talk over my head no matter how many times I ask you to keep me in the loop." Her eyes narrowed somewhat playfully (but still evilly) at John. "My apologies for making you collateral damage, Khrkat."

"No, I'm bad with Zhann. Bad a lot." He gave her a little apologetic bow, lips pressed down quite firmly to keep from smiling back.

"You would say I'm sorry' there. Just 'sorry' in more casual situations."

"Sorrh-ey. Sorrree. Hm. No that's bad."

John shrugged. "Still has an accent, but it's understandable. Don't fret, buddy."

Guess what I'm thinking about your generous advice. (Is this beach endless or what god my hip sockets hurt so much sand.)

Noo, I bet it's rude and crude and I'm way too delicate and refined to hear pffff. "You want to go home?"

"No, I -- Rhoz. I, nrgh."

"There's still something you need to know."

"Yes, I." He paused there in the sand, frowning deep, brain a whirl of thoughts. If I say this -- but I don't know that word -- maybe from that angle...

I can translate, in case you forgot!

No, I don't want your answer, I want hers. You'll think your answer even if you're trying not to color it with your thoughts I don't want that.

"Dzeneral Harley... Doc-tor Lalonde. Hm." That (quietgentlesoft) man with the brown/dark skin who was he?

"Doctor King? Who was working on your mech?"

"Yes Doctor Kin-gh. Unh." He made a vague, upward gesture with his hand. "Noir no, why -- who?"

Rose was watching him attentively. John blinked and tried not to feel miserably confused.

Karkat turned to the wave-flattened, damp sand, gestured at them sharply to follow. A dot -- "Sstrider." A line aiming up, toward... "Harlee." A dot. "Noir." A line, toward nothing. "Who? Not
"Dzeneral."

Rose's eyebrows arched up as she bent over the schema to stare more closely. "Ahh. You want the political landscape."

"Yes."

She bit her lip briefly, thoughtful. "People involved in the war?"

"Infol--vol-ved in me. Alien." (*Prisoners of war.*) "Me and me and -- hrm."

"Other prisoners?"

Karkat nodded; Rose stared at him for another very long handful of seconds before she decided herself with a sharp nod.

"Well. There's Skaialabs -- that's us. We're independent. I don't think we will be allowed to interfere quite so much with others of your people, should we acquire any; we're supposed to concentrate on planetary defense and scientific and technologic advancement, and you're a bit of a special case. We can justify keeping you around for study; we couldn't justify acting as mere jailers."

Karkat frowned, feeling a bit uneasy. *John's people* had proved themselves safe, and he -- slammed the door on John's nose before he could get to the end of that thought. Ow. John rubbed his nose, even though the sting was purely imagined.

"There's the United Nations of Earth, or UNE -- that's a joint military organization. Each of the militaries comprising it often come with their own agenda, of course."

"What a clusterfuck," John told her from Karkat.

"Pretty much. And then there would be the International Committee for Ethics Oversight, or ICEO."

("Oh yes that's it."

John didn't need to translate for Rose; the way Karkat's spine stiffened and his irises flicked huge for a brief instant were telling enough.

(Yes yes yes tell me more everything I need to know more) "What, that?"

"Hm. It's composed of civilians, and -- yes?"

"Ci-vi-lians." Karkat shook his head in slow bewilderment. He'd grabbed the definition from John as it went through Not-military. *Not-military, what then. (this is gorgeous/can't ever work long-term sorry but.)* "No sorry bad. Talk."

"The military, while extremely--" she rolled her eyes faintly --"important, is often so preoccupied with efficiency that it forgets to keep unnecessary cruelty in check."

*She doesn't think it is/should be important?* Karkat asked.

*Nah. It is important (also self-important.) It's also a huge pain in the ass.*

Rose gave a philosophical shrug. "In the spirit of fairness, it is by nature insular and prepared for violence, so some unsavory habits and ways of thinking will seep in. It's also fairly secretive, of course, which is necessary, but which makes it hard to keep some behaviors in check, as we don't see them happening. So... There are committees working to make sure that they still respect the laws
and charts of ethics -- what's good, what's bad, what's never allowed, et cetera."

Karkat made an interested grunt, head tilted to spur her onwards.

"What never allowed?" he parroted, checking lightning-quick with John's brain that the sounds matched the meaning he wanted and that he wasn't repeating a chunk of grammar-mangled meaninglessness.

*Just a little mangled!*

*Dictionaries don't editorialize,* Karkat retorted with a little mental prod.

Rose sighed. "Disturbingly little some days."

She stepped over a rock, onto a second. The trail of rocks emerging from the sand didn't quite reach the waves yet, they could have gone around... John shrugged, and hopped up after her, sure-footed even in the dark from clambering over that rock since he was eight years old. Karkat followed with an ease John had seen in the other pilots and maybe Bro and pretty much no one else.

Rose reached the top and found herself a hollow to put her butt in, patted the rock beside her meaningfully.

*It's a good place here we played so much all the time. King of the castle! (King John pushing Dave off into the waves at high tide splash oh no Roxy got behind me welp salty.) Little hide-hollows and butt-crannies everywhere too big now heh.*

*(that's almost cute) don't tell me those things, John (too attached already how much worse do you want to bet it gets.)*

"From the army side," Rose continued once she was comfortable and Karkat had found himself a spur of rock a little lower to cautiously perch on, "there would be a lot of pressure to... Well. Torture for the sake of torture is expressly forbidden, but there'd be pressure for invasive medical research and aggressive interrogation, and -- let's say, if we capture another of your people and they prove more hostile and less manageable than you've been it'd be hard to bargain for them as well."

John wasn't sure if she saw Karkat flinch and his eyes flick away in shame, but he sure felt it, the raw burst of it from some deeper layer where John couldn't have hoped to figure out its depth and width.

*Shut up John nothing that isn't true (so manageable/docile/obedient what a good domesticated pilotwarrior I've been.)*

The way Rose was looking at him, it didn't matter if she'd seen it, because she knew it'd been there anyway. Her frank, direct stare didn't falter any as she continued. "At the same time our medicine is advanced enough that we don't need to cut a hundred of you open to understand how you work. It would just be easier, for some people who are very invested in continuing to see the lot of you as nothing more than space monsters to eradicate."

John sighed, stretched out his legs in a crack of the rock. Talk about a fun beach excursion. "He understands."

"I want to be clear -- if we capture more of you, experimentation will be happening. You're right; you're safe because you're unique."

*What about once he's not unique anymore,* John thought, and then no, *fuck them,* before he could smash it down. He hated the conversation, wanted nothing more than to wander down the beach and
push Karkat into the surf and have a sand-throwing battle and forget it.

He wanted to pretend the situation didn't exist, because he had that luxury. Karkat didn't.

*I'd say I'm sorry for making you sit here and translate but it'd be a lie I'm not sorry. I need you here translating it's inconvenient for you for me it's my life. You can deal with shitty things just fine once you decide to stand your ground anyway you're not that weak so just do it.*

John bowed his head and pretended fiercely he hadn't caught the undertow of Karkat's words; *(I need you knowing what I might have to fight (I need to know you'd fight for me.))* It would be too embarrassing for the both of them.

"But not as much?" John asked, and then paused to make sense of the notions Karkat was sending. He wasn't sure either, it made things complicated. "I mean, if that ethics group thing supervises. Not as much torture?"

"I assume they would do their best to keep it to strictly necessary levels, yes. But political games and the urgency of our situation means there can be no absolute guarantee."

"Yes," Karkat replied, quiet and a little subdued. "I know, that." *We're not that different.*

"So. Have I given you all the information you needed?"

*Welp. That's her you're about to pay me back tenfold face. It was nice knowing you Karkat!*

Karkat shoved John in the back a little; John's heel slipped and he pitched forward, only stopping as his tennis shoe landed in a shallow, algae-laden puddle at the bottom of the gap.

"Shit. Zhann?" *Didn't want to do that hell now it looks like I'm trying not to answer (and so clumsily too.)*

John pulled his foot back up and held it in the air as it dripped, festooned in mushy green strands. A little animal prickled its way up his ankle; his hand shot forward to capture it.

"Here, have a crab." He went to put it down Karkat's shirt, but Karkat grabbed his wrist; the animal plopped free of John's loose, non-crushing hold and ended up on a bare gray knee.

"Zhann stop you shit dumb face. Rsst." He sighed, head bowed to stare at the tiny crab wandering warily on his thigh.

*(oh it has dad pincers.)*


John repeated it for Rose, who waved it off. "Of course the situation is much more complicated than that."

"Politics often are," John translated absently, watching Karkat watch his clawtip be caught in a thumbnail-sized crab's grip. He was strangely delicate with the little beast.

Rose leaned in to watch, hands on her lap, politely interested. "So which side will you be playing for which end, then?"

The night felt so still around them suddenly, it was like the sea breeze paused for a moment, like even the trees and Noir's men amongst them went statue-still. Karkat and Rose stared straight at each other, wordless, intense, and John was left staring at them in turn.
John knew all too well that Rose, mindgame-happy as she was, had no real issue with blunt force trauma as a problem-solving method either, whenever her patience ran out.

All he could read from Karkat was a fierce resolve not to bend.

"Guys--" 

Karkat gave a quiet snort, and his lips quirked up in a crooked, vaguely cynical smirk.

--

JH: sir? hope i'm not disturbing you. do you have some free time for a meeting? like, face to face. JH: karkat wants to talk. 

-- Hass Harley [HS] signed off! -- 

JH: i suddenly understand twice as much nothing. 
------------------------------------------
------------------------------------------

John sighed as he dragged his feet through the plushest carpet ever, and let himself flop on the couch. There was a lot of space for it; the thing took up half of the length of the room with its fake-Louis Somenumerorother glory, and it wasn’t a small room.

"Welcome to Hawaii," he told Karkat, who arched an eyebrow back at him and gingerly took a seat at the end of the couch. "I'd tell you how pretty it all is out here, but it would be kind of mean considering we're never going to see any of it."

The suite's half-inch-thick hurricane shutters were down and locked from a remote location; the antechamber was full of Noir's people, the rest of the hotel full of other agencies' people, Karkat had a locator band around his ankle, and John could hear the choppers circling from here. They were nicely boxed in. Then again it wasn't that much worse than the trip itself had been; they'd basically been locked up in the back of a troop carrier truck and carried across the ocean cradled in the hands of Roxy's Molotov, and then driven the rest of the short way to the hotel's underground parking lot.

Apart from the takeoff and landing -- some shaking -- it had been the most boring two hours of John's life. Karkat wasn't in an interacting mood, and John... well for once John was pretty sure it was not a good plan to disturb him. He wasn't brooding, anyway, or at least not unproductive, mopey brooding -- okay, yes, he was totally brooding, but it didn't seem the kind that would benefit from an interruption, and -- argh. Well. 

John was pretty much along as a companion, to keep Karkat from... he wasn't sure, trying to dig a way out through the stone wall, maybe, or tearing off all his clothes and doing some kind of alien "come and pick me up" dance. Though later on John would also get to be of use as an automated translator! Yayyy.

"Zhann," Karkat said with a sigh. 

"What?"
Karkat stared at him, crossed his arms high on his chest, and let himself ooze down the couch, lower lip jutting out sulkily. John straightened up and glared at him.

"Oh, shut up," he grumbled.

"No, you shut up."

"No, you shut up first."

Karkat sat himself back up properly, leaned forward to prop his elbows on his knees. "Zhann, you -- " he said, more serious, a little subdued. "I need..."

John sighed, but nodded. "Yeah? Tell me what you need."

"You."

"Hm?"

Karkat looked away, like he was embarrassed, stared away at a bit of carpet pattern. "I need stupid idiot you. You... no, bad -- fl'ths arrheke--"

"Okay, I understood none of the thing at the end," John said, and managed a charming grin. He stretched out across the couch -- and shuffled his butt a little -- to punch him gently in the shoulder. "I get you. I'll be here. No worries."

"No worries," Karkat repeated, tone cynical, and rolled his eyes. "No worries yes, no kill... ing?"

"Who cares about grammar right now -- argh, okay, yes, that was good, no killing. I don't think the old dudes out here will try to kill you. And if they did I'd headbutt them in the walker anyway."

Karkat probably didn't get two thirds of the words, and those he got were in all likelihood the least meaningful ones, but the tone, he got; he rolled his eyes again, allowed his mouth to crook up at the corner. John grinned back, wide and bright.

Of course he knew Karkat liked him (that was the problem, most of the time, when he was telepathically made aware of the fact.) But it was tons of nice to hear it without shame and regret, to see him smile that little amused (trusting) smile. Karkat seemed sharper, anyway, since that short discussion with the General the other day -- but not in a bad, mean way, just in a... more awake one?

It was nerve-wracking, okay. But also... It was an adventure! And they'd been so bored.

"Head-butt is?"

John mimed it on the air.

"N'eh butt is..."

"Butt is a nicer, softer word for ass, yep. Ass is a little bit bad." He gave a thoughtful hum. "I think they're related like..."

Of course John's dad walked in just as John was demonstrating a hip check before his alien bropalbuddy.

Rolling his eyes at John discreetly, Karkat got up to face John's dad -- he always did that, as long they weren't sitting at the dinner table, because Dad didn't want them to interrupt their meals and shooed him back down, but the thing where he stood up if one of the adults came in and he thought
they might be looking for him, yeah. Like he thought he needed to be at attention, almost, except he
didn't know the right way to salute, or if that was entirely appropriate.

"Sir."

"Hey, Dad."

"Karkat, John." His father nodded at the both of them as a soldier with a big gun closed and locked
the door behind him. Dad was dragging along a big suitcase, which he hauled up onto a table and
popped open. "You've got one hour left, I thought we should get you dressed."

... Yeah okay, they probably couldn't appear before an international committee in t-shirts and jeans.
(Or even in a flight suit, which was an outfit he would face anyone in with pride.) He had known
that. He'd hoped anyway, though.

"John, I've got your dress uniform -- boots in that bag -- and Karkat... Ah, this is one occasion for
which that latest doctor's visit had unexpected benefits."

Uniform vest draped over his arm, John blinked at the inside of the case. There were at least two
suits in there, neither of which were his father's.

"They should be roughly the right size..." the man was humming as he pulled everything out and
draped them over convenient pieces of furniture. "Of course nothing replaces a proper fitting, but
we'll make do. Now, the pure gray or the slate? Or I was thinking the taupe, as it would compliment
your eyes and horns and you hardly have a skin tone to concern yourself with... Hm."

He held a vest near Karkat's face, then another. Karkat didn't move, brows knit in faint worry.
John sighed and went to the nearest bedroom to change.

T-shirt, tennis shoes and jeans were taken off and folded haphazardly -- even if he folded them well
Dad would refold them anyway -- and he saw about putting on everything. Too-warm black socks,
white slacks, a solid leather belt (who the heck cared about belts in this day and age), a button-up
shirt... okay, was it tucked in properly? He'd have to get Dad to check that the back didn't make a
weird bump. He gave the shoes a bit of a spit-polish to get rid of mildly imaginary dust that Dad was
sure to see twice as well as he did, and then put the jacket on. He didn't button it all up yet, the collar
annoyed him. And he should probably comb his hair before he tried to put on the cap... Yeah. Bluh.

It did look a lot like a Marine dress uniform, even though it wasn't even technically a military
uniform at all. The mech pilots from Skaialabs weren't military per se, but... well, they worked pretty
closely with the Space Marines. There was a time it had flattered them a lot to see the kids wearing
that kind of getup for official occasions. John wondered if it'd piss them off to see him wear it right
beside an alien.

Oh well, he wasn't running to a tailor to get a brand new dress uniform now, anyway.

He came back out of the room to find Karkat in jeans and a button-up white shirt; Dad was doing up
the buttons. Karkat was looking mildly embarrassed.

Oh wait, no, Dad was sewing on a button. "Claws?" John asked as he stepped in. Though really it
wasn't much of a mystery.

Karkat looked at him, blinked, and looked him over again. "Huhn. Zhann is a lot of old now."

John processed that, grinned. "Yeah, huh, I look way mature like this." He struck a straight-backed,
stern-faced macho stance.

"Yes, you look." A faint smirk. "Is, no."

Thwarted by the presence of his father, John could only glare in return, eyes narrowed meanly.

He went to get the comb and started attacking his hair, checking himself over in the outrageously big gilded mirror on one of the walls. "Karkat is mean and has an ugly face," he muttered under his breath as he combed. Karkat ignored him.

"You should put on the headset before your hat, son, it'll be better to have it on as soon as you leave this room. Possibly earlier." He looked up at Karkat's face, then at John. "He still hasn't told you exactly what it was he wanted to talk about, has he?"

John shrugged, went to search the suitcase for the headsets. "Still no clue, sorry."

When Karkat and Rose had made him message General Harley again, he'd thought the General would come and they would talk it out at length, and John would get to find out then!

Instead, well, the General was participating in an important international conference about the war effort, and apparently since he couldn't leave it without being -- le gasp -- rude, it made a lot more sense to bring up something the old man didn't have the first idea about right before the lot of them. Instead of... maybe... waiting.

So... Here John was, with his alien, crashing the conference. Woohoo.

Even though he was the main interface Karkat had with the world John had apparently totally missed something that was enough for the crazy family politicians to gamble on. It had better be worth it, was all he thought about the topic.

Maybe Grandpa Harley should go back to Black Ops, if he was missing adrenaline that much, for serious. John finished setting the headset in place and combed his hair back down around it, so it would still look professional.

(It was still hot pink. Oh, whatever.)

Dad finished sewing the button back on and buttoned Karkat up, tugged the cloth into place, then stepped back.

John smiled. "Not a bad look!" It made look his shoulders look more solid, and they already looked wider than John's, a bit. "Did you decide on the rest yet?"

"The pure gray is out," his father answered absently. "It makes him look much too eerie. The taupe really does complement him well, but is not a color with quite as much authority... What do you think, Karkat, do you want to seem friendly or serious?"

Karkat blinked at him. "What?"

John picked up the gray-blue vest, held it before his chest, straightened up and gave him a stern look, then switched it for the brownish-gray one and loosened his frame, smiled. "This one or that one? For you."

Karkat selected the gray-blue one, though with a doubtful, hesitant moue. Dad nodded firmly and picked up a navy tie to put around his neck.
"It's a leash," John said, casual and entirely seriously. Dad huffed at him.

"Don't you start joking about that sort of thing now, young man. It's just a fashion accessory, Karkat, please don't listen to him."

"What, leash?" Karkat asked, blinking doubtfully at the knot forming at his throat.

John snickered, and mimed holding one. "It's that thing Jade puts around Bec's neck to tell him to stay close and not run."

Karkat threw him a flat, disdainful glare. "Zhann you no have leash."

John tugged on the unbuttoned collar of his uniform. "Yeah, because--"

"Because you need ten leash, have one neck. Sad."

Dad chuckled. "I'm afraid even ten leashes wouldn't be sufficient."

"Wow, harsh."

"Shush, John. Karkat, you're getting good at English very fast. I'm impressed."

John grimaced at the both of them. "He learns fast just so he can be mean to me."

"Well, one ought to find motivation where one can," his father retorted calmly, and gave a mock-philosophical nod.

"Daaad!"

His father laughed quietly; Karkat ducked his head to hide a little smile from him. Okay, fine, it was kind of cute that they were getting along, John supposed. Maybe. Sort of. At least there was one adult Karkat wasn't quite so twitchy around anymore. Which was good because they were about to see a crapton of them in forty-five minutes.

"Alright, you should go to the bedroom and change your pants, son," Dad said, and handed Karkat the blue-gray pants and started nudging him toward the door John had used earlier. John snickered, grabbed Karkat's arm.

"I, uh, think he should use the bathroom," he told his father. "C'mon, Karkat, this way."

"What? Zhann--"

"Never mind, just get changed." John shoved him in the (huge, gilded, spa-furnished) bathroom and closed the door. "Pants, Karkat!"

He leaned against the door, hands tucked behind his back. The corridor was full of fancy wall lights and little wooden curlicues at the edges of the paneling; the main room gleamed with light scattering off each golden whatever or crystal whateverelse. Too bad they weren't allowed to see actual sunlight.

His father was on the phone, talking with someone in a low voice. As John watched, he started frowning deeper. Uh oh. He ended the call and turned to John. "I have to go. Take care of getting Karkat ready, please."

"Uh, okay, but what--"
"It shouldn't take me long," he said even as he walked toward the door and disappeared from John's view. The door opened, then closed; John sighed. Hard to admit it, but it helped keep him calm, having Dad around to joke with. Seeing him leave like something was a little wrong out here did not fill him with confidence.

Couldn't allow Karkat to get fretty and nervous before his big conference, either way.

The door he was leaning on opened, and he almost fell back on Karkat. He caught himself on the doorjamb, looked at him. "Yeah, buddy?"

"Uh -- Dad... sir?" Karkat paused, wrinkled his nose. "Hrn no. Mist-uh Eg -- argh! He, where?"

"Someone called him," John replied blithely, and tugged Karkat closer by the belt loops. "He'll come back soon."

"Ghhk -- Zhann!"

The slacks fit pretty well, at least, no weird pockets of cloth anywhere, no strained seams, and the ankle locator was flat enough not to make a weird bump. John started tucking the bottom of his button-up shirt in. Karkat growled quietly, clicking in his throat in that way he did when he was irritated, but John only had to bat his hands away a couple of times before he stopped trying to take over.

Karkat resisted a little when John turned him around to tuck in the shirt on Karkat's back side, but in the end he gave in with a sigh and a long muttered ramble.

(Pff, backside.)

(Karkat's slacks were pretty shiny. Must be brand new.)

He finished tucking in Karkat's shirt, freed his fingers of the waistband, and stepped back. If this were Dave or Jake it would be a pretty choice time for a wedgie, but somehow right now it did not seem appropriate.

Possibly because Karkat might squeak, but after that he would probably try to maul John. He was pretty well maul-equipped. John considered his hands, loosely fisted so the murderclaws weren't visible. They'd considered asking Karkat to trim them short, before coming here.

So far outside of training he'd used them mostly to climb walls in improbable fashions to avoid his butt being chewed on by grumpy dogs, and he might possibly need them as a last resort thing in case of... last resort needs, so he got to keep them.

"--Okay! Sorry, I zoned out. Stay here, I'm getting the rest of your stuff."

He zoomed off, came back with an armful of socks and shoes and jacket. Karkat had both hands on the sink counter and was staring at himself in the mirror. Maybe it was the tie and shirt, but he looked broody.

"Socks! For your feet. Sit on the counter, I'll help."

"No," Karkat replied, and snatched them from his hand, looking tired.

He figured out which side was for the heel in two seconds and pulled them on, grimacing faintly. He had trimmed his toes (using Bec's claw-trimmer, because the humans' nail cutters weren't wide enough to fit over the whole width) so they didn't pop through the end of the socks, which... was
something, John guessed. John handed him the shoes and watched him push his feet in, make a face.

"Yeah, they're going to be a bit too tight for a while, sorry. Tell me if it starts to hurt, okay?"

Karkat grunted, dismissive, without looking up to meet John's eyes; John sighed. Yeah, there was just about no chance he would, if they started hurting while he stood before all the people he wanted to meet. He'd just suffer in silence. Bluh.

"Jacket." John handed him the jacket, waited as he put it on, and then stepped in to fix his sleeves. "There should be a half-inch of shirtsleeve showing at the end, but just a half," he explained quietly, mostly so he didn't have to think too much about his hands on Karkat's wrist, and then by his chest as he did up the jacket buttons in turn and smoothed his tie back in.

He took a step back, looked him over from toes to head, laughed a little. "Whoa, weird."

Karkat's lips twisted in a disgruntled grimace, turned away to stare at himself in the mirror. He did not seem impressed, red eyes traveling all over what he could see of himself with his eyebrows furrowing a little deeper with each second.

"Aw, don't fret, you look nice. Come on, the mirror over there is bigger."

Karkat followed with a short but deep sigh. Once he was before the bigger mirror in the other room he just... stopped and stared, touched his chest gingerly, looking more and more troubled. He turned around to look at himself from the back, frowned deeper, stared at John.

"Uhn. Zhann?"

"What's wrong?"

Karkat opened his mouth, and closed it, like he didn't know where to start. "A thing is no... here?"

"Something is missing?" John blinked, turned to check the suitcase. "Oh, hey, you get a pocket handkerchief thinger. Right, don't move."

Dad had taught him everything he knew about suits, and he knew a ton. John had promptly forgotten almost all of it; he had to think a little before he remembered the proper way to fold it. He tucked the white silk handkerchief in Karkat's breast pocket, grinned. "Super classy, Karkat."

"Rhsst." Karkat started massaging the base of his horn, eyes closed in exasperation. "No! Not that thing! Shitdumb, you." He tapped the middle of his chest with emphasis. "Here."

John didn't get it until he was done drawing the round, squishy lines of the slime ghost logo.

"... Pfff."

Karkat threw his hands in the air and glared at the ceiling like he was asking the tiles for patience. "What!"

"Why would a suit have that thing on it, Karkat, you're so weird! It would look so silly, wow. Okay, maybe kind of cool and hilarious and something I would totally wear, but I don't think politicians or stuffy old Army dudes would enjoy it much."

Karkat was staring at him. Like, really hard. Like John had done something especially impossible and-or especially stupid.

"Uh. Yeah, what?"
"That thing. You have that thing in -- on shirt and shirt and shirt and shirt."

"Every shirt. Yeah! It's funny. But it's just something I saw on TV and liked. And then Dave tried to make it a joke by putting it everywhere, but then I liked it and I kept them. Why?"

Karkat stared another second, and then he started muttering under his breath once again.

"On TV," he muttered darkly. "TV. Okay, no. What that thing mean. Hn?"

"Nothing! It's what I'm trying to tell you. What did you think it was? The Skaialabs logo is totally different, buddy--"

"AUUGSH!"

John stood there dumbly and blinked a lot as Karkat raked both hands through his hair and yanked, snarling. The gold part of his eyes had gone a little orangey. He yelled something at the ceiling, stomped his way to a wall, and kicked it hard enough to crease his brand-new leather shoe.

"Karkat? What--"

"Shitfuckstupidhell! Aie'tserne rhess -- rauugh!" Another kick. The mirror shook on the wall. Um.

Someone knocked hard at the door. Ummm. "Egbert?! What's going on?!"

"Nothing, it's fine, stay out! Karkat, what the hell?!

Karkat was now pacing around the room, swearing and hissing, though at least he'd stopped yelling. He was still raking his hands through his hair, which had been enough of a royal mess to start with, and then ruffling it hard, scratching. He was going to hurt himself at this rate.

J.Noir: what the fuck is going on in there. can you even tell me that.

JH: uh no, i can't, i've got no idea either. :/

JH: he looks more frustrated than violent, though, hasn't even broken anything. prolly just blowing off stress. i've got it.

"Zhann."

Karkat stopped before him, pretty much backing him against the table, and stared hard at him. Since he was more or less trapped, John sat on the table casually and tried to look earnest and listening.

"Yeah?"

"I ask white shirt, no..." He quickly drew the slime ghost's lines, flicked his fingers as if to sweep it away. "I get?"

"Uh -- yeah, of course! Man, you should have told me earlier you hated it that much, I'd have asked Jake or Dave to trade."

Karkat closed his eyes, face pinched as if praying for patience.

"And we would definitely have gotten Dad to buy you your own shirts way faster!" John assured him, wincing a little. "I just ... didn't know you minded that much?"

Karkat let out a long, hissing breath, and grabbed the suitcase, searched it quickly, pushed it away along the table. He stalked off and started pulling open drawers next, quickly touring the room and checking every single piece of furniture the room contained.
"Uh. What are you looking for?"

Karkat came back out of a little cupboard with a pencil, stomped back to the table, tried it on a flyer with his eyes narrowed grimly. He pulled out his chest-pocket handkerchief thing next, tested the pencil on the back in a corner. Silk and graphite didn't mix super well, but eventually he flipped the handkerchief over to the side that would show.

"Um. Karkat?"

Karkat hesitated, pencil poised over the cloth. "... No. Hrrn. No that. I want -- rgh."

"I don't think we have any pens here, I didn't think to bring any. Dad would have some in his pockets, but..." John looked around, a little lost. "Do you want me to call him to ask?"

"No," Karkat replied, and stomped his way to the door to the antechamber. He yanked it open before John could tell him not to. The men packed outside went tense really fast; John hurried to his side so he could grab him if he tried to get out, but Karkat stayed on the threshold on his own.

"The fuck does he want?" Jack Noir asked with that eternal bitter and displeased look on his face. Karkat turned to him.

"That." He showed him the pencil. "I want not that, I want -- f'gh." He pointed at his eye next, stared at the man.

"You want a red pen," Noir said slowly.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Shoulders squared, feet set, Karkat bared his teeth. "Because fuck you, why."

John and several of the men cringed; Noir stared at Karkat for another very long five seconds, and then snorted in (oh lord how) amusement.

"Bannister, you heard the alien, go ask a manager for a fucking red pen. Wouldn't want to be called inhospitable, right."

One of the men in body armor slipped out of the suite and hurried down the corridor. Karkat crossed his arms in a grimly satisfied way and waited.

"Dude, you'll crease your suit--"

"Fuck you Zhann."

"I really need to teach you more insults, bro. Come on, let's go back inside, they'll tell us when they have the pen."

Karkat stared at him with suspiciously narrowed eyes as John took him by the elbow and guided him back in, but he allowed it. John went to pick up the brush and pointed it at Karkat's hair.

"Tame that thing before the guy comes back, you look like a bush in the dark. Or maybe like a wild bear. An angora bear. I can't even see your horns anymore, dude!"

"Fuck your shitface mouth," Karkat groused as he snatched the brush from his hand; but he didn't throw it at anything breakable and even actually used it, which was not something John had hoped
for very much. "Stupid, stupid, bad, stupid."

"You or me?"

"You and me!"

John snickered. "Oh, well, in that case."

His hands itched with the need to smooth down that epic cowlick at the back of Karkat's head, even more vigorous than his own, but he had a feeling the alien would not appreciate John's hand on his hair right now. Or anywhere else on him, actually. He sat on the table again, tucked his hands under his thighs, feet swinging, and worked very hard at not saying anything.

Noir's man eventually came back with a handful of pens; Karkat stalked his way back to the door and had snatched them from his hand before he could offer them. Karkat then visibly made himself pause and say a grudging "Thank you," before closing the door neatly in his face.

He went back to the handkerchief and spread his assortment of pens on the table; John leaned in to watch. One was a hot pink highlighter, which was dismissed with an irritated little sniff; the rest were a ball point pen, a crayon, and two felt-tip pens, all of which he all tested on the back seams of the handkerchief before deciding on the thicker felt-tip.

He put the folded handkerchief back in his pocket, marked the line where it emerged with a finger, pulled it out and flattened it on the table again, and then he drew two swift curves on the cloth.

John leaned over his shoulder, frowning a little, wondering if they would be the two back-to-back longbows of his Empress, but instead they were more like horizontal parentheses, the top one with a circle attached on the left end and the lower one with a circle on the right.

It sort of looked like a somewhat elongated 69 on its side, only with smaller circles. Huh.

Karkat settled the handkerchief back in, straightened the folds, checked himself in the mirror. John looked with him.

The little symbol wasn't even as long as his index finger, but bold red on white, it showed well enough, he supposed.

The biggest change was the way Karkat stood.

Feet apart, back and shoulders held straight, stare direct -- not defensive anymore, not tense, just ready. A weird shock ran down John's spine. It was like -- like something significant had happened, he knew that much, he just couldn't understand what.

"You good now?" he asked, just a little hesitant. Still peering at himself, Karkat nodded firmly.

"Yes."

"Well. Uh. Good."

Karkat spent the remaining fifteen minutes sitting on the table, staring at the door. John spent them on the couch, trying to sprawl without creasing the hell out of his stupid uniform.

Knock at the door. "Egbert! Time." Dad still wasn't back.

JH: dad?
PL: Will join you shortly. Advise you follow Mr. Noir.
JH: ok. :/

Wow. Terse. Must be busy.

PL: You'll be fine.
JH: heh. wasn't worried.

John got up, smoothed down his uniform. Karkat had already slipped off the table and was staring at him with burning eyes. He had his headset on, half-hidden under the mess of his own hair. He'd tamed it some, John could see, but no one who didn't know him would be able to realize it usually was worse. Oh, whatever.

John clicked his headset on. *Showtime.*

Karkat didn't respond in words, just in feelings -- battle-nerves, battle-eagerness, and a burst of shame and guilt that he quickly pushed underneath before John could grab it and look it over more closely. (*No time for that, back off, John.*)

They came out into the antechamber and Noir handed John handcuffs. *Which hand do you want free?* he asked as he turned to Karkat. They were both right-handed.

*Left's fine, I'm used to it/you're not.*

John closed the handcuffs around his left wrist and Karkat's right, let Noir tug on them to check, and then they stepped out. Men fanned out before and after them, blocking some corridors entirely.

*Other men beyond (loudheavy thuds, big boots metal shellarmor.) Who?*

*Other groups/security not Noir's, allies. (They don't know you not used to you might be twitchy.)*

"Tch." *We'll give them no excuses.*

John borrowed Karkat's horn sense to try to feel the men moving overhead and underneath and behind the corners. They must be really heavy for him to feel them from that far, with how small his horns' radius was. (*Fuck you so much, you hornless freak.*) And there really were a lot of cables running in the walls -- huh.

*Bzzt. Bzzt. What's that?*

*Ankle beacon."

*Oh. Wow, so regular and sharp, it made for a startling feeling every time. Doesn't it get on your nerves?*

(*Not any more than your flat-toothed face.*) *Shh. Showtime.*

They walked down a wide, winding staircase and reached a set of fire doors. Noir stopped there.

"Egbert. And you."

"Hm?"

The man stared at them in turn for a couple of seconds.

"... Don't make me regret not shooting you earlier. Too much fucking paperwork if I have to do it in here."
"Yes sir," Karkat said, entirely serious. "No paperwork." Then he flicked him an actual smile.

Okay no, John said as he pushed the fire door open to let Karkat in and get away from Noir and his weird amused/offended/gonna-stab-this expression. This is bad wrong he's an enemy you remember?

Pfft yes I do but not a real one. Won't attack/kill with no warning. (You/we are important to Mr. Strider he might not like it but a little important to him too.)

Last door. Fuck, he could almost feel the weight of the attention of the people behind. But he hates him!

No duh that's exactly why. Let's go.

John curled the fingers of his free hand like he was preparing for takeoff and stepped into the conference room.

Amphitheater style; three half-circles of seats. Only the middle and last one were occupied; the second with fifteen to twenty older men and women, the third with armed security. They had come in on the front dais, on the lowest level.

Some of them looked like they were wearing actual power armor, metal and servos that could help the man inside lift up or punch through a car. John had seen schematics; Karkat had seen the real deal, once, during his stint in the infirmary. (If you tore through the weaker parts on the lower back you could cut the power on half of the body at the low cost of a few really painful but not debilitating electric burns on your arm.) (Huh, I could have done it even easier through that area.) (Stop looking at my state secrets, bud, shoo!)

A half-dozen of Noir's men spread out before the first rank of desks, crouched there so they wouldn't block anyone's view. John and Karkat scanned the room, nodded briefly at General Harley, who was seated toward one of the ends of the half-circle, and who smiled genially back. He nodded them back at the security person lifting a chain from under the little desk thing they were standing by and holding it for Karkat to put his free wrist in.

John expected it to make Karkat nervous -- chained to the podium he would be even more powerless than merely chained to John -- but Karkat was glad instead; alone and not tall and low-caste and they were still taking him that seriously, it was good. Felt good.

Luckily John's dad came in before the silence got too oppressive in the room. Dad was perfectly put together but his mouth was pinched, displeased.

Someone tried to make him late, Karkat thought, and nudged John to look at the representatives, wondering if there was one who looked disappointed. John didn't notice anything weird, though.

General Harley stood. "The Committee of the International Committee for Ethics Oversight and the Allied Military of the United Nations of Earth calls Mr. Paul Egbert of the Skaialabs Board of Directors to the podium."

"Thank you, General." Dad moved behind the podium, turned to face the crowd. "I present Karkat and John Egbert, his translator, to the committee."

Harley said, "The Committee acknowledges Karkat and his translator, John Egbert," and sat back down with great formality. (John wasn't sure how you could sit down in a formal way but Grandpa Hass managed it somehow.)
Couldn't Harley have introduced us straight on, Karkat was thinking. Nice and obscurely formal just like home. John tried not to smile.

Okay, we're up.

He felt Karkat rifle quickly through his mind, find nothing more useful (damn it!) than "Stand at attention, be respectful." Well; they'd just have to wing it.

Dad stepped aside; Karkat stepped up, and John followed him.

For a second they both drew a complete blank.

"Mech Warhammer pilot, John Egbert," John said, and turned to introduce Karkat.

Who lifted his chin in an oddly non-challenging way and said, over-enunciating the vowels because humans were deaf, so deaf, "Karkat Vantas."

... You have a last name? Second name? Holy crap your name is not just Karkat? My mind is blown wow.

Yours is Egbert I thought that was Dad?? No wait explain later shut up.

"Letting me speak," Karkat said, "thank you."

Only he didn't know what to say, didn't know -- fff. No. Breathe. They wanted to listen. It was good. It would be fine. They wouldn't kill him for disrespect anyway. (For what?? Dude!) (Oh right you're all pansies.)

"Will ... Mister Vuntes take a question?" an older man in a civilian suit asked, looking sour.

Karkat looked up at the old dude, and then flicked John in the brain somehow. John blinked. Ow.

"Oh -- yes, he will."

"You appear to speak English. For what purpose do you have a translator?"

"I speak bad," Karkat said, and looked at John.

"Karkat has been learning at a relatively fast rate, but he still has less than two months of exposure to the English language, sir. He doesn't have more than basic knowledge of grammar and he still has a pretty small vocabulary." Most of which is bad words. Pff.

If you make me laugh before them I will arrange to kill you with your own dick to the bafflement of everyone in the universe.

I thought we'd agreed we don't exist below the belt and over the knees, buddy.

PL: Explain the telepathy for the record.

Oh, right. "I will now explain the function of the headbands we use for communication for the record."

He was pretty sure everyone in here had already received a report or twenty about it, but it was probably better that they make sure everyone was clear on it. Thank fuck for Jade's rambles, and thank fuck for the file Roxy had mailed him earlier that day, which he now just had to read out loud.

"The headbands Karkat and I are wearing contain a gel that transmits brain waves, combined with
Earth-make radio transmitters. In effect, they are telepathic headsets. What's transmitted isn't complete thoughts, exactly, and it's nothing like speech -- it's a mix of moods, images and notions, which the receiving person's brain -- so, mine right now -- reinterprets into things the person can understand. I then put them into words."

Um. Okay. Was that clear enough or a tangled mess or too informal or what.

"That means there can be a certain amount of data loss, doesn't it?"

John tentatively dubbed the old dude Interrupdude. "Of course, just like with pretty much any translation into a foreign language." He shrugged, and then remembered it wasn't very classy. Bluh. "Sometimes notions that we don't have in our culture are translated into the closest available equivalent, which means we miss nuances, or they will simply refuse to translate, in which case we'll have to break it down until the ideas go through. Most of the time it's fairly straightforward, though."

An old woman in a General's tabs and uniform raised her hand. "Will Mister Ventis answer a question? Two of them, actually."

Karkat and John both arched an eyebrow. "Yes, ma'am."

"Does he have a rank comparable to what we might use on Earth?"

Huh. John had never really wondered about that.

"Of course not you're not military at all you're a mech sports superstar. I'm --"

"Ah -- I would say... Corporal, ma'am." Huh. Nice.

And he didn't want to be dragged into a conversation about how ranks were different in alien land (by which I mean really weird!)

"Your second question, ma'am?"

She gave a slow, thoughtful nod. "How long has he been enlisted?"

Bluh. Why did she even want to know that. They had actual stuff to talk about here. Well, he friggin' hoped. Uh, Karkat?

Establishing how much of my ass I still take for a hole in the ground, of course, Karkat replied, and then they started prodding at the chunk of time Karkat had given him.

"Hm. We've established an approximate equation for time measurement, so it's -- a year and a half? Give or take two months either way."

Her bushy, gray eyebrow went up. "Third question, if you'll permit."

Damn it.

"Yes, ma'am," Karkat said, face impassible and mentally kicking John in the knee.

"Do Corporal Ventis' own people use the telepathic gel for the same ends? By which I mean communication with aliens and-or interrogation."

Oh yay, change of topic! Vaguely more relevant, that one. At least relevant to the setup of the actual, eventual discussion. John glanced at Karkat, who gave a faint nod. Yeah okay, tell her.
"No, ma'am, they have naturally telepathic people for that. And for longer distances they use technical means the same way we do. The -- uh -- neural fluid? -- is used to synchronize with the biomech. Basically it amplifies their thoughts so they can act as the mech's brain."

"Are they really alive?" someone John didn't see called out from the other side of the amphitheater. He sounded grossed out.

John said, "No," just as Karkat said "Yes." They looked at each other.

"Which one is it?" the same person called again. Rude. This time Karkat saw him; a really pale-blond dude in a military uniform John didn't recognize at a glance. Probably one of the smaller independent countries. The European Union Brigadier-General next seat over was glaring sideways at him.

"The animal used in the process of creation becomes brain dead, but the mech still, still breathes and has basic nervous activity and it's, well, not rotting. So, technically alive? But it's maintained that way by artificial... biomechanical pacemakers and the like."

"Do you even understand anything you tell us? Christ."

John smiled. Do you mind if I take a minute?

Karkat sighed. No, go ahead he asked for it. (Gotta make yourself respected or they'll pounce anyway, fuck them.)

"Sir, you may not have been informed, but I'm a mech pilot. Ask me to calculate reentry trajectories or refueling timelines on the fly while handling several tons of metal at high velocities, that's easy enough, but biology is outside of my area of expertise. I'm sure you will be able to get reports from someone who'll be able to explain the alien neuroscience in more detail."

J.Noir: politest fuck you i've heard in a while.
JH: it's all in the suave, charming grin.
JH: karkat wants me to tell you that when we come out of the room he is going to hit me and he'll make sure it's not lethal enough for paperwork.

"That said, Karkat -- ah, Corporal Vantas--" that wasn't quite the right sounds, but then again neither was Karkat, and still closer to the couple of attempts they'd heard already "--would like to take some time now to discuss the topic for which he asked an audience, so if there are no more questions..."

Silence. John tried not to shiver. He was finally going to get to know!

"I understand," Karkat said in his growl-hissy alienese, and John followed, one beat behind, "that your planet has certain general standards for the treatment of prisoners of war."

Silence. Apparently that tack had surprised everyone. John a bit less; he'd been there for the conversation with Rose, after all.

"I also understand that it's not certain that everyone will accept 'sentient being' as an equivalent to 'human.' I would like this point to be sorted out and out of the way first of all."

"Are you complaining about how you've been treated?" a Russian Air Force Colonel asked, scowling heavily, in the middle of sudden whispering. Karkat stared back, face blank.

"No, sir," he said by himself, in a calm, carrying voice. (Behind the calm steel was a storm of things John wasn't allowed to get at, not yet, not yet--) "I'm not. I don't want I give my people to you and
later they're dead."

Silence, again, breathless, poised. He had them.

He had John too. Holy shit, John sure as hell hadn't seen that coming.

Karkat nudged him inside his head, brisk and businesslike, closed. (John wished he wasn't, but he knew why. The vicious undertow of guilt and shame made entirely too much sense now.) Talk for me now.

"I have seen that your people have a totally different approach to -- to people," John tripped a little, "to soldiers. It's not like that with us. Every year many are born, no one but their--" friends? Lovers? It wasn't family but -- argh, he was losing the rest of the sentence. "--close friends care. If they live they can... climb in grade, if not -- uh. Acceptable losses. Next year there will be more trainees. We can all die, next year there will be more."

"And it's normal?" someone asked, aghast.

"Yes. The Empire says it's normal. It's -- good. It's strong. Only the strong live and pass their genes on. If you want to be strong it's normal. If you're weak and you cry you can go to the front lines first, you can be mocked and pushed away by your -- your year mates -- peers. Don't -- think about it, don't, just do it--"

(It's not normal here, it's not, I want that, fuck you to the last one, it's not fair, I want that.)

John bit his lip, shook his head. "My apologies, this is -- a bit of a jumble." Shit, more than that.

A civilian raised her hand. Karkat nodded. "Yes, Ma'am."

"Are you perchance a r-strategy species? That is, a species that reproduces in great numbers, and invests comparatively little adult attention and energy in the hope that at least a few of them will attain adulthood and breed in turn?"

Karkat blinked slowly. John replied for him. "Yes, ma'am. Adults -- most adults? -- are not involved at all. Apart from the, uh. Conception part, I mean."

She gave him a dry look. "Yes, thank you, Warhammer, I had assumed."

John's ears reddened and he tried not to glare. "That's straying from the topic, though."

Karkat moved his wrist a little, tugged on John's handcuff. ... I need you not to clown around right now. (It's not funny it'll never be funny.)

Right, crap, I'm sorry. I just it's such a pile of shit I can't, my brain just--

I know. Quick sweep it under the rug whee just like it was never here. It's how all your brain shortcuts work. I need you to stop that.

... I will. Sorry.

He firmed his stance, pulled his shoulders back a little bit.

"I know," they said together, and then John continued alone, just a voice, fitting words together from images and wordless understanding, "that you can't make a binding decision on the personhood status of my species as a whole today, with so little warning. But I also know that my commander was given the hotshot rookies and the unpromising -- rabble -- with the understanding that -- each
and every one of our deaths was, was valuable data, and if she brought enough data back she would get to captain a new ship."

Shit, shit, shit. All those half-unseen spaceships in Karkat's mind, a mere suggestion of something that would blot out the sky several times over. John breathed out, tried to empty his mind. Kept talking, somehow.

"She is wasting us because we don't matter. We're just one base-ship. We're the test run."

Holy shit, John couldn't help but think, no, no, if you scare them too much they'll start to wonder why they should even bother wasting the resources to--

Shh I know. Keep talking. Karkat slipped around his mind, nudged in. It was easier like that, closer and easier, for both of them.

"What you need is time," they said. "And every minute the ship is coming toward Earth is a minute wasted. A replacement will take a while coming, you're nowhere near far enough along your predicted timeframe for it to become necessary. Your response needs to happen now."

"Necessary?" Dad whispered beside them.

"We're mapping your progress curve," they told him, looking over. "You're learning fast, but you're starting from too far behind."

People were starting to whisper and talk together in the room, outrage and fear. They turned back to look at them. The woman General was staring back, arms crossed.

"To evacuate in time, you need me," they concluded, "and I need my year mates."

PL: John. Are you alright?
JH: we're fine, dad.
PL: I am not addressing "we."
JH: ...
JH: i'm fine. little syncing up between copilotpals. nothing to freak out about.

It was jarring to go out of sync. At the same time, his father's tightly restrained horror -- it shocked him, reminded him of the horror he also... And then Karkat was pushing him the rest of the way out, shuddering, fists clenched behind the podium.

Shit that felt really wrong (really too right) what the flying flock of fucks.

If it's any help I don't think there's any way it would have lasted past the time we went back to the suite! John sent back, face trying to contract into a mildly hysterical smile. Holy shit, holy shit. You should see the bed they've got in there even I can't say it's meant to be slept on more than in passing, like, to recuperate.

Oh lord.

Silk sheets and sinfully fluffy pillows and bouncy like a dream it's big enough to fit like five people --

John for the love you bear Rose do not make me send her lapdog/balance/boyfriend back to her with his alien dick lodged up his left nostril, I swear to all that is holy I will find a way to coil your spine at least three whole revolutions before it gets in there.

See? John shot back with a wide inner grin, lip twitching as he forced it down. We'd snap apart the
second I think "I want to jump on it."

... You are depraved.

"Corporal Vantas," the General barked out, startling them. John realized he'd been sort of staring in her direction without saying anything. Whoops. (She was using John's pronunciation now, heh, wonder what she'd think if he told her that the first he'd heard it was today.) "Do you think Egbert is compromised?"

Karkat snorted, quirked her a weird smile. "Yes."

John spluttered.

"It's okay," Karkat said. "Me too."

(Oh.)

"Warhammer," she said. There were people watching them, listening, though about half the room was snarling at each other in more or less contained tones.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Do you feel able to kill his friends when they come for us?"

He looked at Karkat. Karkat met his eyes, expressionless.

"Yes, ma'am. It's war. That makes it fair. No hard feelings." Then he grinned. "Plus I have it on good authority that I'm not pretty enough for the cushy harem position anyway."

Oh my god, fuck you. (that is so not true anyway shit fuck hell PLUG YOUR MIND EARS AND BUTT OUT.)

Karkat tried to raise his hands to yank off the headband, but one of them was chained to the podium and the other one was chained to John, who refused to raise his to match (that turdfondling taintsniffer.) John grinned -- Jesus but this day was completely insane, adrenaline everywhere and nowhere for it to go -- and said to the room at large, "Thank you for allowing us to address the Committee. If there are no more questions at this time we will cede the floor."

There were not. Or more like there were but no one could hear themselves talk in there, and eventually General Harley got up all official-like and said they could, only in fancy words.

So you think I'm hot enough for the harem? he teased as they waited for a guard to finish unlocking Karkat from the podium. (One took their distractions from that horrible shame where they found them.) Ohoho, Mister Vantas.

Why not I've seen some ugly ones there for the novelty value your teeth would be pretty fucking exotic! Argh. You're in good shape is all, like your oh no cut it off cut it off now please John I will beg --

John turned the headset off. He was pretty sure he could blame the last flash between them on Karkat; he'd never seen his own ass from that angle, that was for sure.

Karkat's ears were a pretty nice brick red.

So was John's face. Welp. Hehehe. Well, John supposed he didn't mind. No harm in looking, right?
(No harm in being looked at.) It wasn't like Karkat would ever want to be unfaithful to his boyfriend anyway...

Surrounded by guards, they were herded back up the winding staircase, back to the hotel side of the building, and up and right and left, and it was weird to be alone in his head again, too many thoughts buzzing, (so many enemies looming on the horizon, but today they'd faced other enemies and they had them, so they had them, and Karkat looked at his ass, that was just too hilarious for words,) too many feelings.

They stepped back into the suite and were freed and the first thing they did was reach up to their throats, and they weren't even telepathing at each other anymore, hehe. Karkat yanked his tie off, John pulled his high collar open, they both went about taking off their jackets.

Flop, flop, on the back of the couch, which was, John thought, the natural perch of jackets in a house, sorry. Dad would grump when he came back but he had just left again for God knew what reason so that was a while off.

Karkat rescued the pocket handkerchief from his jacket, stared at the symbol. John watched him. He still didn't get it, that was one mystery Karkat still had left, but he could tell how important it was.

They stared at each other.

"I --" Karkat blinked, raised a hand to his head, took the headset off. "That. My head ow." He looked away from John's face as he massaged the base of his horns with a hand, putting the headset down on the table and his handkerchief in the incomplete circle of it, like a teeny hot pink fence to keep people from touching it.

Right. John took off his hat, and then his headset, too, ruffled his hair where the flattened roots were starting to ache. The headset went on the hat like it was a headset stand, because why not, and why he couldn't look at Karkat suddenly, he didn't know.

"I want... They talk yes?"

"Yeah, for another couple of hours until the session is over, and then we can go home."

"Okay." Karkat breathed in deep, like he needed to brace, asked cautiously, visibly forcing himself to meet John's eyes, "I want -- me not you. No TV, no -- no talk. Couple of hours no Zhann. Is... that okay?"

"Oh." John didn't know if he was hurt or not. No, probably not, at this point togetherness was starting to look like torture, and John at least had gotten a few chances to tap out and be on his own here and there. Karkat had never even been left alone in a room on the island because their home wasn't escape-proof, but this suite definitely was. "Okay, yeah. Which room do you want?"

"Bathroom," Karkat snapped back instantly. John laughed.

"Wow, I see you've had your eye on that tub for a while. Sure, there's a tiny pocket bathroom off the main bedroom anyway, I probably won't have to pee in the chimney."

Karkat snorted on principle, even though he likely didn't get half the words, and with a little nod and a vague wave of his hand he snatched the pile of his normal clothes and disappeared down the corridor. John stood alone for a little while as he tried to decide what to do.

Maybe a nap.
Maybe he'd go yank off his boots, kick free of his constricting pants, throw himself on his back on that ridiculous mattress and bounce until the bed allowed itself to go back to stillness. Maybe he'd stare up at the silly princess dais.

Maybe he was already doing that, actually, and maybe his hand had landed on his thigh, and maybe several weeks' worth of enforced chastity and quick, guilty, unsatisfying jerk-offs after everyone had gone to sleep or the morning in a goddamn toilet stall were starting to get really annoying.

Okay, yes. He closed his eyes and pushed his hand down his underwear, and didn't know if he was surprised to find himself half-hard already. Maybe not very surprised. Adrenaline. Yeah.

Mnh. They had -- they had *rocked* today, and John wasn't even annoyed anymore that Karkat hadn't talked to him first, hadn't warned him, how did you warn for a bomb that size? You just dropped it and hoped they'd rise to the occasion.

*(Stand your ground I know you can.)*

The war -- the coming war, that was going to be awful, so much worse than it already was, but Karkat didn't get humans very well yet if he thought they were going to run. Hah. Saving his friends, though, yes. Making more allies, maybe. Yes, that'd be awesome. Couldn't wait. Maybe Karkat would be happy.

Felt good. He bit his lip, froze his lungs to keep from gasping, silence ingrained in him since puberty. Goddamn dorm room. Couldn't even -- oh, he could now. Just like -- just like in Warhammer's cockpit, just turn off the mike for a minute, seated all nice and firm, enclosed, alone, safe.

He could gasp, maybe. Quietly. No one would hear.

He wasn't going to last long.

He planted his feet on the mattress, knees up, bit his arm where it wouldn't show through the sleeve even if someone came in before the nanomachines were done with the bruise, tightened his hold on himself. He pulled on his dick, tight and fast, no time to waste today, shoved himself toward his orgasm at a punishing pace.

He came with a short, muffled shout in the crook of his arm, cleaned himself up on automatic, brain mercifully blank.

After, he took a nap.

--

"Karkat? Dad brought sandwiches, and then we'll have to go."

The door was locked, and he wasn't answering. Had he fallen asleep in the bath? John knocked louder.

"Karkat, wake up, it's almost time to go. Karkat?"

Something went thud in the room. The door unlocked with a click. "Yes, yes, what!"

Karkat peered through the crack. He was holding his button-up shirt closed and stepping on his too-long jeans; his hair was damp, sticking to his forehead and cheeks and flattened down, so that his little horns were visible to the start of the brick red zone.
"We go now?"

"Food, and then we go." John chuckled. "Did you fall asleep?"

"Uh -- yes. Shut up." Karkat grumped, and started squinting down at his buttons and frowning in consternation. John remembered what happened the last time he'd tried to conquer them alone; he reached out and did up the two middle ones, at least, so his shirt would hold somewhat closed.

"There! You're decent." ...Karkat was staring at him. Uh. "What?"

"Zhann you go. I uh. Water on the tub. Make it fshoo. Go away."

"Yeah, go away is a good phrase for it, though that was a nice sound effect--"

"No, you go away," Karkat retorted, and closed the door in his face.

Rude! Huffing, John went back to the living room, where his father was finishing packing up John's clothes. Were three Johnless hours not enough or what? He picked up a club sandwich and bit it in two mercilessly.

He'd decimated another three of them when Karkat finally came out, in tennis shoes and jeans and still the button-up shirt. Okay, wow, when he'd declared his enmity of John's ghost slime he had really meant it. He even went to pick up his felt-pen monogrammed handkerchief before even a sandwich and put it to safety in his jeans pocket. (Then he didn't know what to do with his headset and draped it around his neck like a weird collar. Heh. Wasn't a bad idea, so John did the same with his own, since the box they had originally traveled in was nowhere to be found.)

Dad picked up Karkat's suit from his arms and started refolding it as well. "Eat something, Karkat."

"Thanks, Dad," Karkat replied absently as he took one from the plate. John started giggling.

In the end Karkat ate more sandwiches than John did, even with his starting handicap, and drained almost a whole bottle of water to boot. (He bounced it off John's skull once it was empty, but almost nicely.) They dragged themselves back to the underground parking lot and into the troop carrier with a couple of Noir's calmer men; Karkat found a seat at the opposite end from them and made himself comfortable.

He looked all... thoughtful. Maybe a little subdued still, almost melancholy. Maybe just recharging.

(Maybe brooding. Maybe sad. Maybe guilty.)

(He'd betrayed his people there, even with the best intentions in the world. Even if in a way they had betrayed him first.)

JH: hey, grandpa.
HS: Yes my boy?
JH: why did we get to keep karkat really? why did they let us so easily?
HS: Oh that. They wanted to see if we could induce stockholm syndrome.

... Mother of fuck.

HS: I don't think what we have here fits the clinical bill for it but if today was any proof it's close enough for government work.
HS: You shouldn't message people until you're back on the island. Security concerns you know.
HS: Well then i'll contact you tomorrow.
"Zhann, sleep?"

-- Crap. John crouched low in the middle of the alley and stretched his thighs one after the other, busied his body, and hoped Karkat was too inward-turned still to notice his smile was a little wobbly. "Nah, I already had a nap, I'm not sleepy."

Karkat didn't say anything, just blinked slowly and said "Mnh 'kay."

He didn't have anything resembling Stockholm Syndrome. John had never been cruel, never let him guess what would make him angry to make Karkat a nervous wreck trying to figure out how best to placate him, never even threatened to punish him -- when Karkat mouthed off it cracked him up! Karkat wasn't scared of him at all, John could feel that every time they put the headsets on. It was trust, not some gross mental mindfuck trick --

On his tenth angry crunch he noticed Karkat was already asleep.

John spent another hour running through all the exercises he could in an enclosed space, then went to make conversation with his guards, one of which indulged him and the other of which was fun to make hardcore blankface. The dude was like a wall and Mr. Strider's lovechild, only way less snarky.

They were still twenty minutes out by his best calculations when Jake's Flintlock sped up, rattling the troop carrier in a not-very-reassuring way. The truck was made to take a beating, of course, but it wasn't exactly made for the kind of stress that being carried gave it.

Jake wasn't going slow.

John had been told not to contact his friends until they were home -- possible hacking, maybe, that far from the server -- but surely they were close enough.

JH: hey brotwin, did you just remember you left the milk on the fire? it was your turn to feed mutie? what?
JK: Cant talk now john.

... What?

JK: Eta five minutes. Prepare for evac.
JH: is the island under attack?
JK: No. Four minutes thirty seconds.

What was going on, what the fuck, John didn't even have a weapon on him -- no, Jake had said the island was safe and he wouldn't send him without a heads up into danger. And Jake didn't do subtle, not even under duress, so his behavior wasn't a warning to disregard what he was saying the way Jane's or Dirk's or Rose's behavior might have been.

He went to Karkat to prod him awake but the vibrations had already done that and he was sitting up straighter, staring up at John in confusion.

"Something is happening. I don't know what. We have to--" Argh. Frustrated, he pulled the telepathic headset on; Karkat sighed but put his on as well, set it against his horns. Something bad is going on, John said, and let Karkat rifle though his memory and how unsettling it was for Jake to speak so tersely.
Huh yes okay. We get out run for cover? What where?

Dunno we just follow the instructions I guess. (Might be politics/Earth assholes might be your people, from above they won't notice a difference bomb you too.)

The truck was put down with very little finesse; John grabbed onto a seat and rode the sudden bounce. And then the back door was opening and Flintlock was hurrying away, boom boom boom, heavy steps, and then it was --

Shit, those were the heavy duty thrusters. They weren't supposed to use them in low atmo.

John followed one of Noir's men out -- they were behind the research wing, but that was where the bunker was, so -- and his glasses went from passive light optimization to on.

This wasn't a chatroom's discreet flickering. His whole left lens was taken up with Priority update: pilot to report to hangar 6 immediately. Priority update...

acknowledged, he fired back, and started running.

In his head there was nothing -- not Karkat, not the conference, not the all-out war waiting months in the future. Just the memory of Warhammer's last damage report, and a question -- who had they lost that he now had to replace?
John reached the hangars at a dead run. Marcia was waiting with a pickup truck; he jumped on the open back and she floored the gas. He held onto the roof as she drove through piles of crates and past hurriedly backing off mechanics, riding the bumps and swerves.

"Flight suit!" she snapped, and grabbed a bundle of cloth on the seat beside her to push it through the cab’s back window at John. He stuck it under his arm just as she swerved right, almost flinging him off, and then suddenly they were pacing Warhammer's immense, prone shape as it was moved onto rails toward the launch shuttle.

John didn't have time to put his flight suit on. He stuck a corner of it between his teeth, climbed onto the cab's roof; Marcia matched her speed to the flatcar and John jumped to Warhammer's wrist. He was running up the slope of its arm in the next second.

The rails made the whole frame vibrate. John threw himself in a controlled slide along his mech's chest plate, slapped a hand down on the cockpit door lock, and let himself fall backward through the opening, spine first into his seat.

Oof. Still lying on his back, he tucked his legs in the foot well, reached over his head to close the doors, the huge drawbridge-armor one and the slide-locking airtight ones. He spat his mouthful of cloth onto his chest as he started a preflight check. Too many lights showing orange -- not many in the absolute but even one was not so good when going toward a mission instead of back from one.

"Warhammer, do you copy?"

"Copy, flight control. I'm strapped in and ready to go." He strapped himself in quickly so that it wouldn't be too much of a lie, made sure to stick his flight suit under his ass so it would stay put in zero gravity. Marcia hadn't gotten him a helmet so probably he would have one... aha! In the compartment under his seat. Perfect.

He shoved it on. Crap, he was still wearing the telepathic headset underneath. Ow.

The fit was really tight and his skull would be sore and chafed pretty soon. He almost took it off, but then his helmet started to display tactical info and he could not even take the time to blink.

> XCLBR incapacitated, attempting extraction, no pilot response
> ECHDN incapacitated, attempting extraction, intermittent pilot response, possible psychic attack in progress
> MSAMN severe damage to all limbs, down to 35% speed, pilot response erratic, possible psychic attack in progress
> RGMTN possible damage to main reactor, down to 78% speed, 27% ammo
> PSIDN pilot response erratic, possible psychic attack in progress
> MLOTV least concern
> FLTLK ETA 6 min.
>WRHMR ETA 17 min.

Fifteen seconds of video. The alien biomech wasn't moving like anything John had ever seen -- it didn't even have legs, just the four usual arms and a long, eeling tail of a lower body, the back of which was edged in serrated black spines all the way down to space-superfluous flukes.

Fish monster maybe, John thought vaguely, and then his cockpit tilted forward and his ears popped as the cranes lifted them into a standing position on the launch pad. He let Warhammer's computer handle stepping the rest of the way back into the launch shuttle's docking port.

Clang. Clang.

"Locked in," he confirmed. "All green." At least all the necessary crap for shuttle-assisted flight.

"Warhammer, prepare for launch in five, four, three..."

They were skipping a dozen steps at least. No preflight check. The hangar guys had probably done one in the hangar while someone was summoning Jake; it still wasn't supposed to be enough.

(Excalibur was giving no pilot response. Echidna and Masamune were dead in space.)

All the pilot survival stuff like oxygen and heat checked out. He would just wing the rest.

"... one, ignition."

The rocket roared, sound muted by Warhammer's seals, so that John knew more by vibration than noise. A half-second later he didn't need to feel vibrations; he felt the kick in his chest, in his neck, where for a moment it seemed he had left his organs behind, down under.

He went through his instrument checkup routine, now that it was too late to stop.

--

By the time he got there the psychic attack had been moved up from "possible" to "confirmed."

He'd hitched a ride with a light cruiser slingshotting around the moon (the trajectory the Marine was left with afterwards looked really precarious. John hoped he could eject in time.) Ten minutes before engaging hostile combatant, codename Capricorn. Rose was down. He'd changed into his flight suit.

Jane had lost a leg from the knee down, was shrieking. Eight minutes. He took the headband off, locked it away (he wasn't going into battle against a psychic while wearing a telepathic receiver.)

Seven minutes.

Jake was engaging it. Six minutes. Jake had lost a gun. Five minutes. Roxy had landed a hit -- higher caudal area, non fatal. Four minutes.

Last pre-battle check. All weapons online.

"Molotov, do you copy?"

A hitched breath. "Copy, Warhammer!"

"Need you to boost our glasses' chat ability."

He waited as she took another shot at the biomech to get it away from Jade. "You fuckin' kidding? Where do you see a server in space?!"
"Use your mech's computer. Roxy, do it."

He was only three minutes out. Two thirty. He took the time to memorize everyone's positions. Jane was mostly attacking the biomech but she'd take a whack at anything that came close. Rose and Dave were floating (limp and dragging like drowned corpses -- no, bad thought, dump it.)

Dirk was attacking with relentless intensity, and zero regard for coordinating with others, which was how John could tell he was not himself. He'd managed to get winged by friendly fire several times, and he just ignored it and kept hammering away at the thing's armored arms, using his mech's body like a ram when the limbs failed to respond, until it slapped him away with its tail, stripping several layers of plating with each swipe of the barbed side.

"Got it!"

JH: attn. everyone.
JH: karkat can not read my thoughts when i'm typing.
JH: i repeat, karkat can not read my thoughts when i'm typing.
JH: not the thoughts i'm writing down at least.
JH: we don't know if the hostile can read us but it won't hurt to coordinate using different parts of the brain.
RX: !!!
RX: <3
JD: idk if it can read us, havent seen anything 100% "oh i saw it coming" but the guy is way too good
JK: Not sure i get it but will try!

John wished he could get confirmation that Dirk, Rose and Dave were actively viewing the discussion. There was no "online" list.

One minute.

JH: i have you on visuals.

From the alien's previous tactics, he'd go after -- Jane, John thought, or Jake. Probably Jake, he was fresher. John's intel said he'd tried going after Roxy and she couldn't land a solid hit, but neither could he.

The reaction speed advantage had been their ace in the hole for years. Where did this dude even come from, that he outmatched them all but her?

JH: roxy, grab dirk, arrow for dave.
JH: jade, jake, barrage, plasma guns.
JH: jane?

No response. Okay! Okay. They'd manage around her. He damn well hoped.

He wanted to wade in and go toe to toe with this Capricorn. He wanted to see how well it'd dodge him in Warhammer's namesake's reach.

So far he was the only one who couldn't possibly have been tagged for impending mindfuck.

He reached the battleground and circled wide without slowing down.

"Control, this is Warhammer, do you copy?"
"Copy, Warhammer."

"Need evac ready for Excalibur, Echidna and Masamune. Masamune will be combative. Get ready for emergency shutdown and pilot extraction."

He braked briefly, skidded up to Echidna's limp form, locked Warhammer's arms under her armpits, and blasted off again.

JH: rox, shove masamune at excal and go back, jade's plasma pack is almost empty.

Roxy was close enough now, he could see that on her feed; Dirk would have a hell of a time maneuvering with only the back-mounted thrusters, John would snatch him back before he went too far.

RX: hacked his magnets on, HA!


Alright. The support teams would be useless in the middle of combat but they wouldn't be far either, he'd be done with evac soon and then he'd--

"JOHN!"

Plasma fire bloomed on his right side rear view, a purple so white at the center it hurt to look at for the flicker of time before the cameras adjusted for the glare.

It was arrowing straight for him.

Roxy shot it twice, hit it twice; the shell went dull, went wet. It didn't care.

John shoved Echidna off him, sent her and Rose tumbling Dave-wards, blasted straight at it as fast as he could. He couldn't afford to lose his support in a chase right now and the son of a bitch was fast in a straight line, so unfair.

He went into a barrel roll as they crossed each other, only barely dodged a set of raking claws, and then he was past it and rushing to form up with the other pilots.

Who could he send in his stead to evac? He was going to need Jade's very last shots -- he did another barrel roll and then reversed the rotation, felt all the blood rush to his brain. A plasma beam roasted Warhammer's left heel, melded circuitry and bearings. John killed the alert. He wasn't going to walk Warhammer under any kind of gravity anytime soon.

The error screen flickered red, orange, settled mostly on orange. Little pinpricks dotted the outline of his mech's spine. Fuck. Yeah, he really wasn't.

He dodged behind Flintlock; its volley of shots would slow Capricorn down for John to grab his--

"Cripes!"

A high-velocity slug from Jake's railgun bore a hole through the thing's upper right shoulder. Its trajectory wobbled from the impact, and then the plasma wings bloomed again. John dodged away from behind Jake, and only barely managed to divert its trajectory enough for Capricorn to rush past Flintlock and not through it.

Okay. Okay. Dude was determined to lay one on John. Okay. He'd been erratic and borderline playful in the reports, lazy on the follow-through. Because he'd hit everyone else once already? --
shit, half-loop and barrel roll to the left. It was gaining.

JH: roxy, jade, i'll lead him in a straight line thirty degrees up from your axis
JH: my leg's fucked from the knee down STRAFE AT WILL!

He did. They did. Five impacts confirmed. Splatters of dark wet blood trailed behind it on Roxy's feed. It didn't even flinch, didn't slow down at all. What the fuck.

(Blood -- it was almost-alive -- the pilot was acting as its brain and telepathy worked two ways, did they kill the pain receptors when they made the biomechs? Why else wouldn't a pilot feel it? But without any return how could you fly it right--)

It was on his tail it was on his tail it was swinging down -- he swerved, hard, without warning, crossed Jade's field of fire. He vaguely noticed her jerking her gun up, a bolt going wide at the corner of his eye -- it was close, no time for instruments it was catching up and --

And.

Clammy hands. Heart in his throat. That feeling of impending disaster, that instinct he's always depended on to dodge.

It had anticipated him. It was gaining, oh shit, it was gaining--

Either the instruments were lying to him, or...

JH: hes in my fucking head!!!!

It was -- the distance was shorter now, because goddamn but that was a stupid maneuver he'd just done, but Capricorn didn't turn as well -- as with most biomechs it was faster on straight lines when it had time to build up momentum, John knew; he'd seen it flip around on a dime, with that tail, but without hands and feet propulsors it couldn't race like a mad hare the way Warhammer could, no matter that his fucked up leg messed with his balance.

It'd made him feel it was closer than it really was. It was still doing it. John blew the instrument readings up across his screens, flashed them red -- barrel-rolled to the side, went around in a curve, shit, the guy was trying to herd him away from his backup. He told his nerves to shove it, his shaky hands, his clenched guts.

"You're cheating!" he yelled. The cockpit was silent save for the thrum of machinery. He should have put on some angry music the way Roxy did; hell, even Dave's retro-coolio hip-hop would be a plus at this point. Drown out all intrusive thoughts, only let through instinct and ingrained training Jesus that one had gotten close.

"Did that fucker seriously barf a plasma beam at me oh my god."

Jake barked an involuntary laugh into his mike. "He seriously did!"

John grinned (or bared his teeth, either or.) The humor put some distance between him and the terror cramping in his guts -- not much, but enough.

It felt the way talking with Karkat felt; he couldn't really tell where the thoughts came from, experienced them inside his own skull in the same place his own thoughts came from, but there was a flavor to them, a shape, a vibration different from his own thoughts, from his own fear.

"I can believe that's not butter, bro," he rasped (his throat was dry.) "I'm not buying,"
JD: jesus fucking GOD john if youre going crazy here i will shoot you in the butt myself!!!!

Whoops.

JH: haha no sry thinkin outloud

He wished he could get the three seconds he needed to stabilize his mech and draw out the goddamn hammer it was named for. The damaged leg was already causing problems; at this speed the gesture needed to grab the pole from his back would send him spinning in a straight, predictable corkscrew to nowhere.

The herding was getting him pretty far from Jade and Roxy, though they were trying to follow -- but it was making it hard for them to maintain their position, or, hell, to find one that they could use without shooting him too. It wasn't like he could send them his flight plan!

It was getting him pretty close to Jane, because she'd been doggedly trying to close in from the start.

He didn't like how she hadn't communicated with him at all, or shown much strategy. The way she swung her trident, she wanted to bash the biomech over the head until it stopped twitching, and then stab it deader for good measure.

JH: sis, i dumped your maltese eaglething book in a mud puddle, it's ruined to hell and back! :B
JH: and the bookmark fell out. whoops.

No response. A sick fear grabbed him by the guts, deeper than the alien's made-up one -- Jane being escorted out of a troop transport, Poseidon-less, face bloodless and eyes blank, Jane pacing and snarling and unable to relax, to rest, unable to look at a Marine's uniform without flinching with devastated guilt.

She'd been getting better.

Claws raked his leg, sent him careening wildly in an entirely unplanned direction. Fuck. He needed to stop running and fight, waiting for it to bleed out was a useless strategy but how the hell was he meant to fight without any good weapon?

JD: sending you a flight plan FOLLOW IT EXACTLY!!!!

John gritted his teeth as another swat sent him whirling in another direction; he couldn't even look at the arrows on his screen before he'd stabilized and fired his leftover foot propulsors straight into one of Capricorn's grasping hands. He went plunging into it at breakneck speed, his instruments beeping mine warnings at him with every turn. Holy crap, the girls and Jake must have dumped all their leftovers, it was like a three-dimensional maze made of small, almost invisible explosions in a can.

He flicked a tab, dropped a bunch of his own mines in his wake to close the path.

Mines detonated, flung Capricorn's length from side to side, a salvo of flashes without sound. John burst out of the minefield and immediately swung the hammer from his back.

Behind him, a shockwave of -- of some kind of energy triggered the mines in a row, glare-blinding his cameras for a second.

Capricorn emerged gleaming wet with blood, black shell cracked and dinged in places.

Roxy was closer. It arrowed straight for John once again.
The whole thing was starting to feel extremely personal.

Especially when he started wanting to throw up once again, when the face of the biomech staring at him with its odd black-light eyes started feeling like it saw him, John inside his cockpit, right through the metal, it saw right through him --

Get the hell out of my skull, asshole! he mind-yelled, hoping it could hear him back.

(Probably not, it hadn't seen some things coming, like the minefield, God he had to believe that--)

The cockpit seemed to close up around him like a fist; he could almost hear the metal crumpling inwards; the screens darkened. His helmet's oxygen didn't seem to be coming out right.

He tried to breathe, even as he desperately jerked his mech onto a new escape trajectory, half at random.

A hard jerk had his body straining against the flight harness; well-padded as it was, the way his head bounced and his guts seemed to lurch and crowd up under his ribs could hardly be faked.

The son of a bitch had him by the leg.

John stared down at it, watched it stare back up, claws slowly digging into the plating; its odd maw was open in an unfriendly rictus. They ate, Karkat had told him they did, they fed.

All those teeth, all those --

Hands clenching hard on the controls, he swung his hammer down.

Red lights bloomed on his instrument control panels -- gyro popped, the load-bearing upper arm support slanted out of alignment. It went by in a flash and yet he knew even as the hammer was coming down that it would miss the head.

It hit hard in the shoulder blade of the already injured upper-arm; black shell plates cracked, knifelike spines broke straight off. The biomech twisted around his leg like a furious eel on a line, shaking Warhammer around. John's head rapped against the side of his seat, against the other side, whiplash, brain shaken even despite all the ways in which he'd been tailor-made to deal with acceleration speeds that would knock a normal human right out.

(His instruments were beeping warnings at him -- torn-off leg plating, fuck, this was the good leg, circuits gone offline, he really wasn't walking Warhammer anywhere after this. His poor buddy.)

The hammer was gone; the locator beacon showed it on a trajectory that right now meant a lot of too damn far. John swung his mech's hands down, rained punches that did jack shit. Capricorn's shell was cracked in so many places John couldn't imagine how it wasn't retreating already, how it wasn't dead.

They'd never fought any alien who could keep it up this long, who'd go up against the eight of them and knock over half of them out.

Jade and Jake were so far away on the other side of the minefield and where the fuck was Roxy, and Jane --

JH: jane, i need you!
JH: i'm fucked if you don't help.
She didn't respond and she wasn't moving, just floating there in space, what the hell was up with her, oh no, no. He was going to die, this thing was going to kill him, he was going to fail and get Jane and his clonesibs killed and then they'd pour down onto Earth, he couldn't breathe over the certainty that he was going to die --

RX: GERONIMO!!!!!!!

Molotov seemed to him to have teleported in, though objectively it had to have been racing at them for a while. It hit, fist first in that odd beast maw, and then as Capricorn's head flew to the side, its metal arm slipped around the biomech's neck for a haymaker of epic proportions. John and Warhammer were once more sent flying ass over head, plus several other angles of rotations that strained even his augmented stomach and inner ear.

-- Jesus dick, it was still grabbing onto his ankle with one hand. And then two hands, fuck, fuck. Three hands. Both of Warhammer's ankles were caught, one of them hugged even by the secondary arms; that one wasn't about to get freed. Roxy was coming back for another pass but at the speed it crawled, and its mouth coming open with that odd flickering purple light coming from its gullet --

Jade was in position.

But nothing she had left would pierce that shell.

Well, okay.

JH: JADE LEG OFF NOW!

She didn't even need to ask him what he meant, didn't pause to second-guess, on his wavelength exactly. Her last plasma bolt seared through the hole in Warhammer's thigh's plating, the exposed wiring, the underlying struts. A sharp punch of his own, and it was breaking off.

Capricorn's secondary arms twitched open -- startled? -- and with a savage grin John wrenched his mech's severed leg free to backhand the alien with it.

He blasted his back-mounted thrusters the second that last primary-hand loosened on his other ankle, shooting free. Roxy almost goosed him, using his flight to hide her dive until the last possible second.

RX: catch!!!

He let go of the leg, grabbed his hammer as Roxy rammed another fist home -- collarbone hit; she'd been aiming for the chest, it had curled up. Still closer to the chest, to the alien pilot's womb-nest, than it had let any of them get so far.

One of its main arms was pretty damaged, though not entirely out. The second one -- John watched it try to rise for a second, the way Capricorn flipped around to follow Roxy, reminded quite sharply that it and John weren't alone on the battlefield.

Maybe it shouldn't have forgotten John was still there.

He braked hard, and plunged, hammer ready. His flight stabilizers were shot, Warhammer's body lopsided; he went into a corkscrew. It didn't matter.

His hammer's thrusters kicked in.

There was no sound in space. He'd have heard that arm break otherwise. The swing took him past the upper body, broke off some more back spine on the way. The alien convulsed, and fell on him
like an enraged beast.

It was a blind melee after that, flickers of terror trying to find purchase in his mind but his body was too busy, his hands were too busy commanding his mech for his brain to catch up, reflex after spinal reflex, savage elbows to the face, hard jabs with the handle of his hammer. The tail threw him off -- couldn't swish the handle between legs it didn't have to flip it around. He tried swinging the hammer again, had it grabbed somehow a mere meter before contact with the chest (the force shoved the alien's hand back into its own shell, hard -- not enough to crack the alien's cockpit.) Deadlock.

The alien's snake-fish tail whipped around Warhammer's chest. Started squeezing.

Dark, gloopy blood smeared on a few of his cameras. The hammer was caught between them -- so was the last of the alien's stronger, primary hands. The small ones came up to cup, almost lovingly, John's mech's face, and then started twisting.

It wouldn't kill the mech to have its head broken off, even if there were a ton of sensors in there he'd be miffed to lose. The spine, though, was already beyond fucked -- had started out fucked -- and that was more of a problem.

The real problem was the way Warhammer's frame groaned and sang, the way metal screeched.

His mech was good as dead. Another two minutes.

So.

JH: sis.
JN: nrihbmk&&
JN: here

He shoved the alien terror to the side and smiled.

Let go of the trapped hammer, freed his hand. Held it out.

JH: weapon plz. sharing is caring.
JH: hey, i love you.

He heard her snarl in her mike, was briefly stunned that all this time he hadn't -- that she'd been silent.

"You shut your fool mouth before I stash a soap in it!" she yelled, and threw her trident out.

It hit and locked in his palm with a clang of electromagnets.

The biomech's armor was cracked to hell and back. Jane's trident's edges were lined with monofilament blades. The only real question was whether its chest would stop the points before they reached John's cockpit. Only one way to find out!

John swung down.

"--John!"

Jade's yell couldn't stop him, he was committed, it was too late.

Jade couldn't, but Karkat could.

The trident glanced off against Cancer's massive, shield-like pincer, skewed hard to the side, and
then Cancer impacted the both of them and they went careening into the void.

John couldn't *breathe*.

That nightmare shape with the red in the cracks screamed enemy, target, but inside was Karkat, Karkat his *friend*, his prisonbuddy, his -- he couldn't breathe, couldn't. He punched down hard onto Capricorn's broken collarbone, flicked his thrusters on and off to try to sear that tail off him, try to yank free. Battle, he needed to gain ground to swing, ground for his allies not to be scared of joining in, *it was Karkat* --

Cancer wedged its upper body between Warhammer's chest and Capricorn's bared teeth. Its back was wide open to John, and Warhammer still had the trident in hand, chipped tines or not.

He breathed in, and breathed out, and forced his hand to unclench from the controls to unlock the overhead compartment for the telepathic headset.

A desire to destroy so deep it felt like lust slammed into his mind the second it was turned on. Dry-heaving, he jerked his hands off the controls entirely. No, fuck, no, he needed to get to Karkat, not that monster, Karkat --

(*Fear-rage*) how fucking dare you, you fucking dumbasses I'll kill you both (no I won't, no), *stop that, let go let the fuck go already*--

Oh.

John went loose in his seat, eyes closing.

Karkat was here to help.

John could feel a strange phantom echo -- Karkat's body, and Cancer's body around him, matching him almost beat for beat. He was slowly, tenaciously wedging himself between the two of them, trying to force Capricorn to let go. Capricorn's tail tightened with a spasm and the lights through John's eyelids turned even redder; his mech shuddered. An alarm was beeping; John cracked an eyelid open to check. Not the cockpit or its life support; nothing to freak out about.

JH: he's here to help.

He said it again, out loud, for the support teams and all the Marines his farthest radars showed him following. "Cancer's trying to help."

*Of course I am why the fuck else -- John! You're online/linked/brainbond! (didn't notice too busy shit) don't kill him fuck don't kill him (I'll do anything oh please he came I can't believe he came--)*

"I -- think he knows the dude. Could yet end this without bloodshed."

Without any more, at least. God, his friends.

He firmed his voice. "All units hold position, I repeat, *all units hold position.*"

JH: jane, i'm gonna need you to move back a tad.
JH: roxy, if she won't move, please move her.
RX: yeah sur ehting
JN: I can manage.
JD: john, what the fuck is going on!?!!!
The miasma of guts-twisting terror slowly receded; Karkat's own thoughts only seemed to get brighter in contrast, loud and crystal-clear. John could even hear/feel the steady beeping of the ankle locator, providing a distracting buzzing counterpoint to the steady thrum that was Karkat's usual ranty thought processes. They weren't turned toward John (John wasn't an asshole-not-listening-damnit.) John thought he was maybe talking to the dude? It felt like that, at least. Turned outwards. He wasn't sure how you could speak in that womb-cockpit full of wet glop, though.

(With my mind stupid, more controlled is all) (don't distract me now)

John tried to follow the conversation; Karkat's thoughts were such a mess it was hard to decide what made it out into the (radio-communicator-farspeaker); even harder to translate what made it back into words.

But you're dead, he caught once, echoed through very clearly, for how sharply it stabbed Karkat through.

"Warhammer, this is Meteor Alpha-Zulu-Eight-Niner, come in! Over."

John wet dry lips. "Meteor Alpha-Zulu-Eight-Niner, this is Warhammer. I'm in telepathic contact with Cancer. Capricorn is calming down, Cancer's talking him down. Over."

(You were dead, you died)

Do I look fucking dead to you, stupid (I love you.)

It was all through Karkat's mind, in and out and underlining everything, a running thread of "you came, I can't believe you came, I love you so much I could die."

John wondered if it was going through to Karkat's friend. It didn't feel like he was trying to broadcast it.

The biomech's tail released him all at once, and chunks and pieces of his mech that had been kept in place by the pressure floated off; sparks cascaded out. John's left-side back-thruster was dead. Everything south of his cockpit was liable to break off if he tried to move under his own power. He kept Warhammer floating, even as Capricorn's black, serrated tail slithered off and wound itself around Cancer instead.

Karkat's biomech was patting Capricorn on the muzzle with a giant pincer. It was somehow surreal enough to be hilarious.

Shut up, voyeurasshole.

I love you too! shot back out thoughtless and teasing, but right on its heels was the memory of Karkat's gut-wrenching I love you, I love you to that guy with the antelope horns who'd...

Who'd been told John had killed his boyfriend. Wow. Yeah. "Personal" covered it nicely.

The Marines had arranged themselves in several layers all around the three of them, barely a mile out. John didn't want to think about how many of them would die if Capricorn decided to plow through them. Though the biomech was injured enough that it might slow down to their speed, and its cracked shell might even let hits through, so their deaths might not be in vain at least...

I want a cease fire, Karkat sent him, forceful and worried. Talking, face to face. War on pause I know you guys do that (so weird your traditions are weird are we all noblemen playing at not needing victory at all costs now.) The interface to lovemine sucks, filters all
emotion/feeling/notclinical out. Make them not attack (I will defend him I will I have to--)


He waited; no doubt the request had caused a right little fuss out there.

It was kind of strange that the two aliens wouldn't take the chance to attempt to run off, he thought, and then tried to un-think it. Karkat abandoning them now felt wrong, even though... shit, he was still a prisoner of war, and it was the duty of a prisoner of war to escape.

So fucking compromised wow, Karkat thought back. John flinched. No I meant you-me-us, asshole.

Huh?

I thought about it -- fuck no shut up it was pointless anyway my dad's half starved to death and his might bleed out before we rendezvous with a transport assuming the transport didn't fuck right off when he got surrounded, chances of us escaping were one in four.

Aw hell. It's bleeding to death? Seriously? (well I didn't mind killing it ten minutes ago but welp.) might need to evac him in a hurry then. (drowning in his cockpit kind of a bit ugh)

... I might be exaggerating some. I have no idea, he won't tell! "What will you do/were going to do after avenging me lovemine?" "Uuuuuughghu no fucking clue my mind is made of chewed foodgum and paperclips hurr."

John rubbed his thumb against the armrest of his chair, thoughtful, a little melancholic. (Good Warhammer, best buddy.) But you... didn't even want to make the attempt.

A flicker of embarrassment-guilt, and then Karkat returned him an odd, cagey brouhaha of thoughts, muffled by some sort of mental wall that John couldn't get through. Something kind of... not hope; harder, darker than that. Anticipation-nerves-tension, but concealed yet, a grain of possibility that he was still clamping down on, that pulled his shoulders back and his spine straighter, oh, what if, what if, soon -- (no, you're getting into the pilot's seat of a shuttle before they've even installed the pilot/reactor, assturd, "too early" barely covers it and stop assuming so much it's gross and you don't deserve it anyway.)

"Warhammer, this is Meteor Alpha-Zulu-Eight-Niner. Permission granted to touch down on the Moon, coordinates, 43 degrees, 36 minutes, 0 seconds South, seven degrees, 24 minutes, zero seconds West, over."

"Coordinates noted, Meteor Alpha-Zulu-Eight-Niner. The Pictet crater? Over," John confirmed as he entered the numbers into his computer. Not far from Tycho base, then, but not right on top of it either. The armament around the rim of Tycho's crater would give a serious pounding to anyone trying to cross, he supposed.

"Affirmative. Are you able to proceed unassisted? Over."

John looked at his instruments, giggled out of sheer disbelief. The only yellow lights left were for the oxygen. With his main reactor shut down for fear of overloading the circuitry and getting things to explode he was starting to lose heat. "Yeah, that's a negative. Over."

"We will proceed with an extraction--"

I'll take you, Karkat said. (Insurance/no whoopsies) -- argh I don't want you as a hostage I just don't
trust them trying to put distance between us before we've talked is all (shit do you believe me I wouldn't believe me!)

John laughed out loud. *I believe you. (I trust you argh that's sappy no stop.) Let us ride into the sunset! Yeehaw.*

*You are an idiot I am surrounded by idiots you and him(lovenme) should get along like cattle taken for a spin by a tornado.*

*Haha we say "a house on fire" for that one same concept.*

*Case in point.* Cancer started trying to disengage from the death hug Capricorn still had on it. *Come on I need to go pick him up can't you just--*

John started to laugh even harder when Capricorn oozed around until Cancer was wearing it as an oversized backpack. Cancer elbowed it in the ribs, and Capricorn reluctantly detached, though it stayed well in arm's reach.

"Negative, Meteor Alpha-Zulu-Eight-Niner, Cancer will assist."

"Are you crazy?!"

*If I didn't love the fuck out of you I would hate you so much,* he overheard Karkat sending, and then Cancer started reaching for him.

"Negative, I am as sane as I ever was!" John swallowed another laugh, clicked off the telepathic headset in a vague nod toward proper op-sec. "They are requesting a *cease-fire,* Meteor. Not a 'lead them to a good ambush point.' We could take them, but not without heavy losses, and it's pretty much guaranteed I'd be the first one down. And we would lose a massive opportunity to negotiate, which at this point is frankly stupid."

A noise of protest was heard through the mike, but the other man didn't say anything.

"Corporal Vantas took a risk by wading into that fight to separate us instead of joining in, and did not escape afterwards with his ally, which to me proves his good faith more than well enough. They deserve a bit of insurance for their nerves, I think."

Plus they were much closer than anyone else. Couldn't stop them without restarting the hostilities. He wasn't saying that, though.

"As it is my mech they will be holding onto, and as I am the one with the most experience in alien behavior, unless someone wants to challenge my de facto command over the battlefield, it's my decision."

He'd just bet they would have a team in power armors ready to extract his poor brainwashed self the second everyone touched down. Oh well, so long as they got enough time to talk their way out of it, it would probably be fine. He clicked the headset back on.

--where were you could have warned me okay which end do I grab you from, your machine-fakeperson looks so bad/mangled/dead wow.

*You don't need to remind me, wah, my lovely. And uh just grab me under the arm/around the torso should be the most structurally okayish. I'll navigate yeah?*

*Unless you expect me to divine the location we're going to you're pretty much going to have to,*
assface. Oh no, love, it's fine, but you're going to have to move farther back, I can't blast/fly with you in the way.

John's smile died slowly. It'd have been nice if Roxy and Dirk had found a way to turn down the intensity on the telepathic headbands after all, wouldn't it. Heh.

JH: ok guys we're rendezvousing at pictet crater. i'll need you all there for security, yeah? make sure they don't blast off again.
JK: Roger my good man!
JH: i'll have to ask karkat how the heck he even managed to break into the science hangar and leave the planet in the first place, holy crap, that promises to be a ton of fun as clusterfucks go.
RX: yeah no fukin kiddin wow someone must be shittin enuf bricks for liek a whole tower down there
JH: also does anyone have news from rose and the rest?
JD: they were evac'd safely but i dunno where they are, i'll ask!!
JK: Much obliged dear sister i must admit im getting kind of antsy regarding the continued health and safety of our comrades in arms.
JK: John can you maybe ask karkat to ask his chum about long-term issues?
JH: huh, that's a thought. a scary one. right away! brb.

Karkat hey Karkat long-term damage of crazymaking power plz? (insanity ptsd persistent hallucinations tremors in the piloting hands what???)

On Roxy's cameras (she was dead at their backs) he could see Capricorn had moved down level with Cancer's legs, so the red plasma wings could peek out, get them moving without singeing it into a charred mess. It started rotating slowly until it was staring back at Roxy's cameras. Creepy, but it didn't make a single move to attack.

Jesus, it looked like they might yet all live.

More or less.

... I don't know, came Karkat's belated reply, it depends how hard he hit them (could be lasting damage I'm sorry I don't know he's never used it that hard around me)

Capricorn pushed off Cancer's legs all at once, sent itself floating closer to Roxy, and John felt Karkat's spark of surprise.

What is he doing? John asked, tense anew, wary.

...Just preparing in case your allies attack us anyways (he will mow them all down and I won't calm him down in time aw hell.)

John let out a short, frustrated sigh. I guess that's reasonable.

Karkat mentally echoed his dubious agreement. You/love/boyfriend/mine, the pink alien is nice and friendly and not actually in charge John/blue/shredded is in charge (who gave John/you command haha what the fuck that makes no sense aliens are weird) don't crowd her I like her.

RX: JOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOHNHNY BOY! HAY THAR ASSBUT!
JH: whoops, sorry.
JH: karkat doesn't know.

Which was the kinder answer, missing the "he did say it was possible there'd be lasting mental damage" part entirely.
(Why'd Capricorn think Roxy was in charge anyway, John wondered, and got back a faint echo of pink. Long smooth legs clad in black with just this one dark pink line on each, which was strange because Roxy's flight suit was mostly white -- oh! Oh. The empress's color. Right.)

"Warhammer," came the reluctant voice over the radio. "Your acting officer-in-charge position has been confirmed for the duration. Requesting orders, over."

"Solid copy, Meteor Alpha-Zulu-Eight-Niner." He nudged Karkat into facing the correct direction -- there good straight ahead -- and quickly checked the number of troops available to him. Okay, it didn't need to be anything fancy. He set them into three concentric shells around the three of them at a distance that hopefully would allow them to aim and fire before the biomechs were on them, with Roxy, Jade and Jake in a triangle at his back.

JH: jane, report to medical.
JN: Negative. I will report to medical once you have been extracted safely and not a dang second sooner.
JH: oh, come on!
JN: Tell Karkat I will trident his friend in the back of the head if he makes the smallest wrong twitch.

Sigh.

JH: he says, acknowledged.
JH: no, wait.
JH: ACKNOWLEDGED. big letters for big seriousness.

Earth mechs were quicker on turns and flips, more maneuverable, but biomechs outpaced them in straight lines, by far. If they went at the speed Cancer was capable of, half-starved or not, they might leave half of John's mech behind. He waited for Karkat to secure his grip on what was left of Warhammer, and then he gave the order to get moving, and they cautiously went.

--

It took them a good half-hour to get there. John spent most of it offline, checking in at five minute intervals, both with Karkat and with his command. The thing was...

The thing was, the oxygen lights had gone orange halfway there, and a lower heart rate was good for saving oxygen, and he needed both to come down after the fight, and to prepare for whatever would be coming.

Whoever would be coming. He didn't know yet who'd be there, but they promised to be major hardasses.

Yeah. He needed time to get ready for that.

Also to stop thinking of how much Karkat wanted to cry out of heart-rending, guilty gladness. Of what exactly it made John feel. It was --

Crap. What the hell was wrong with John, that he wasn't happy for his friend? It was just...

JH: damn it, rose, i wish you were online.

Not too hard to figure out exactly what got his nose all out of joint. It was Karkat's old life -- the fact that he'd had a life before, and that it wasn't all fun and weird and distantly tragic anecdotes any longer, that it was coming back.
JH: it's like i think the dude is going to take him back.
JH: ... even if he DID take him back, so what?
JH: no, yeah, i mean, of course i'd miss him but it's better for him to be with his people, isn't it?
JH: what the fuck is wrong with me.
JH: we don't even know what he's planning anyways, could be they're not going to go anywhere for weeks or months. we'll have lots of time to have fun together!

Yeah, only now he would have to share that time with Karkat's boyfriend, and no need to guess who would get the lion's share of it.

What if he had to behold alien makeouts--

Ow. "Sorry, Warhammer," he apologized, and rubbed his toes. That'd learn him to kick at his cockpit. Just because his mech was only good for scrap at this point was no reason to break his toes on him.

JH: bluh.
JH: okay, i feel ridiculously like a toddler having a tantrum here. this is completely the best place and time for it too.
JH: i can just see you shaking your head at me, rose.
JH: "*Insert sympathetic shoulder pat* And how does that make you feel, John?"
JH: well pretty not good actually but it's a bad time to wallow in it, wow.
JH: sorry! i know compartmentalizing isn't awesomely healthy and you'd be very sad you can't indulge in a long mind exploration session if you knew.
JH: but hey, you're not gonna know.
JH: i feel like i should cackle or something.

He attempted a villainous cackle out loud. Nope, it sounded stupid. Also he was apparently still a bit loopy from coming down from all that adrenaline, and the low oxygen. He concentrated on his breathing for a few moments, hands loose on the controls, eyes closed.


> send offline messages? Y/N

He hit N, and clicked his radio back on.

"Meteor Alpha-Zulu-Eight-Niner, this is Warhammer, come in."

"Warhammer, approaching destination, ETA seven minutes. We will be spreading out as coverage, over."

Huh. He checked his instruments, and then tapped into the feed from Roxy's main camera, since his was smeared blind; the moon had grown to cover over half of her front view. "Roger."

John confirmed the location, and turned the telepathic headband back on, sent Karkat a tight, focused image of the spot, the vector they had to follow to get there. Karkat sent back a formless acknowledgement, busy with his own assessment of his biomech's shape, how easy it would be to land without dumping John -- calculations John didn't have a frame of reference to translate in detail. The gist of it came through easily enough.

And they were caught in the Moon's gravity and slowly drifting down. John confirmed with Karkat -- yes, that crater, those hangars within the crater -- and watched his feeds, oddly detached. It was so strange not to do his own landing.
You had better not drop me, bro.

I will drop you face first and then land on you, Karkat thought back, but distracted.

Cancer's wing-thrusters came on, his angle of descent changed to feet-first, and Capricorn imitated him on the feeds. They slowed down as they passed the crater's highest points; colorless mountains rose all around to swallow them. On their right, miles away, Tycho's heights glimmered with cannons.

The canopy covering the deepest part of the crater, keeping the oxygen in, wasn't as impressive as Tycho's, only spanning a mile at its widest point; if John remembered right the only things stocked in those hangars were chemicals and radioactive materials they didn't want too close to the barracks. He made sure to click off the telepathic headset before he let himself wonder where they'd moved the worst of it. Bunkers, maybe? Tycho itself?

As they drifted through the iris, he turned his radio back on. "Warhammer speaking! Good work, gentlemen. Report to base command. Over."

The man made a little amused noise in his mike. "Roger, wilco. Always a pleasure, Warhammer."

"Haha, to watch me get beat up?"

"With all due respect, you had it on the ropes."

Laughing, John went, "Warhammer out," and tuned out of that frequency.

Karkat flinched a little when the iris closed back up behind Poseidon and Flintlock, a brief flare of paranoia, quickly smothered.

The canopy's not that solid bro we're not even supposed to land hard on it. It's to keep air in not people in or out.

...I guess that's good. I'm telling him, the less paranoia the better (if you don't mind/not a betrayal? Shit I hate having stakes on both sides this is like sitting with each ass cheek on a different chair and the floor is slippery.)

John grinned disarmingly, even though Karkat couldn't see him. By the way I guess it'd be a good time to tell you that my air is running out.

What would have been a massive wall of swearing erupted at him (mostly it was very gross and somewhat pornographic imagery,) and then Karkat was putting in a burst of speed to reach the ground, only braking at the last second before landing between two hangars. Warhammer, held under the armpits, was swung up a little bit and deposited roughly but serviceably on its ass on the ground. John was a bit rattled inside the cockpit, but nothing the padded seat and safety harness couldn't handle.

RX: john why teh fuck is cancer-chan in a tearin-ass hurry 2 climb on ur lap ??
RX: like are we going 2 see sum hawt roboporn or ???

John looked up from the harness he was working to unlock, just in time for his mech to twang as something bumped it.

Capricorn had landed facing Warhammer, and sat there coiling on its tail, limbs hanging limply. Cancer was in the process of straddling the fuck out of Warhammer's lap. Which wasn't easy considering the space between the hangars wasn't that wide, and there were perhaps three meters of
clearance between Warhammer's shoulders and the roofs.

JH: oh jesus no. i uh told him about my little oxygen trouble is all.
JD: your WHAT??!!

Umm? (lap dance? cuddles? what?)

Oh my god you are the stupidest. I need to get to you without getting sniped O lord of dirty-minded tools.

Like you can talk! John protested, but with embarrassment. He finished pulling free of his harness. I'm fine anyway, I just need to get out of the uhh. Uh oh.

Did you just figure out the door is stuck/frame twisted out of true/stuck inside, dumbass? Don't fret I'll get you out.

John pouted for a second. Cancer was leaning in, so that its domed forehead brushed Warhammer's face, blunt maw turned down. Made it hard for other cameras to see what was going on between the two mechs.

Its lone secondary hand came up; it set its claws into cracks around the drawbridge-door. Sighing, John contributed a mental picture of where the hydraulics would be easiest to cut through.

A twist of claws, a yank, and with a screech of nails on chalkboard the first door clanged open. John pressed the emergency release that opened the airtight inner door -- somehow intact, like the rest of the pilot's block, good armor design there -- and clambered out.

Cold air slapped him in the face; not super rich in oxygen, but still bracing.

The drawbridge hung at slightly more than a right angle; John didn't really want to trust his weight to it. Hanging from the doorjamb, he craned his head and looked up into the cracked-open maw of the black biomech -- he would go down easily in such a massive gullet, wow, even if he went sideways.

Then he looked ahead, just in time to see the black armored chest crack open to show wet red flesh, and Karkat forcing his way through and into his mech's waiting hand, head lowered like he was charging out horns first. It was... very organic. Huh.

Oh my god Karkat it looks like you're pushing your way out of a giant chest-vagina my eyes will never recover. It wasn't like that last time??

Was in shock/loosened up. Karkat shot back, but distracted; he didn't even say a thing about the vagina comment. He just glanced up across the divide, face obscured by his damp hair and the massive shadow of the biomech. (is he fine? he's fine. next.) His skin looked a bit wet still, but not completely covered in goop; his clothes were a total mess, jeans clinging and rucked up on one side around the anklet, button-up white shirt gone a violent, drenched pink.

He pulled his shirt off over his head and dumped it off to the side; John bit back a teasing whistle.

Karkat didn't react to that thought either, aborted or not.

He toed off his shoes, and then he was swinging from Cancer's massive index finger and dropping down to his mech's lap.

He's gonna catch a cold, John thought, being all damp in here. The canopy kept oxygen in, and warmth as much as it could, but the Moon in general was ridiculously cold where the sun didn't hit
straight on, and the crater rim cast permanent shadows to the bottom, which meant cold as balls. They'd managed to get it up to "survivable by humans dressed appropriately," but people were still supposed to come here in winter gear. John's flight suit would do until he managed to get inside a building, but...

"I need a set of clean, dry clothes for Karkat," he said into his mike, and then saw a twin flash of ochre-gold down on the ground, by Warhammer's knee where Cancer was straddling him. Horns, long and oddly elegant. "Uh, probably make that two. Blankets as well--"

The guy wasn't moving. John couldn't see a lot of him from that angle, just part of the head (were those dreadlocks, or was the slime just drying weird?) and a shoulder, but Karkat was hopping the wrong way across and--

Where?! Karkat turned on his heel right on his mech's thigh and hopped and clambered his way across the mess of shelled and metal-plated limbs the other way.

"Warhammer, Capricorn's pilot has left his cockpit. Going your way."

"Yeah, I see him. On Warhammer's left, by the knee."

"Cancer's upper claw limbs are affecting visibility. What is he doing?"

Nothing. Standing there. Staring at Karkat, who stared back for a little eternity before he took the headset off his head, hung it from his neck, and dropped to the ground.

"Rendezvousing with Vantas."

Staring, without touching, without breathing (not that John could tell at this distance) until suddenly one of them was moving, or both, and then they were wrapped around each other, and then they were sinking to the ground, out of his line of sight.

John turned around and went back into his cockpit. "Getting my blaster gun," he said laconically, and paused there to unwrap and munch through a cereal bar while he was at it. Wow, but those sandwiches back on Earth really felt like a long time ago.

It was so quiet in his head. Heh.

Heh.

He puttered around for another minute, made sure everything was powered down, and then he climbed cautiously out onto the drawbridge door.

JH: going out to find the aliens. where should i take them?

There was the rappelling line; he grabbed a good hold, slid down to Warhammer's lap. On the way down Jade forwarded him a map of the compound.

JD: they've got clothes, whats wrong with karkats?
JH: he's all goopy. that's gonna bring down his core temp like whoa.
JH: dumped his shirt, even, but i don't know how much that'll help, considering. jesus but my face is prickling with cold already and he's damp and half naked.

Half-naked and being hugged by his boyfriend. John had to pause for half a second and blink out some unwanted silly thoughts. They wouldn't be making out now, haha, no way, so not appropriate. (Though in the past he'd bet they--) Possibly the dude would be keeping him warm. (Just keeping
him warm.) Which was rather a good plan at this point; hypothermia wasn't fun. Yeah.

He made sure to kick things and drag his feet as he made his way down Cancer's thigh, made sure he was turning his back on where they'd been last he saw them so they'd have time to -- so he wouldn't interrupt anything.

A body length and a half from the ground. Good enough. He flopped face down on Cancer's knee and let himself slide off the edge, too cold for acrobatics. The landing went fine; he raised a little puff of moon dust, sneaked it a super-relevant look, oh no, his boots were dusty now.

He looked up.

Back on their feet, Karkat and his boyfriend were looking back at him, Karkat turned so his side would be to the other alien's chest, all burrowed into him.

The dude was tall. Karkat seemed normal-sized for a human; he wasn't tall -- John was taller, and wasn't considered basketball-player-sized -- but not small either. This guy must be about seven feet tall or more, and that was without counting the horns.

The way he stared at John was mildly unnerving, but then again John was staring too as he walked up to them. Long arms corded with muscles, raw-boned, wide shoulders, and there were three ragged, parallel scars barring his face at an angle; it was surprising that the eye was still there, the eyelid itself was nicely scored, eyebrow barred through.

The yellow of his eyes was solid orange. Huh. Right, Karkat's eyes did that when he was angry. Okay.

"Hi," John said, expression as neutral as he could.

Karkat was staring at him, even through his shudders. Maybe he wished John would go away a while longer? Yeah, but he'd given them as long as he could. John broke eye contact with the other man to look at him, forced a tiny reassuring, apologetic smile that didn't get to stay, because there on Karkat's side under his boyfriend's arm there was a smear of red that wasn't translucent enough to be telepathic goop.

John tapped his helmet. "Someone bring a first-aid kit out into the hangar on Warhammer's left. Corporal Vantas has several open puncture wounds. Oozing, not gushing."

"Zhann, what you say?"

"You're hurt, stupid. C'mon, come with me."

The weirdass connecting tentacle-things in his cockpit had left little round wounds all over Karkat's arms, probably his legs too; his jeans were torn in a lot more places than they'd been back at the hotel. Nanites would close him up in five minutes. John gave a passing thought to doing it the emergency way with Karkat's boyfriend right there. Yeah, someone would end up very dead there, from the way they both vibrated with tension, from how overbright their eyes were.

Wasting time explaining it to him when they could walk in and get the first aid kit was just plain stupid, so he turned on his heel and led the way. With a quiet little sigh, Karkat pulled out of his boyfriend's arms (he immediately started shivering in earnest) and set his headset back on against his horns.

Where are we going/who will be there/sitrep?
"Hangar here," John said, and pointed, head turned a little so he could see him from the corner of his eye. "It's the closest, they can send a car afterwards but we need shelter right now." The other alien had grabbed Karkat's hand the second it wasn't busy anymore and their fingers were all-- "I'm requesting some time for you to get cleaned up and warm. We won't meet the brass straight away."

He did that, turning to face ahead, was granted it in under ten seconds. No doubt the brass was still finalizing things themselves, and it wasn't like they could have known which hangars Karkat was going to choose to land by. Actually John thought someone probably had wanted to direct them, and the order hadn't gone through. Possibly to that big, bare landing strip over there with zero cover. Yeah fuck that I would have frozen solid before we got anywhere (cold cold cold pants glued to my skin can't move so fucking cold.) also it's totally my ambition in life to make it easier on my potential enemies.

John snorted quietly, smothered a smile. There's that.

The other alien said something, or at least John assumed the almost subliminally low growl-clicks were words and not the dude trying to freak him out with the harmonics, holy crap. John got the vague impression that the question was about him, but then Karkat nudged him away, shut him out of his mind.

Okay, yeah. John paused briefly at the corner of the hangar to scan the grounds -- he could see one sniper, as an official threat, meaning there had to be two more he couldn't.

The other alien barked something and then Karkat yelped and when John turned to look he was being carried bridal-style and the taller dude was making a hella long-legged beeline for the door. Karkat was ranting up a storm in protest -- put me down, I'm not that weak -- but he did it without uncurling his arms where they were chafing at himself trying to keep warm, and the rattling teeth were hardly convincing. John was sort of with the boyfriend on this one.

Traitor, Karkat sent him grumpily.

Heheh. John jogged to catch up, went ahead to open the door. The light was green, the first door whooshed open with his weight on the landing. The aliens followed, Karkat's boyfriend ducking his head to avoid catching his horns; John pressed the button to close the door. (--locked in urgh--) A gust of warm air buffeted them and then the second door opened.

They'd entered in in a corner of a glass-walled corridor; on the other side a wide, several stories tall storage space sprawled out, mostly empty. A few crates were left at the back. Once his face got used to the warm air it still felt kind of cold in there.

Didn't want us playing with the crates huh, Karkat sent him with a touch of cynical amusement.

Dude from the symbols on that wall I think they were mostly unstable chemicals. I don't want to play with them!

The radio crackled. "There's a locker room with showers second door to your right; fatigues and a first aid kit on the bench."

"Roger," John said, and led the way there.

The other alien's voice buzzed. There's people in those rooms, John heard from Karkat like a muted echo. John pulled his helmet off so he could look at him head on.

"Yeah, of course. They won't come out unless there's a problem. Is there one?"
His eyes were that odd, deep blue that seemed nearly black, rich enough to start leaning toward purple. A lot more unsettling somehow. A pulse of -- he wasn't sure -- tickled down his spine, made goosebumps rise under the sleeves of his flight suit.

"G'mzee!" Karkat snapped, kept growling in alienese. "(Don't you fucking start on him, get moving, I'm freezing my genitals off! They will break in a hundred ice shards while you dick around I swear to fuck.)"

Snorting, John pushed the locker room door open. "You know how things work, Karkat, yeah?" he asked with a pleasant smile, without looking at him. "I'll wait here."

He took a seat on the bench near the first aid box, cracked it open to check the contents. Karkat squirmed out of his boyfriend's arms, landed a bit wobbly, and almost overbalanced as he dropped his headset on the bench. A long, lanky arm stayed wound around his back in support.

Huh, interesting, what they'd seen fit to add in that first aid kit.

Alone at last in the locker room, John slipped the blaster from his shoulder and propped it against the bench, and then took off his own telepathic headset and massaged his scalp for a minute. Wearing it under the already tightly fitted helmet had left him sore as hell, with his hair kinked against the grain everywhere.

JH: am dropping off radio for a minute, the helmet seriously hurts!
JH: they're showering.
JD: yeah weve got them on infrared
JD: gonna start to see jack crap soonish with the hot water but yeah.
JD: status? :( ???
JH: i'm good.
JH: the boyfriend is skeletor. same muscle mass as karkat, three more feet of height to stretch them onto.
JH: wanna come in and say hi?
RX: oohhh me me me em me :DD
RX: i like em tall and horny *WONK*
JH: groan.
JD: graaaaaaaaaan!!!
JK: Oh my miss lalonde. *undoes collar and fans self with kerchief*
RX: ur my favorite jakey :( the rest of those harleyberts r such tightasses i swaer it culliminates in janey & just trickles down in great mountains of UNFUNNY BIZUNESS like sum wooshin raging torrent of high pressure butt content
JN: *Thank* you.
RX: Welp. Proper formatting and spellcheck all up in that bitch.
RX: I'm even punctuating! This is seriously cutting into my posting speed.
RX: Janey?
JN: Appreciate it.

John noticed he was smiling, a small, affectionate one. Goddamn but he loved his family.
JH: JANE. Hi Jane. Thanks for the assist out there.
JH: How are you doing? Can I get you something? A wet cloth for your brow? Some peeled grapes?
JN: The lot of you can stop mobbing me, to start with.
JN: Also turn down the claptrap, buster.
JN: I am...
JN: Still not back to baseline. Keep talking.

Over there in the shower room soggy clothes were hitting the floor, a shower turned on. Only one, not two. Was Gamzee just going to watch or what? He was kind of sticky-looking too.

Well, maybe Karkat liked them grungy. Who the heck knew.

Yeah, maybe that.

Jesus, John was disgusting himself. What the hell was even wrong with him? Karkat wasn't a found pet that his first family had finally tracked down and was taking away from him.

JD: news!!!
JD: not all awesome but not all bad either
JD: rose has been waking up here and there! NOT A COMA. And dirk uh.....
JD: finally stopped trying to escape the infirmary which actually probably means he's plotting a better attempt :/
RX: ... yyyyyep. but it means hes like got enough thinky thoughts back to plan ahead now!!
JK: That is a very good way to see the situation!
JK: Crikey but that man has me worried.
JK: Not that the rest of them dont naturally! Its just his worrying behavior makes me wonder what hell do if they cant keep him contained to his nice little bed.
RX: yeh i feel u. there would be MASSIVE shenanigans
RX: and davey? :( 
JD: __. no change.
JK: Well fuck.
JN: Jake.
JK: Yes maam?
JN: I think.
JN: You should go sit with Dirk. Keep him calm. Possibly half of his insistence to return to the battlefield is his worry over our continued safety, compounded by his paranoia.
JN: He might not believe reports. Having one of us around in the flesh would be good.
RX: aw hon :(' 
JH: if anyone should go sit with dirk, shouln't it be you, jane? you could get checked out at the same time and all.
RX: godarn it egbrett
JH: what? it's logical, okay, jake is healthy and fresh and jane isn't. sorry sis. it's not awesome tactics to do it the other way around.
JN: You're right. It's not. I am still not budging.
JK: Its okay i wasnt planning to leave you lot in the lunch i mean im sorry about dirk but the situation might still devolve here! Hell forgive us hes understanding like that.

Being in command of your older-by-two-minutes-is-still-older sister sucked some days. Sighing, John wished someone higher ranked that Jane would actually listen to would tell her to go, but that was pretty much Dad and... yeah, no, just Dad, she'd even argue with the General if she felt she should, and she obviously did.

The shower cut off in the other room. Another minute of silence and then he heard soft footsteps
coming his way.

JH: ok they're showered, just gotta doctorize at karkat's booboos and then it'll be time to get this show on the road.
JH: brb.

Karkat came out wrapped in a towel, holding his soggy jeans out with his fingertips. He let them flop sadly on the floor by the bench.

Behind him his boyfriend had unzipped his flight suit and was wearing it pushed down to the waist. There were some nasty scars there, ashy-white on his damp skin. His hair looked less goopy, but still kind of a tangled, dripping mess.

With less flesh on him and his proportions so stretched out it was a lot more obvious than on Karkat that his anatomy was wrong. That he was just... that there wasn't a Homo sapiens skeleton underneath the padding. The ribs weren't shaped quite right, the shoulders rotated weird. The way he walked was odd as well, not like Karkat's purposeful stomp, more like an odd shuffling that still covered too much ground in one go.

His sclera had gone back to yellow. Awesome.

John stared back at him for another second before he turned to look at Karkat, who had just sat on the bench and was frowning absently at the oozing punctures on his legs. He still wore the ankle locator.

"There's nanites in here," John told him, and picked up the injector. "Good healy stuff, you remember?"

"Huhn. ... No mouth with mouth this time?"

John's head jerked up to look at him. Karkat's brows and the corner of his lip were quirked in dry, doubtful amusement.

"Um, no. We do have other ways to do it, you know!" He waved the injector around, trying to look stern (but not too much in case the boyfriend took it seriously.) "Gimme your arm."

A gargle of noise, a cricket buzz underlining it in ear-shivery ways. Karkat craned his neck up and patted the other alien on the hip.

"He say what is this thing." A little eyeroll, but fond. John tried to un-notice the reddened, bruised look around his eyes. Karkat had cried recently. "A thing you kill me with it like ninja and he's right here, yes. Smart, good."

"Hehe. Yes, I am super ninja. I'm so ninja that my weapon is a hammer on a giant robot." John grinned cautiously at Karkat. "No, it's just a dose of nanites. One time only, they'll go away once they're done. Oh, you should eat this, they'll make your brain pretty tired. Sugar crash, yeah?"

John waved a cereal bar he'd stashed down his collar at him. With a grunt, Karkat took it and shredded it free. John shuffled closer on the bench and pressed the muzzle of the injector against the outside of his arm, under the bump of his shoulder muscle.

The hair at the back of his neck went up again. "Goddamn it." He looked up, glared. "You! Stop that. Bad. No. Do you want to make me shoot wrong or what?"

Karkat sighed. "G'mzee, Zhann." He glowered at the both of them in turn tiredly, and then took a big
chomp off his cereal bar. "Zhann. Do the thing."

John did the thing. Karkat barely winced. "It'll take a little time. Better clean up the wounds anyways."

"Wound is?"

John rummaged through the box for antiseptic wipes. "A hole in you. Ow. Bleeding." He tilted his head pointedly toward Karkat's bare legs. Ugh, just remembering those needles... How could this be regular procedure?

... Actually.

"Um. Does -- does G'mzee need healing too?"

Karkat blinked at him, blinked at his boyfriend (who still stood there staring and looming like a creepazoid, a towel on his hair. John understood having a hard time trusting an alien but he could at least give it a try there, John was sitting down with his weapon on the floor, wasn't he?)

"No he's good. Clothes... Hm." He made a squeezing movement with his hand. "Like that. No bleed, clean inside. Fasts heal. ... Heals fast. Rrgh." He glared down at the puddle of jeans on the floor, even as he started running the wipe on his legs with perfunctory swiftness. "This bad. Bad piloting, bad walking, stupid clothes. You give me stupid clothes, why."

John repressed a smile. "Because I'm stupid too?"

"Yes," Karkat confirmed, and then rolled his eyes and went on a tirade at his boyfriend, no doubt detailing why John was stupid, which made it stop being a private joke and start being a little bit ouchies.

As he zipped himself back in (or however his flight suit worked) Gamzee gave a serious nod and drawl-buzzed something. Karkat backhanded him in the thigh, half-seriously. Gamzee's scarred, dead-eyed face cracked an actual smile.

John got up to unfold the fatigues left in a perfect square on the bench. "Well, those should be less stupid!" He draped the pants across the bench. "D'you still have your underwear, or was it too soggy, because I don't know if they -- aha." Boxers, still plastic-wrapped. "Okay, these have never touched the butt of anyone else, if you want them."

Karkat took them from his hand and put them on under the towel, then picked up the pants, frowning faintly.

"What's wrong with them?"

"Green. I'm not green."

John blinked at him. "Um. Since when do you care about the color of your clothes, bro?"

Pants halfway up his legs, Karkat paused to stare at him, and then yanked them up over his butt so he could free his hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. "John, what is your color?"

"My favorite? Uh. I like green, I guess?" Uhh. "Not this one though, it's way drab, that's boring. It used to be blue. I suppose I like both?"

Okay, what had he said to be stared at like that. It was the "I can't believe such monumental stupid
exists” face. Rubbing his own hair dry with a towel in a way that never hid his face, Gamzee inquired about things, and Karkat replied, terse, his red eyes still on John's.

Which still didn't get John to understand him, given Karkat wasn't wearing his headset. "Listen, I don't understand your question. Try again?"

Karkat gave a heaving sigh, and started rubbing at his damp hair with the towel. "No. Later. It's a thing I know before, but not... Not with words. Rokshi is not -- rrayzkh -- but Dirhk is. In your head I see that."

John made a slow, baffled blink, tilted his head encouragingly.

"I say later, Zhann." Sigh. "Tell zheneral too. I don't like it say again."

He stuffed his feet into slightly too large combat boots, put on the plain khaki t-shirt and then the camo jacket, zipped himself in -- extracted his little handkerchief with the sixty-nine on it to tuck it half out of his breast pocket. John watched for lack of anything better to do, at a bit of a loss. Gamzee was still standing there with his arms hanging loosely, and creeped him out without use of any power that John could detect.

HS: Coming in my boy! Are you all ready?
JH: good timing, karkat just finished getting dressed. should we meet you outside?
HS: No. Stay where you are it's fine.

"Huh. General Harley is coming in." John eyed Gamzee. Yeah, no, Karkat he trusted with his grandfather's safety; this dude not so much. He got up, slung his rifle strap on his shoulder all casual-looking. "I think he wants to talk a little first, and then we'll go somewhere else."

"Huhn, okay." He talked at Gamzee for a minute, then gave his own hair a last rub and picked the headset back up.

Outside there were little noises; the double door opening, probably -- ah, yes, here came the distinctive noise of the gust of warm air. John stiffened when Gamzee slunk to the door, fingers curled into loose claws, stare too intent. He started after him; Karkat grabbed him by the arm.

Shh don't go from behind stupid he'll slash you open from throat to twat do you want to die. "(Gamzee, they won't attack us in a locker room. Calm your tits.)"

It was funny hearing him talk with his voice and his mind both. John was aware that his own mind formatted it into expressions he personally used, but if he paid closer attention and didn't make the little effort to sort it out -- if he made the different effort of not sorting it out -- the words came in a different order, or no order at all, with shades of meaning attached that he wasn't too sure how to translate, if they were even relevant.

Yeah it's like that on my side too. Let's geek out later because they're about to come in.

How'd you know? John asked, and got told Gamzee knows (horn sense, footsteps, three sets) see how he's ready to-- "(Gamzee, I'm fucking serious.)"

"(How am I meant to trust those (space... creatures? Something derogatory.), friendbrotherlove?)"

"(I don't know but find a fucking way,)")" Karkat growled back, and caught him by an elbow to tug him back just as footsteps that even John could hear stopped before the door. "(That man let me use a knife while sitting next to me/in arm's reach, I'm not repaying it by letting you at him.)"
"(That just means he thought he could take you, doesn't it?)"

"Oh, fuck you," Karkat said in English. "Sir?" he called out through the door.

"Yes, Karkat?" General Harley called back from outside.

"G'mzee is stupid. Another people come in first, not you, yes?"

Harley chuffed out a laugh. "How about you come out when you're ready? We'll wait out here."

HS: Danger? Will my men get killed if I send them in?
JH: he's just being a bit unreasonable. wary?
JH: also i'm behind him and i have my gun.

Karkat threw him a quelling glance. *No shooting my boyfriend. Not even in non-fatal places. I will screech until you go mad.*

Whoops. *How'd you hear that, I thought you didn't hear what I typed so well.*

*You visualized it way too happily, turd-face.*

John quickly buried his burst of guilt. *Tell him we're the only allies he's likely to get around here. If he wants to chomp off people's faces there's always Jack Noir's bosses.*

Sighing, Karkat walked up to Gamzee, tugged on his arm until he was looking down at him, and then with an odd burst of embarrassment (*John's watching argh*) he reached his hand up and patted him right on the face. Tap tap, just between the eyes. That was so weird and unexpected John couldn't help but stare for a second, until Karkat sent him a burst of annoyance (*stop being a voyeur, John, Jesus.*)

"(Don't make me soothe/tranq you, I need you alert and ready. Just not *murderous*, okay?)"

"(Aw, but love-friend--)

"(Noooo. Read my lips. No. N-N-O. Trust me just a bit, okay? I've been living with them for a *(way too fucking long length of time.))*"

(It was an actual length of time Karkat told him, just that there was a grammar twist that meant the word used *also* denoted that it was too fucking long somehow, like the objective and subjective lengths didn't match. Neat bit of linguistics. He made a mental note for Jane.)

Gamzee was successfully herded away from the door, though he muttered things that translated all tangled up. John called out, "We're coming!" though not without giving him the side-eye first. To keep up with the lot of them the dude had to have pretty insane reflexes.

He went to the door first, shoulder blades itching a little, opened it. A little farther down the glass-walled corridor his grandfather was standing behind two Marines in power armor. It had to be a courtesy escort thing, because even if those were better prepped to fight aliens than the guys back home, John was pretty sure that Karkat had managed to put two armored people in the hospital back when he was alone and bare-assed in a paper gown.

*Yeah pretty much. But it's not right/proper for brass to travel alone anyway, Karkat added philosophically. He dodged Gamzee's hand and stepped forward first, keeping him at his back.*

"Sir. This is Gh'm -- Gaaamzee Makara. G'mzee, Me'rkh (General/high brass) Harley."
Yeah, when he listened closely John could almost hear the vowels, but only because Karkat repeated them all exaggerated.

(You guys are all vowels and no consonants seriously it's a fucking moan language that's just wrong.)

"It's good to meet you like this!" Hass said with a bright grin. "And not in pieces on a dissection table. Karkat, please translate exactly."

John and Karkat shared a brief moment of welp.

Karkat translated. Gamzee started smiling. Oh Jesus, those teeth. Karkat's were almost round compared to his. On top of the pointy rest he had two longer eyeteeth that looked like vampire fangs, visible even at rest, but when he smiled it was even more obvious how creepily long they were.

"He says, I guess you're right, doctors are really boring. Unfunny?" John grimaced. He couldn't convey the right tone Gamzee had said it in, like death by doctor was boring, and all the implied "a hands-on death wouldn't be."

From the General's amused little smile, Gamzee's facial expression was good enough.

"It's good to be in agreement on this." He pointed to an office door just beside him with his thumb. "Now, sergeants, if you'll stand guard outside, we still have a couple of things to discuss before we go."

"Sir," one of the men protested.

"Shh," Hass said, putting a quelling hand on his armored arm, and looked at Gamzee again. "Are you planning to kill me?"

John and Karkat blinked, threw Gamzee an accidentally identical dubious glance.

"(He asks if you're planning to kill him. Because he wants us to go into that room alone with him. The answer had better be no! Have you seen the size of their base next door--)

"Shhh," Gamzee said, and patted and ruffled the hair at the back of Karkat's head and between his horns, which had the effect of making Karkat's jaw clack closed and his mind to fill with flustery, embarrassed things.

"(Don't (quiet/soft/gentle/sleep) me in public, asshole!)"

"(Aw, the old man just did it to his guy.)"

"(Patting a guard's ass in passing and groping your boyfriend's are different things, okay?!)"

John spluttered. "What? Oh my god you call that groping he barely touched you I was right you aliens are completely insane about physical signs of affection. Frigid! Karkat you are the frigidest, they could use you to store food in.


"(Nah, I won't kill him.)" Gamzee stared at Hass, and then straight at John. "(You tell him that, friend/brother."

John was pretty sure he didn't mean the friend thing one bit, and Karkat's background thoughts confirmed that it was more of a habit with him and his tone was hella not sincere anyway. Karkat
was willing to take him at his no-killing word, though, so John nodded. "He says he won't. Karkat is inclined to believe it."

"Good! Follow me." Hass turned away and stepped through the door. The put-upon soldiers were forced to fall into position on both sides of the doorway and glare at the lot of them impartially. Sighing, John went -- and then Karkat caught his elbow, and went first.

Stay closer to Gamzee -- you-hostage, me-proving-your-allies-safe.

*He'll be pissed.*

*He's pissing me off being so unreasonable (no he doesn't oh god it must have hurt him so much when they told him I died I didn't expect--) urgh I can't even wallow in the feelings with you voyeuring it up in here so unfair.*

John made the equivalent of gagging noises, hopefully in a way that came out teasing and not actually meaning it, and smoothly stepped in the way when Karkat slipped inside the room first. He could feel the spike of not-right in the air, right at his back, and had to resist the urge to slip his gun into firing position.

"Gamzee, stop," he grunted, hopefully conveying tired more than nervous.

Gamzee grumbled at his back, and, ducking under the mantel, leaned way too close to John's head. John was pretty sure he felt his breath on his hair. John refused to hurry out of the way; it was a matter of pride and keeping face at this point.

It was a little office inside, all squeezed in -- no doubt the important paperwork was done at the main building, not out here, they didn't need more space. The General sat on a far corner of the desk, and John went to stand beside him.

"Alright." Harley straightened up, eyes turned to Karkat. "I let you throw us that curveball at the conference, because things weren't urgent yet and it wouldn't hurt to shake things up a little with that bunch. They're sufficiently shaken now."

Karkat gave a little grunt of acknowledgement, shushed Gamzee when he leaned on his shoulder and asked for a translation; it'd have taken too much explanation right now.

"But you can't keep it that close to your vest twice in a row. If we're to be allies, you have to start treating us as such." Stern-faced now, he stared Karkat down. "And I'm darned sure you've got a plan, or there's no way on God's green Earth you'd be so calm about delivering your beau to us."

Karkat inhaled through his nose; John could feel him giving in before he even looked it, though he wasn't very annoyed about it. Support might be good, and Harley was a canny man; it was better to have him on their side.

If his plan was shot down by Harley, though, he wasn't sure what -- no. It'd work. Probably.

It had a better chance of success than doing nothing, at any rate.

"Okay," he said. He didn't bother glancing at John; they were in sync again, they knew John was ready to translate.

"So I'm a -- dreg of society," John said for him, "I don't have any real authority or ability to contact anyone else, much less order them around. But Gamzee is very much not."
John slid Gamzee a glance. In Karkat's head he was very... high-class/brass/nobility, but it was hard to imagine that guy in charge of a team. The way he fought -- very 'kill them all, God will recognize His own.'

"We also happen to be childhood friends of the heiress to the throne."

Harley narrowed his eyes. "Huh. Interesting coincidence."

"Karkat won't say it but he's thinking, yeah, I totally got captured because secret plan to pretend it's a coincidence," John offered with a shrug. "Also he's remembering a girl his age with very long hair and the same symbol as what he said was the empress', so..."

"Hm." Hass gave a little shake of his head. "That's all well and good, but how does that help us? I thought the main thing protecting us at the moment was that most of your empire was either not interested in us or not even aware of our existence. Giving someone so high ranked a heads-up seems rather counterproductive to me."

John/Karkat's lips went pinched -- and then spread into a little smile anyways.

"Did I mention she really wants to depose her predecessor?"

There were a few seconds of silence, and then General Harley gave a slow, narrow-eyed nod.

"... Continue."

--

Roxy was the first person John noticed when he walked into the conference room, mostly because he hadn't expected to see anyone he knew, and in the middle of those suits and uniforms her pink and white flight suit really stood out. She was standing with her back pressed to the wall out of the way, hands tucked behind her, deceptively harmless. He sneaked her a stealth hi with his fingers against his thigh; the smile she returned him was totally cryptic, close-mouthed, Doc Lalonde all over.

At the big conference table that took over most of the room five people were waiting, two sitting, three standing in a tense, whispering knot in a far corner, a handful of soldiers standing at attention against the walls.

Oh that's the General who asked for my rank/ if you were compromised down there at the conference, Karkat thought at him. Uhh, unless the face creases are confusing me.

Huh, so it was. No you're right. John nodded at her. "Ma'am."

"I did not expect to see you again so soon, Egbert, Vantas," she said, like she wasn't best pleased about it.

"My apologies," Karkat said, pronounced with such crisp care, John could still hear Rose in it.

The other woman sitting was a civilian, skin as dark as he'd ever seen on a woman, hair shorn, elegant to her fingertips. Putting an age on her was almost impossible, though he pegged her as younger than the General by simple virtue of not having ravines on her face.

She pinged John's Lalonde alarms something awful and he wasn't entirely sure why.

I am fuck that's the first alien I've ever seen with proper evisceration-capable claws.

Oh. Yeah. Meep.
Behind them Harley cleared his throat, though he hardly needed to gain anyone's attention; every person in the room was watching, some with more trepidation than others.

"Ladies and gentlemen. You may already know Corporal Karkat Vantas and his translator, Warhammer pilot John Egbert. May I introduce you to Gamzee Makara, pilot of alien biomech codenamed Capricorn."

*What's that word mean?*

*Iunno some kind of weird legendary beast, ask Rose or Jade.*

Karkat went to something that looked a lot like attention. Behind him Gamzee slouched, slightly orangey eyes scanning each face in turn like he was memorizing them all for ease of tracking down later on. The ceiling seemed lower from how close to it the tip of his horns got.

"General Gravier, for the Western Alliance." Cool, now John had a name to put on her face. "Colonel Deng, for China." An Asian man, unsurprisingly; there was an impressive knot of shiny-skinned burn scar on his jaw. "Mrs. Schneeman, diplomat for the Sub-Saharan African Coalition." The Black woman at the table offered a faint smile. "Mrs. Reginald, representing Oceania. And this is Lieutenant-Colonel Ruiz, who will be sitting in as the Lunar Base's representative and our host."

Huh. No Europeans or independent USA peeps; Ruiz was a US Marine but if he was just "sitting in" he wouldn't get to decide much. John was pretty sure from the accent that Gravier was Canadian; she would represent the USA and European Union just as well, he supposed, but he would have loved to watch the kind of political wrestling that went into making that happen.

Heck, maybe they had a limited number of places in the emergency shuttle and everyone else knew she'd break them in half if they tried to take her spot as representative of the Western Alliance.

*Not sad they're not handcuffing you this time?*

Karkat squared his shoulders, set his chin like he was thinking of headbutting someone in the face with relish. *Fuck no, I'm not a prisoner this time, this is a potential alliance meeting just they try it I will bite.*

"Let's not stand on any more ceremony," Gravier -- as the highest-ranked person in the room -- said.

Harley pulled out a chair and sat, so John and Karkat imitated him. Karkat had to pause with his ass still off the chair and give Gamzee a bit of the hairy eyeball before he would stop *fucking looming they won't attack now okay* and do the same.

"Well, then?" Colonel Deng said, chin twitching up like a challenge. *(Was it a challenge hello I can aim at your throat now aliens are still weird.)*

"First I would like the terms of the cease-fire clarified," John said with Karkat. Which, yawn, legalese, but necessary legalese, he supposed.

He translated the back and forth while eyeing Gamzee; the dude was picking at his parka with his claws, apparently not sure how to open it. It had been cold in the truck but in here parkas were kinda overkill.

*I'm still cold personally shut the fuck up and stop distracting me. *(Gamzee, find the metal tab and tug it down -- carefully!)*"

John avoided translating that bit, but only narrowly.
"I'll be blunt," he repeated faithfully, trying to empty his mind, to just let Karkat's words flow out without thinking about them. "This negotiation can not happen if I am still considered a prisoner, and it can not happen if the second the discussion is over you will attempt to take us into custody again."

(Because if he thought about them he started being emo that... what, Karkat wouldn't be under his protection-custody anymore, which was kinda super gross.)

"Should we just let you go?!" the Oceania representative blurted out, looking offended.

She was at least three times his age and she still broadcasted her discomfort in every line of her body. Karkat speared her through with the most quelling, bossy look John had ever seen from him.

"Should we zust kill Zhann and Rokshi and run? We can. We do not, before."

"Oi, oi," Roxy said, and made a face. John resisted the urge to roll his eyes, though he didn't push it to the point of trying to look worried. "You're not in your mechs right now, broski."

Karkat stared at her for a second, and then a slow smirk bloomed on his face, full of "I know something you don't." The people facing them obviously knew it too from the sour faces they were making, but John didn't --

(Shock, exhilaration, want-to-cry, Karkat standing in a knot of alien soldiers on the hangar floor as his mech--)

"(I'll tell you about it later, John.)" Karkat said, steady, eyes back on the Oceania representative as she swallowed nervously. Just please if you ever cared about me don't tell them exactly what a fluke it was I need the leverage. I would totally not tell them it was a fluke even if I knew what you were talking about. Hint hint.

Karkat swallowed an inappropriate bark of laughter. Well that way you really can't tell them. Okay next!

"Rokchi and Zhann," he said in English, "you want to ask to see the thing. Later." He looked at the assembled people. "I think you see it before, yes? (fuck yes it ruled so much I am the empress of awesometacular.)

John tried not to grin, or to keep wondering too hard. He'd known Karkat had the capability for this - - pride, passion, determination -- but he'd just... even on his best days, being a prisoner, being done overshadowed everything; he would snark back at John, elbow him aside, and John could tell he was going through the motions. It was -- feeling this fierce determination twisted something inside John, gladness and regret and things he couldn't name, unpleasant. What the fuck was wrong with him.

The South-African diplomat chuckled, low and rough. "We did." She turned to her peers; they exchanged a lot of looks and a few more or less snappish mutters; Gravier and Deng switched to German, which John didn't know the first thing about, to argue it out.

Useless! (just kidding asshole) why do you guys have several languages are you serious here this is so inefficient I wanted to spy damn it.

"Very well," Gravier said. "We will agree that the both of you are free to leave if you so choose, with the understanding that if you do choose it, your current immunity is cancelled and your opportunity to ally with us is lost."

Karkat nodded soberly. "Yes. That is good."
"One thing I would like to understand," Mrs. Schneeman said, "is why exactly you think the presence of one friend, singular, redistributes the stakes so drastically."

She still looked amused. Hn. She had this languid way of speaking like she couldn't care less, but the way she moved the sharp, lacquered points of her nails gave Karkat twitches of wariness.

(There was something about the shade of the red all over her mouth and hands that pinged Karkat as a threat, but that part was half subconscious.)

"Oh, that's because he's a prince," John replied without thought.

Whoops. Staring crossfire. Eyebrows up, Roxy pursed her mouth like she wanted to whistle.

"Well, that's -- his rank is... I don't... fully understand what Karkat is telling me, to be honest." John frowned at him. Clarify! "He doesn't at the moment have authority over anyone detached to his service -- he's still in training -- but there's a ... right of birth? So, duke or prince, like, maybe not as high up as the son of the king, but still pretty up there."

A lot of brows furrowed at once. (Apart from Schneeman. Hers went up arched in very pointed angles.)

"(What you might find more interesting,)") Karkat said, and John could have sworn he was on the edge of purring, "(is that the commander in charge of my home-ship, and thus the whole front here, is of a lower birth-rank.)"

John could feel how much Karkat thought that ought to mean something, and how much those weirdass aliens refused to understand it, with their frowny-confused faces.

"I don't get it. Why should that even matter, if -- Mister Makara? -- isn't even done with his training, who would even hand him command? That'd be stupid."

Karkat stared back at Mrs. Reginald for a second with thinking-narrowed eyes, translated for Gamzee without looking away from her, still weighing his words -- they don't get it yeah, if I explain it like this -- no, maybe ...

"(Nah, bro,)" Gamzee said lazily (or something more fucked up really don't bother translating his slang you should be glad that by the time it gets to your brain I've already fixed the grammar good lord calling it mangled is generous.) He lobbed his parka at a corner of a room. "(It's mine if I want it, on account of my right of bloodline and my ability to just take it if I decide to.)"

As John relayed, Gamzee started plucking at Karkat's parka, which he was still wearing, though unzipped.

Plink, plink, plink. Spy bugs rolled onto the table, almost invisible to the naked eye. John and Karkat groaned.

"Sorry," Karkat said to an especially mortified-looking Colonel Ruiz, oddly polite for someone being spied on. "It's bad in his horns."

"Oh dear little nonexistent parent-gods I will lovingly fuck you in the eye socket with one of them you'll see if they're tiny!"

Hehehe. I was just teasing, man.
Gamzee casually crushed the bugs under the side of his fist. Karkat frowned at him. "(For all you know they're expensive.)"

"(No, see, love. They're on you, they're yours, what's yours is mine, and I sure as hell don't want 'em.)"

John wisely kept out of it, though really bugs were usually cheap and pretty much made with the thought that they would eventually be lost in mind and... yeah, he'd learned his lesson from Dave and Jade, if a couple was squabbling you let them squabble, neither of them wanted an objective view.

Stop taking Gamzee's side!

I'm not! John grimaced. Or did you want to be bugged? Is that part of your master strategy dude --

"Are you saying there is a Mandate of Heaven equivalent at play?" Colonel Deng asked with a deep frown. "Makara rules because he has a divine right to rule?"

John blinked, snuck Karkat a glance. "Uh. I don't know enough about the Mandate of Heaven to say. Like the religious aspects of -- okay, Gamzee also has religious... things about him but they're not the main thing. Sorry, this is a difficult concept."

Karkat took in a deep, bracing breath. Okay we're gonna need something to draw on. A flat computer thing will do ask General/Grandpa for his?

Harley hadn't said a thing ever since they sat down, content to let the talks progress on their own. He raised his bushy eyebrows in genial inquiry when John turned to look at him.

"General Harley, sir, Karkat needs the painter program on your tablet. Or failing that, a box of crayons and a sheet of paper."

"Ah. No need to kill more trees, sonny," Harley said, and typed a couple of things before sliding it to John -- password-locking it, probably. John handed it to Karkat, and didn't even have to explain how the touchscreen worked; Karkat lifted it off his brain as they looked down at the screen.

Why are the colors in a circle you weirdos.

Uh, it just makes sense? They all fit that way, like, smooth gradient from one to the next?

Karkat disagreed, with a strange amount of bafflement. The greens and blues were too squished together, and the oranges and dark reds and purples were way too spread out.

It looks normal to my eyes.

Okay, great, we've found something else you guys are fucked up about, and it actually does explain everything.

"This is Empress color," Karkat said. He quickly selected and drew another nine... ten patches in a line underneath the purple-pink blotch. "Only her and the -- small, not-old, Empress later?"

"Heiress," Hass said.

"Nh. And Heiress are that color."

"Use that color," Gravier rectified, leaning in to see the screen. "Wear, maybe?"

Karkat looked up from the tablet at her. "No, Ma'am. Am, is, be. Is the right word." A short sigh.
"This -- Zhann, what color?"

"Purple?"

"Purple is best not-Empress. Then this --"

"Uhh. Blue-purple?"

An annoyed snort. *You suck and your colors suck and fuck them in the face.* "This is Gamzee."

John blinked and looked Gamzee over. The flight suit he wore was black and dark gray but he did have highlights here and there, and a looping design on his breast, and they were all that same color. So were his eyes, actually.

*(Yes, right path)* whispered Karkat's brain to him, *(but not quite there yet.)*

"Uh. Do you guys get your castes based on eye color?" John asked hesitantly, knowing it was wrong even as he asked.

"No." Karkat glanced at his boyfriend, hesitated briefly. *(Gamzee. They all come in red here. Could you --)*

"(Show them?)" Gamzee grinned. Hi there vampire fangs. *(Sure, yeah, let's school some aliens.)*

He tugged his sleeve back with a finger, waved his hand at the people watching like a kid saying bye-bye, and then dug a claw right into his skin. John hissed without thinking, just a little. Getting hurt was a thing he could take, but deliberately hurting yourself, ouch, okay, no, that was more gross somehow.

At first John thought he bled black, some terrifying ichor of creepdarkness, and then Gamzee smeared it across his ashy skin with a careless thumb and holy shit, it was blue.

Okay. Purple-blue.

Which was still not a color blood was supposed to come in!

Karkat laughed briefly, knuckles pressed against his mouth to smother the sound. It wasn't so much honest amusement as some kind of dark irony, something so ridiculously wrong that it became funny.

*What did I --*

*It'll be clear in a minute. Shh. (You fucking freak-alien, I truly do love you some days.)*

"What the --" Colonel Ruiz had started rising in shock, chair scraping back. Mrs. Reginald's hand was on her mouth.

"Is that your *blood*? But the drawing you just --"

John could see them figuring it out. Yeah, of course aliens had different colored blood, duh, why was that so shocking -- no, John was shocked too! He pursed his mind-mouth at Karkat, who was still trying very hard not to smirk and not quite managing.

*Aw, sad, you'd be weirder-aliener if you came in golden or turquoise, bro, why do you gotta have the normal one?*
... John. Stop right there I don't know how I'm going to react (hugsmother or kill, kill or hugsmother) but it's going to be bad for the time and place either way so stop.

... Yeah, huh, red was pretty much the very last rung on his scale. Welp. When he'd said people didn't want him and Gamzee together because they thought Gamzee was slumming it... yeah, John could imagine how he'd meant it now.

Schneeman's eyes flitted to Karkat's face. "The ichor. The biomechs are said to come in different shades, are they not? Do they all correspond to their pilot's blood?"

"Ah." Karkat nodded carefully. "Yes, ma'am." They matched because the white monster they were made from always matched and -- and Karkat gently nudge John out of that one memory before he could get them both caught up in it and barf again.

"Is there a biological lock so you can't trade outside of your caste?" she asked with polite interest.

"Uh -- no? We can't trade. Maybe a little trade. It's hard." Karkat shrugged. "They eat trade-ing people a bit."

Jesus. Ugh.

Wimp.

John wasn't the only one looking disturbed, which was interesting because he wouldn't have expected either General Gravier or Colonel Deng to betray any inner botherations.

"Do they eat a bit of all of them or do they eat a whole person sometimes?" Roxy asked, trying to sound amused behind the eww.

Karkat rolled his eyes. "Whole person sometime. Okay! Next. Zhann?"

"Yeah." John relaxed his mind, made it receptive and open again, even though what Karkat was telling him just... he had to think about it as an abstract thing, it made no sense and was repulsively wrong otherwise. "One thing about the castes is -- to simplify a lot -- that higher-ranked people may dispose of lower-ranked people with relative immunity. More immunity the farther down they go. If the person was useful they will be yelled at, but ultimately, unless they annoyed a supervisor too much by doing it, they'll often get a slap on the wrist."

Okay, and now he could finally see them making the link between Gamzee's caste and Karkat's captain's.

"This makes no goddamn sense," Mrs. Reginald said angrily. "How do you even build a rational society with such total lack of cohesion?"

Karkat tilted his head at her. "(There is cohesion. People take lovers from all castes, and people do get revenge for lost lovers. That acts as checks and balances. Even if people wouldn't think twice about getting rid of someone half the rungs down from them, they'll think twice about making their lovepartnerfriends angry.)"

"Huh." Harley pursed his lips, stroked his moustache doubtfully. "My boy, are you saying that literally anyone higher than your own caste could hurt you so easily? You're all the way to the bottom, that severely damages your potential for any authority, doesn't it. Is there any merit-based advancement?"

Karkat was at a loss for a minute, and John couldn't even read him; he just felt blank.
"I -- no, sir. No, yes merit advancement, there is that a little, it's why I'm corporal not... nothing."
He drew breath, turned the tablet, tapped his claw-tip on the glass. "I am not here."

"Are you joshing me, boy, red is right there--"

"I am not this red. I am -- rrh." He tugged the tablet toward himself, scribbled two red blotches, one dark, one prettily arterial. "This is good red. This is... not good red. This is -- this is not people red. Like, like --" He cast about for a comparison, suddenly desperate for Hass to understand and then stop talking about it, but they needed to get through this and like fuck he was going to stop midway and go back, even with the frown on his boyfriend's face. "Like Mutie. I have Mutie red. That is --"

"Mutie is the pilots' cat," Hass informed the rest of the room absently, cutting a demand for clarification about --

Karkat went huh.

John coughed. "No, he says, it is a mutation." Though Karkat hadn't known the cat's name was that appropriate until John thought through the misunderstanding. "Huh. They have animals with red blood on their home planet." Bestial blood. Not-a-person blood. Jesus, John didn't want to think any farther about that. He couldn't get that angry here. "And a lot of other alien species have this color, too," he added lightly. "Though some are all-orange or copper-green or transparent. They're pretty much the only species they've ever met with rainbow blood."

Karkat waved his hand, as if to say, yeah, yeah, fascinating, move along. ",(More relevant, the colors correspond to lifespan, reaction speed, and physical and psychic resilience. You could hit Gamzee with a car and he'd get back up. The car wouldn't.)"

Gamzee chuckled, gravelly and smug. "(Depends on whether I hit it back.)" John decided not to relay that one, it was just bragging. The tone was clear enough as it was.

Karkat kicked John under the table, but didn't tell him to translate it, which was pretty much permission to skip it.

"So..." Colonel Deng was eyeing Gamzee with a new layer of wariness, though to his credit he didn't lean back one iota. "If you are so high ranked, why did you come retrieve such a lowly person yourself? Couldn't you order a retrieval team?"

Karkat, startled, didn't pass it along until Gamzee tilted his head, long horns tilting toward him, and hummed a question. Then he barked it, face flushing. Didn't realize not all of them knew yet argh!

"Um." John cleared his throat. "They're -- romantically involved, sir."

Yeah, that and Gamzee wasn't thinking clearly because all nobles are fucking insane-murderous that way and can't be reasonable to save their ridiculously long lives.

Okay I'm not telling them your boyfriend is psychotic Karkat why are you boyfriends with a psycho in the first place??

Karkat stared at him, bafflement all over his face. What the fuck because he needs me?? why the fuck else????

Why is that a good reason to -- argh! No, there had to be other, better reasons, Karkat wouldn't date someone just because of something like that, it was codependent as hell and where was the love in it anyways? Right?
"What's going on?"

"Sorry, ma'am. Culture clash." He forced a smile. "It's irrelevant right now." And he'd conveniently forget to tell about it later; the brass generally didn't take clear-cut no you don't get to have this well.

"So what you're saying," Mrs. Reginald said, "is that when his boyfriend dropped off the radar, Makara here decided to abandon his post and charge in to get him back?"

"Avenge him," John corrected as tactfully as he could. "He was pretty sure Karkat was dead."

She didn't look any less disgusted. In fact, she probably looked more. "Jesus fucking Christ, we're discussing strategy with hormonal teenagers. What did he think this was, Romeo and Juliet?"

Karkat sighed, translated it for Gamzee with a mildly embarrassed look.

Gamzee laughed. "(What do I care. I will burn down the universe when it takes Karkat away from me. It's a thing that is happening no matter what.)"

Holy crap. Karkat took it entirely seriously, too, with more than just a touch of alarm-worry. He looked up at Gamzee, brows crinkled, hand sneaking under the table to tap at the side of his purple-streaked thigh. "(Gamzee, no, you'll--)"

Slouched in his chair, Gamzee smiled back, eyes crinkled, almost -- soft. "(There'll never be anyone else for me and you know that. I'm good with going out in a blaze of murderglory.)"

John looked away. It didn't take him away from Karkat's goddamn wibbling.

"(That is both the most romantic and the creepiest fucking thing you/asshole have ever said to me.)" His voice gentled, awkward and rough and tender. (love you, love you, you wreck, love you.) "(I don't get why I haven't dumped you yet, you humongous disaster. Must be the brain damage.)"

"(Haha, yeah, probably that.)"

"(Pff.)" Another soft brush of knuckles against Gamzee's thighs. "(And now, time to pretend we were talking strategy.)"

That ship has sailed, John couldn't help thinking at him. People were torn between scowling at them and looking away in embarrassment. (Mostly scowling; Ruiz was the flustered one. Harley and Mrs. Schneeman were smiling vaguely, neither of them in benevolent ways.)

"(Anyway. The reason Gamzee came isn't extremely relevant to the situation at hand. What's more important is what we can do now he's here.)" Karkat squared his shoulders. "(Amongst other things, if he goes back he can make contact with the Heiress. Who is, as I mentioned to General Harley earlier, a childhood friend.)" A little doubtful frown. "(At least a friendly acquaintance.)"

"I'm sorry, Corporal," Mrs. Schneeman said, "are you having an attack of low self-esteem or is this an issue that needs to be addressed at this strategy table?"

Karkat flushed a little. John snorted. "Nah -- no, ma'am. She said friend, Karkat just doesn't want to presume. What with him being all the way down from her and all. And how it might make her look bad now to be linked with him, with his mutation, but there's nothing wrong with Gamzee's standing."

"Hm." He wasn't sure she was convinced, she was super hard to read. Oh well.
"An heiress -- someone with the right blood color to reign -- is born every... three hundred years?" John sneaked Karkat a look to make sure. That seemed like a pretty excessive amount of time.

Sitting at the table with his elbows casually folded on the edge, Karkat only gave him a quick glance back, a flicker of a thought. That's a short estimate. Sometimes they won't happen for a fuckton of time. A thousand years. (None of them look like they believe me yet, huh.) Anyway let's keep going.

"How long do those assholes even live?" Ruiz muttered.

"Uh, did you miss the report from a while ago where Karkat told us the empire had lasted for thousands of years, and the Empress had been reigning all along?" --Whoops, too cheeky, Harley was squinting a stern warning at him. John coughed and tried to look meeker. "The other castes have exponential life expectancy, but as far as anyone has been able to find out hers lives until she gets killed. And only her Heiresses are allowed to take a free shot. The rest she bombs from orbit."

No but seriously do I have to bold and underline the tactical advantage here oh my stars and garters or what?

Karkat's mind rippled with amusement.

Which reminded him. Gamzee could be expected to live -- thousands of years? -- which John couldn't even start wrapping his mind around, it had to be a disconnect between their counting systems or something, right? ... Right? (And he was ready to throw it all away for Karkat. Oh.) But how long did Karkat...

I don't know stupid I'm a genetic aberration it's a total mystery. For all I know I'm even more fucked than the normal reds and can be expecting thirty to forty whole and entire years. His mind-voice gentled. That's still better than being put down upon conscription. I'll have done things. I'll have mattered.

Shit. John swallowed around the knot in his throat, blinked a prickle away. Will you stop having the horriblest shittiest life ever oh my god Karkat you total asshole.

Karkat pressed his lips together to make sure he didn't smirk. I will defend my crown made of the finest braided rectums to the end and beyond.

"(Back to the Heiress. She enjoys a lot of privileges along with the training for high command, rallies supporters to her cause, and then once she's ready she challenges the Empress, and gets herself killed.)" Karkat shrugged. "(And the Empress rules unchallenged for another handful of centuries.)"

"(Feferi isn't extremely interested in dying. And I could tell you all about how she's the only person I ever met before I came here who was interested in taking in wild animals for the pleasure of taking care of them, or that when she was a teenager she kept talking about her grand ideas for social reform, but I don't think you'll care about that half as much as you'd care about the possibility of trading in a millenary-old, revered leader for a brand-new one who will have to wrangle her predecessor's old guard and settle a lot of unrest before there's even a chance she'll look your way for expansion again. Which will likely take centuries.)"

"And what do we do if your heiress says no, or worse, if she decides to make a small backwater whose defenses she knows an example to prove her worth as leader?" Deng demanded, the knot of scar tissue on his cheek tugging the whole side of his face along with his downturned mouth.

... Um okay that's a good one.
"Can you guarantee an alliance? One that she will continue to honor? Because as it stands, we could simply let you go, and you will likely create our distraction with or without us."

"(I can't offer alliance in her name, and I won't. But I'm pretty sure she'll be interested.)" Karkat spread his hands out, palms up. "(And if she isn't, by continuing to be involved with us, you'll have gained political and sociologic intelligence, which is a fuckload more than you had yesterday. Because if you cut ties with us, we cut ties with you. Naturally.)"

Man, the idea of never seeing Karkat again was just... no. And all while Karkat was trying to set up a revolution against ridiculously humongous odds? Argh. Earth needed him here. Why could he not clone himself?

Well, technically he could, just the kid wouldn't come out of the artificial womb conveniently being him age seventeen.

At any rate, it wasn't like Karkat would be leaving right away.

... Actually.

John paused, mouth open on no word he could decide on.

Oh.

Karkat sneaked him a look, eyes narrowed not so much in annoyance as in pained -- guilty? -- frustration. It's not like I can set up a whole counter attack from your harem slumber room, John.

Oh. Yeah. That was a fair point. Made sense and everything. He should have assumed, really.

Oh.

It took General Harley clearing his throat before John realized he'd translated the "fuckload" too. Whoops.

Or maybe it was the stopping in the middle like an idiot thing. Yeah, maybe that.

"And on that note," Harley said, "may I recommend a short break?"

Oh thank god. Yeah. Moving his butt around. That was good. John waited for the adults to chime in with their agreement and then got up. "Colonel Ruiz, sir, is there a room we could use?"

"Ah -- yes." Ruiz signaled one of the enlisted John had totally forgotten, borderline blending in with the wallpaper. Good job, with that camo against cream walls. Hehe. "Show them to the rec room."

And then stand guard at the door, but that would just be normal procedure. John arched an eyebrow at Roxy; she pushed away from the wall and started toward them.

Gamzee took his time standing up until Karkat told him "(I seriously need to piss, you fuckhead, move your bony ass.)" John swallowed a snort, looked away.

"Ah, Molotov," he heard behind him, as Harley held Roxy back, and looked over his shoulder.

How long do we have? so tired of talking and being proper and serious urgh YES TAKE ME SERIOUSLY I KNOW WHAT I'M DOING spoiler I don't have a fucking clue in the universe what I'm doing, a clue is the crucial missing element that makes my periodic table go boom from unstable and holy shit what is this metaphor even coming out of. My brain is puree. Talking puree that only talks nonsense.
Pff. I don't have a clue. A half-hour, an hour? (And then back to the chitchat and then goodbye Karkat). We can get some food too. Crap, it's like nine or ten PM or something, I can't even tell the time any longer. Also simmer down you're vibrating dude.

"Whatcha making that face about?" Roxy asked as she draped herself across his shoulders.

John had no idea what his face was doing, but he immediately switched it to a guileless look. "I wasn't making faces! What'd the General want?"

Roxy brandished his tablet. "Enable me to play the hell out of Angry Birds. Hell yeah, I'm gonna destroy those peeping fuckers."

John arched his eyebrows. "Yeah, and then you can play a rousing game of Snake. I mean, if you're doing archeology now... Doesn't he need that?"

"Pff. He's got a spare, what kinda lamer do you take him for?" She shrugged, tucked the tablet under an arm. "I dunno, he said we'd find it instructive, who knows." She'd ended up following in Gamzee's wake; she looked up at him... and up... and up, head craned back. "Whoa, you're even taller up close."

"(She's saying you're tall,)" Karkat relayed tiredly. Gamzee smiled down at her, in an odd, unsettling way.

"He just thinks it's weird she's walking so close, I mean she's in arm's reach. You guys are so ridiculous that way.

John lifted his hand to ruffle Karkat's hair, immediately froze; the no! Karkat had thrown at him wasn't joking in the least.

Um?

Don't get between us even a little bit right now that'd be -- a little bad. I think. Probably not but don't risk it. He moved closer to his boyfriend, arm almost brushing Gamzee's knuckles, making Roxy weave away so she was on his other side.

I wasn't gonna get between you guys I was just going to--

Karkat sneaked him a look, just a flash of red and then he was looking away again, eyes obscured behind his flyaway bangs. Touch my hair grab my hair go for my horns and throw me to the ground? of course friendly touching happens amongst us too but you're blue I'm not you're alien I'm not and Gamzee doesn't know you yet okay? I told him you were okay but he doesn't know how close -- nrgh.

John spluttered. I. What? I'm not blue! My eyes are blue and I dress in blue it means nothing!

Karkat snorted. You behave so blue you have no idea. High-handed trustconfidence yes I'm important no need to be on my guard I can end you whenever and anyways everyone would come down on you like a ton of bricks if I didn't haha. That is so blue. The bluest.

"Oh my god, fuck you," John muttered under his breath, and wished he had pockets to stick his hands in them. Karkat hummed under his breath and stuck one of his hands in his parka's pocket pointedly. Jerk.

The rec room wasn't huge -- this base was pretty tiny, after all. There were just two couches at an angle and a big TV screen on the wall, a few gaming consoles, some outlets to plug your own
laptops and things into. John was pretty sure the internet would be coincidentally down. Then again even when it worked right there was always a serious lag when you were trying to surf from the moon base.

He wondered if they'd accidentally kicked out some Marines on their break. Nah, no one would be getting any downtime so long as high-ranked diplomats and potentially murderous aliens were around.

"Sergeant?" he asked, stopping in the doorway to look at their escort. "Could you ask for someone to get us some dinner? They'll eat whatever we have, it's not a problem, just..." A helpless grin.

"I'll pass it along," the man promised, grim-faced. Okay. Well.

"Thanks, I appreciate it," he replied, and closed the door.

Roxy was fiddling with the TV, her back pointedly turned to the room. Gamzee had backed up against a wall, had an arm around Karkat's shoulders. Karkat's arms were still hanging loosely, not hugging back, but there he was, planted forehead-first in bony man-chest, the slope of his shoulders screaming exhaustion.

Gamzee's eyes met John's and stared until John found something interesting to look at elsewhere.

"Roxy, whatcha doin'?" He ambled closer, hands linked behind his back, leaned in, saw cables and opened TV guts. "--Roxy what are you doing."

She grunted absently at him and finished linking the tablet and the TV. "Stuff. And things. Hey, make yourself useful, get an update for Davey and all, yeah?"

Roxy started fiddling with the tablet's settings.

"Yeah, okay." He brought up his glasses' chat program.

JH: hi guys, we're taking a break from the brass, what's new?
JH: jane *did you see the medics yet.*
JD: yeah!! they cornered her twenty minutes ago :X shes still afk.
JH: that's good! what about the others?
JD: bro just flew in to sit with dirk
JK: And managed to foil a truly impressive escape attempt in the process!
JD: yeah, and that :/
JD: rose is awake more than not and she seems pretty lucid when she is!
JH: awesome.
JH: and i notice you're still not mentioning dave...
JD: :
JK: Alas he is still catching a truly outrageous amount of zees.
JD: last time we asked the docs said his eeg wasn't too bad? __. like hes having a big nightmare, not like hes... well idk what they were saying this was like earlier but pretty bad, but now its not as bad?

:((
JH: woo. :
JH: i don't even know what to think about it. i mean gamzee thought we'd killed his bf, but.
JH: and during a war you use whatever weapons you have anyways, so it's not even a question of unfairness!
JH: but, shit. why did *dave* get hurt the worst?
JD: from the logs ive been checking out he got between capricorn and rose like a ton of times
JD: hell yes you show him baby!!!! >:E
JD: and i think that pissed off the alien something awful :((
JH: mngh.
JH: from long and totally unbiased scientific observation i can tell you that the dude seems kinda. not stable.
JH: which helps jack shit and i don't know why i said that.
JH: anyways. bro's on base?
JD: on tycho, not this one, thats where theyve got the injured
JH: oh. :( yeah, i guess that makes more sense.
JK: Do i detect a certain animosity between you and our dear guests beau?
JH: oh, shut up.
JH: he just half-killed over half of us, me included, i'm allowed to be a bit grumpy.
JK: Thats entirely understandable no worries.

Yeah, um. Totally.

Blurgh.

"Zhann?"

"Yeah?" John turned around.

Karkat had managed to push his boyfriend into a corner of the couch; he sat tucked against his side. He briefly looked-felt embarrassed when John saw him, and then too tired for embarrassment.

"Rrhoz and Dave and Dirk? Are they good or not good or...?"

Sighing, John dragged himself to the other couch and sat down heavily. "Dirk and Rose are doing better, but they're still mentally confused. Dave's -- not waking up." He scratched at his hair, where the headset was pushing it back and it ached. "Jane, last I heard from her she wasn't okay in her head. Dunno how she's feeling now."

A spark of memory of her sudden table-flinging rage echoed from Karkat, the crack in her mind, and guilt that he was stopping John from going to her. John shook his head. Shit, I know she's my sister but I want to go to see Rose and Dave and Dirk too.

"Jake and Jade are fine."

"Mnh." Karkat rubbed a hand against his face. "Rokshi, you're fine?"

She flicked him a quick smile over her shoulder, threw in a thumbs up. "Yeah, I'm a-okay. Who's the best? It's me!"

"Heh." Karkat crooked her a smile, relaxing against his boyfriend's side. "What you doing?"

"The General has some vids on here, he said it'd be a way to pass the time," she replied absently, fiddling with the tablet. "Aha, there we go."

On the TV was... a hangar? It was seen from a high angle above a nondescript bit of floor, the time and date in the corner marking it as a security camera. John frowned, watching people in white coats walk back and forth for unknown and mysterious purposes.

"Okay, what's--"

No sound, but then suddenly everyone on the screen was jerking and turning to look to the side, and then half of them took off running, looking highly alarmed. A second later security in power armor
raced the other way...

And why was Karkat feeling so embarrassed suddenly?

Embarrassed and smug. And -- pained? No, argh, it was hard to untangle --

*Stop peeping and watch the TV. Ugh. And remind me to tell Harley thanks for nothing later on.* "(Gamzee? I'm fine, don't flip your lid, okay?)"

And then suddenly short bright horns and messy black hair and a button-up shirt, Karkat running across the screen with like a dozen soldiers after him.

John found himself sitting at the very edge of the couch and leaning in.

The camera view switched to another, farther away. From that point John could recognize the place - - the hangar with the huge pool where Cancer lay in all its maimed, black-shelled glory.

One of Noir's men clambered over its knee and took Karkat down with a flying tackle, and then it was a glorious pile-up, men encased in metal over squishy flesh-alien. *How did you not get hurt??!!*

*It was just bruises (ow fuck cracked ribs I can still move who cares) thanks for the nanites by the way I'm fine now shut the fuck up.*

Ugh. John kept watching, hands linked, waiting for the moment when -- there! A vicious kick, a snake-wriggle, and he was squirming free -- was getting grabbed by the ankle -- was kicking people in the face, rolling up into a crouch, and reinforcements had arrived; he was surrounded.

He stood up in the middle of a double-ring of guards, leg dragging (*ankle aches not broken oh shit so fucked no no no I need to go*), and John couldn't wait to see how he'd gotten out of that one, especially with the tranq guns being raised his way holy shit --

He could tell when behind him on the other couch Karkat closed his eyes and burrowed into Gamzee's side. He couldn't tell what the feeling was. Love and pain, something bittersweet but --

The Karkat on the screen was yelling but there was no sound and *(I said petprotectorteacherprovidercomforterfriend (dad) it's all I said (it's all I needed to say oh))* and then the camera trembled, the whole hangar seemed to subtly shift and it took John a few seconds to realize that the hangar itself wasn't moving, that the thing that fooled his sight was the biomech itself.

Without the noise of stressed metal there was no warning for John between that first shift and the heavy mooring chains whipping free. People hurriedly backed out of the way; he could see a destroyed machine, some kind of scanner, flung back several meters and into the wall by the flying length of metal.

It sat up, slow and immense, dripping. The roof crumpled aside; water sloshed out of the pool. Karkat-on-the-screen rammed one of the men aside with a rugby tackle, sent him into the water (*did he drown*); a flash of gunfire *(oh they did shoot after all I never noticed.)*

Some of the men were still racing after Karkat even so *(hah they should get a commendation)* but then Karkat yelled again and all its leftover hands and pincers came down on the ground, hard, and then the camera *did* shake.

Black shell blocked the view. The movie jumped to another camera, lower to the ground. The giant monster-mech leaned, curled over a small gray shape, half visible behind the pincers.
Picked it up.

"Holy fucking *shit.*"

(want to cry) had him turning his head to look at Karkat. Gamzee's arms were wound around him and he'd pretty much dragged him into his lap; his face was half-buried in Karkat's hair, his eyelids at half-mast.

The camera didn't show the next part but Karkat knew what had happened, of course, the smooth warm goop swallowing him, the first breath -- drowning and then not, the neural gel...

What just happened there? John asked, at a loss. He'd thought the biomechs didn't really... make decisions, that they just had reflexes, basic instincts?

(protect the child protect it)

"Yeah," Karkat said, voice rough. John could feel the tightness of his throat like an echo in his own flesh.

"Guys?" Roxy asked. She'd paused the movie to look at them, eyebrows up.

"(Are you telepathing at each other again, best-beloved?)"

Karkat ran a soothing hand along Gamzee's forearm, sighed. "(Yeah. It's pretty much a constant thing when these are on. It's fine, I don't mind.)" *Not much not most of the time it's useful and kind of even fun but-- "No, Rokshi, it's good. TV?"

*I'll ask them to fix yours so there's an on-off switch,* John promised guiltily. Though he doubted Karkat would be made to keep it on as they attempted to force intel out of him much anymore.

Because he was leaving. Right. Haha.

*It doesn't mean we'll never ever need to talk again, John you big dumbass,* Karkat replied, turning his head to look at John and rolling his eyes at him. *On-off switch is good. Ask them to fix the distance thing too I had to be on top of your mech before you heard me that was annoying as hell you leaking asshole (Johnfriendprotectorallymine stabbing Gamzeelovemine and himself both oh fuck oh no)*

John bit his lip. Karkat's plan was still vague to him; he refused to think about it in detail for John, so he wouldn't spoil him he said (so he wouldn't psych himself out thinking too much about it he thought,) but it had him going back to the alien fleet, and John might as well have been tethered to Earth. The Moon's orbit was as far as he would be allowed to go.

"Yeah, okay, ready!" Roxy said, and restarted the video. John dragged his attention forcibly back to the screen.

They got treated to two minutes of reverse-Godzilla antics where Cancer kept trying to get up without crushing anyone, but everyone was running all over the place and almost ended up getting themselves crushed. It would have been surreal funny, if John himself hadn't had some sweat-making moments in the hangar the first few times he'd landed Warhammer -- and Warhammer hadn't been trying to escape containment.

*It's a lot funnier now that I already know I do manage not to splat anyone yeah. (unless I got one and I didn't notice oooh shit) oh hey look in that downleft corner they did fish out that armor guy! He's all sprawled out coughing up his lungs. Oh thank fuck.*
John grinned at the screen. *You're so sooooot.*

*Shut your whore mouth I just didn't want to make diplomacy harder on me I already suck at the calm and reasonable approach.*

*Also Noir would kill you even deader!*

*Also that yeah. (heh I'm so fucking.)*

Cancer eventually climbed out of the hangar, left the camera field. Another few seconds of video, and then it ended.

Roxy turned to look at the three of them, lips pinched and eyebrows up. "... Wowza. So did you, like, always know you coulda run the fuck away, or was this a special occasion?"

Karkat's face reddened a little. *(no I never hoped dad could--) *(I was always with John! It wasn't like I could have stuffed him in a cupboard. I mean, I could have, but then what? There would have been the lot of you waiting in space to play whack-a-mole, even if there was also a troop transport waiting for me.)*

Pffff. "He says he didn't want to damage my delicate visage and also there was nowhere to go once he was up there except into you guys' waiting arms."

Karkat glared at him openly and made a rude gesture with his first two fingers up and the rest of them in a circle, making Roxy giggle. *You shut your yapping mouth before I find something better to do with it like stashing shoes and feces. And feces-y shoes.*

*Not one of your most coherent threats, buddy,* John commiserated, and was treated to Karkat lifting his boot-clad foot with malice aforethought. *(Gamzee was watching them. John pretended he wasn't.)*

"So then--"

Knock at the door. John shot up on his feet. "It better be dinner -- no, don't move, I'll get it."

Of course Karkat moved off Gamzee anyway and Gamzee shuffled to the edge of his seat, because all aliens were pathologically paranoid. Rolling his eyes, John opened the door.

Hass Harley and a noncom were standing there, the noncom expertly juggling dinner trays.

"Hallo, hallo. Mind if I interrupt?"

Blink. "Oh, sure." John stepped back to let them in.

There was no table, though there were a few desks along a wall; the noncom put the trays down on them and retreated.

Hass pulled out a desk chair and sat, waving at the dinners. John picked up a tray and went to sit on the couch.

He was *so hungry.* "What's up?" he asked around a mouth full of bread roll.

Hass waved his hand vaguely. "Strategy concerns, political wrangling. Nothing unexpected. They only just broke for a real pause of their own, so I suspect you should able to rest another hour or so."

Karkat grimaced, whispered something at Gamzee, turned back to the General. "Sir? Do you know
"Ah, yeah, he wants to know if the troop transport that got Gamzee here is still hanging around on radars or what. Because having to wait until the next wave would make things harder, he... Hrm. It'd be easier to manipulate the situation back on his ship if it's still in flux from Gamzee bulldozing his way through their ranks to come out here? Otherwise they have to make up a story to explain how they managed to hang out in space until the next wave got around to dropping in, and I don't think their biomechs have that much oxygen."

Hass arched a bushy gray eyebrow. "As it happens, it is. I'll hustle them along, you finish your dinner." He pulled out a second tablet, sent off a quick message. John concentrated on cramming as much of the meat into his mouth in one go as he could. It was minced, frozen steak, not really fresh off the cow there, but it was still meat.

You're gross. Karkat wrinkled his nose, and did the exact same thing with his own meat. John chuckled into his dinner.

Your mom is gross.

... ??

John coughed. Whoops right I forgot. Your uhh mech is gross!

Those are fighting words asshole are you sure you want to do that now I feel like I could (eat a star and spit it in someone's face) -- urgh yeah really I'd win easy. (so tired)

Ooh it's on. Soon as this is over!

... and we've slept.

Hehe. And we've slept yeah okay. He missed his bed so bad right now, wow. He longingly thought of rolling all over that mattress, of burrowing in those blankets...

Karkat snorted quietly, head bowed over his platter. You sick freak. "(--No, Gamzee, you don't need a pointy knife for this meat, for the love of all that is holy don't pull your fucking machete out around the General--)"

John swallowed down the wrong pipe. Machete?? What where how??

It's not a machete it's just a boot knife. In his boot. Which must fit in his boot. Not that big for fuck's sake.

John eyed Gamzee's boots. They went up to his knees. He could totally have a machete in there.

The creepy asshole caught him watching and grinned, friendly and full of teeth.

Fries and zucchini; the zucchini was mushy but John figured he should at least try to have some vegetables, and besides he was just that hungry.

"(Whoa, what the fuck is that shit?)"

Karkat and John eyed Gamzee sideways. He had covered his zucchini with a mustard-ketchup concoction and was putting it away at speed. "(... Do you want mine too?)" Karkat asked.

"(Fuck yeah, hand it all over.)"
"So did you all watch the videos?" Hass asked.

Roxy hummed, swallowed her mouthful. "Yeah, I put it on the TV. Wait, videos, plural?" She checked the wired-up tablet. "Oh hey, no, we only looked at the first one. Cool. Is the second one more of Vantas the Badass Mofo or?"

Harley smiled, mouth closed. "I can neither confirm or deny."

Balancing the tray on her knee, Roxy started the second video. They were in the air, pretty far up judging from the glimpses of the ground he could see, and -- oh, huh. Fighter plane. At least there were other fighter planes peeking in and out of the camera view, and John doubted a chopper would match those speeds, so it made sense that the camera was on another fighter plane.

And then there was Cancer, rising out of the cloud cover. The plasma wings left a trail of steam behind him.

They got to watch a very short dogfight, because Cancer braked in mid-air to let them all and their hails of plasma guns fly overhead and then sped up without waiting for them to come back; as they went for a desperate second attempt before he broke the ceiling of what their planes could handle, someone zigged when they should have zagged and came into what John could have told them was the danger zone.

Cancer lunged with zero warning and snatched it out of the air, and proceeded to carry it up the rest of the way, using it as a shield. When the other planes had to fall away, it let the one it held drop, cautiously putting it right side up before letting go.

Gamzee burst out into massive guffaws. Karkat batted at his knee to try to get him to shut up, to no avail.

"(Aw, c'mon! That shit was the funniest goddamn thing ever, holy shit, dearest, can you imagine their weird alien face? Bitch got to have been crying. Hahaha.)"

Karkat sneaked a look at Hass, who smiled good-humoredly back. John himself was torn. On one hand, it was funny, if no one had gotten hurt.

On the other hand he didn't like Gamzee laughing at his people.

Or you just don't like Gamzee, Karkat shot back at him, cynical. John flinched.

"Not at all! It would have been legitimate self-defense should Karkat have killed them in the act of escaping. I'm quite happy that he went to the trouble of only causing the type of harm than can be repaired with money."

Karkat squirmed inside, and had to be prodded in the ribs three times before he would tell Gamzee a very truncated version. "(He's just glad I didn't kill their guys. Shut up and stop trying to provoke
"Did you know what you were going to find out there?" Hass asked, deceptively mild.

Karkat's mouth folded down at the corners, and he snuck John a strange look.

"Yes." He tapped the headset with a claw. "This is still on Zhann when he looks at the. Rrh. The TV small, in his mech. Before he go up. He see Gamzee, I see it too."

"... Oh, hell." John groaned, sank into the couch, buried his face in his hands. "God damn it. There was no time to take it off and I -- crap, I totally forgot you were even there." Wincing, he looked up at Hass. "I was just -- mission, gotta go. Crap."

"Wooha. Op-sec for the win," Roxy said, wincing in shared embarrassment. "You're gonna get your fingers rapped, buddy."

Hass let out a heaving sigh. "Well. It worked out for the better, as far as I can tell. And I'm glad the breach of security didn't occur somewhere else, or that Karkat didn't have some mysterious means of communication with his people after all. But yes, I'm afraid you're going to have to get a dressing down at some point."

John oozed farther down into the couch. "Bluuuurhghg."

Karkat explained the situation sotto voce for Gamzee; John opened an eye to hear him laughing again.

"(I'm all kinds of fucking glad he did, too. And not even just because it turns out you're alive, bro. Grumpy asshole over there was about to skewer us both like a douche.)"

"(Gamzee! He can understand you, moron!)"

"(Oh yeah?)" Gamzee looked innocently at him, and then grinned. "(Hi bro.)"

John couldn't have helped showing off his middle finger if his dad had been in the room right now.

"... John Egbert."

Gnrhghgh. "Sorry, sir," he grumped at Hass, and crossed his arms over his chest.

RX: ??????????
JH: he's a bag of douche!!!!
JH: what does karkat even SEE in him????
RX: omg
JH: are you **snickering** at me, roxy.
JH: is that what you're doing right now.
JH: right in front of my FACE.
RX: ......
RX: ayup. :33
RX: bahahaha!
JD: what what what? whats going on???
JK: Yes indeed! Anything happening that we should want to hear about?
RX: johnnyboi just
RX: will kill me if i say it i trink.
RX: he is GLARNING irl liek woha
RX: tuhnder ahead. outta this gorgogus BLUE SKIES and then...
RX: SHAZAMMMM BEHOLD MY MAGIC FINGER
RX: its teh longer one 2! :O
JK: Im afraid i dont get the gist of your meaning here.
JD: ... did he give karkats boyfriend the finger, omfg john what the heck???!!!
JD: really for real?
RX: totes realsies XDDDDDD <3

John logged the hell out, while he was at it.

Karkat was massaging the bridge of his nose.

"(If the two of you keep antagonizing each other I will go out dancing into the frozen night and snort moon dust until I win a brain hemorrhage.)"

"Mnrgh. Sorry.

"(Sorry, bro. It's funny is all.)"

Okay I'm not sorry anymore.

Karkat heaved himself out of the couch, and then delivered a nice little slap to the base of Gamzee's horn. He then turned to glare at John with clear thoughts of marching to him and doing the same thing, and how dirty he was feeling having to do that peacekeeping shit between his boyfriend and his -- his John, if John made him come over there it would translate straight into slapping power.

John raised both hands in surrender. "Okay, okay, sorry, I'll stop if he stops."

"No, you stop. No if. You stop, he stop. I will get handcuff, put on you and him, you will kill the other one, I will hear quiet."

John oozed deeper into his seat. Karkat glared at him for a second, vindicated, and then at Gamzee who was starting to smile, prompting him to switch it for an innocently confused look.

"(Don't even, you giant turd.) And on that note. "I need bathroom now. (Gamzee, do you need to piss? Their toilets are pretty workable, just don't get your narrow ass stuck in the hole.) John, come with me. The guards might be nervous make with the talky meat shield pleasethankyouhurryup I'm still pissed off at you.

Karkat wasn't kidding about needing the bathroom now, either; John could feel the echo of uncomfortable pressure in his belly without even trying. Sighing, he got up and dragged himself to the door. "Okay, fine, all aboard the pee break express."

--

"Having you leave as well is out of the question," General Gravier said, and Karkat fell silent in the middle of a sentence to stare.

So did John. There was absolutely no give in the woman, not an inch of it.

But the plan, Karkat thought, and threw John a side look and kept his teeth clenched on his next words.

"Ma'am," John said for him, "I'm -- he's the one who came up with the plan, he needs to be around to assess and recalibrate the--"
After riding along on Karkat's determination to make this succeed through willpower alone, he was thrown badly enough, being noped like that, that he couldn't even find his words. Shit.

She shook her head, eyes steely. "You're a field commander, Warhammer. You need to be in contact with the enemy as the situation develops. This? This is strategy. Being in the thick of things only makes sure Vantas will get himself killed or fenced in by his own social status. And then he can not coordinate anything anymore. He does not need to be there."

"Ma'am!" Karkat said, frantic enough to interrupt, and then cringing inside (gonna get backhanded for that shit at best fuck fuck fuck she's not your equal self shut up but -- but!) "Yes, I need -- Gamzee need."

Said Gamzee was sitting a little straighter, purple eyes on her weathered face, and something about the minute shift of his shoulders in John's vision made a thrill of alarm go down Karkat's spine. He couldn't break eye contact with Gravier to check on him. Damn it.

"How are we supposed to just take you at your word like this?" Mrs. Reginald said, and threw her hands up in the air in disgusted frustration. "How do you prove this isn't just a ploy to get back home, with all the intel you gained on us? And then you'll be right back with the assault forces. Tell us! We'd like to know. No, you're staying put and that's final."

Deng nodded his stern-faced agreement. Wincing inside, John sneaked Mrs. Schneeman a look -- inscrutable -- and then Harley -- still holding out. No support there, and Gamzee was leaning in to rasp in Karkat's ear, "(What are they saying, beloved? You don't like it, it's got to be bad. What are they fucking saying?)"

John's stomach was starting to feel all tight and queasy. Not good. The guards in the corners had their hands on the butts of their guns, and Roxy was starting to rock her weight back and forth on the balls of her feet.

"Other considerations," Gravier started with a dark look at Reginald -- a shut up and let me speak if he'd ever seen one, but then Gamzee growled at Karkat, "(Tell me.)" and the rich yellow of his eyes went orange.

"(They want me to stay here while you go back,)" Karkat barked back, and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "(It's fine, we'll talk it out, sit your ass down and--)"

Gamzee was on his feet suddenly and if John had blinked he would have missed the in-between stage entirely.

John and Karkat lurched up on instinct, chairs scraping back, reaching for his arm and John was too far to touch him, Karkat was in the way and everyone was going to die. Everyone was, they needed to run/they needed to calm him down, guards with their guns up and their eyes wild, Deng shoving Reginald behind him as she tried to fight her way out of her chair and almost fell to the ground and grandpa/general with his moustache all bristled up and a hand on his own sleeve and he had knives there, John knew he did.

"(Fuck if you're keeping him,)" Gamzee rattled, the buzz in his voice seeming to fill the room, and the rictus on his face unveiled his teeth almost to the gum.

Gamzee picked up his chair by the back. A pulse of dizziness went down John's spine, he could feel his heartbeat in his temples, he was going to throw up. He couldn't stop imagining exactly how they were going to be beaten to death using a stupid chair, it was ridiculous --
Karkat hopped up, hooked his arm behind Gamzee's neck, and hung there. John shoved at the conference table to block their side of the room, free the other one; "Out! Roxy, evac!"

He yanked off his headset; the terror receded some, letting him firm his knees, root his stance. Roxy shoved chairs out of the way to free a path and escorted Mrs. Schneeman out, stood shoulder to shoulder with John between Gamzee and the door as people moved.

He wasn't making a move to come after them for the moment, his arms around Karkat with rib-bruising force, but the bone-rattling buzz of his growl and the terror he emitted didn't weaken any.

He wanted to beat them with his bare fists until they were purpled flesh and smashed bones, alien-red smears everywhere. He wanted it so clearly John didn't even need a headset to know it, to know the warm meaty smell of flesh and the reek of entrails he expected so much.

Mrs. Reginald ran, tripping along the way. Colonels Deng and Ruiz followed, Deng making it a point to move slow -- not running from you! -- even though his forehead had gone shiny with sweat, his scar livid.

John didn't watch them file out; his eyes were on Karkat, who was pulling himself up by arm strength alone, and against Gamzee's grip. Karkat managed to clamp his knees on Gamzee's waist and then they were face to face. He let go of his neck, cupped his face, and started to make a low, breathy sound John hadn't heard before, like a drawn-out, sleepy sigh.

Roxy tugged on John's sleeve, nodded toward the door. John followed her out.

Well, crap.

The higher ups were being herded farther down the corridor at a quick pace by their security, though Harley resisted. John gave him an okay sign. It felt like the terror field was fading, though he couldn't tell if that was just the wall in between them. Did walls even affect anything? John had been hit in his cockpit.

"Game plan?" Roxy asked, chafing her arms as she danced from one foot to the other. When their eyes met she cracked him a reflexive smile, though it still seemed worried.

Well. If Gamzee came out still in murder mode, someone needed to stop him, and they were the only people with the reaction time necessary to block him. On the other hand, they really needed not to die here. Hell, getting benched via grievous injury would be bad enough, nanites or no nanites.

He went a few steps down the corridor to a maintenance cupboard. Which was locked, crap, but Roxy dodged under his arm and did something with the datapad and the electronic lock that had the lock mechanism popping open in fifteen seconds.

"Yeah, thanks." He peered in. "If you've got brass knuckles on you, time to put them on."

Aha. Aha.

"... Are you gonna beat him up with a broom," Roxy said, and then giggled a bit, disbelieving and giddy from adrenaline. "Oh my god, John. Mad props."

John swished the broom a bit to feel out its balance, and regretted that it was plastic and aluminum. "Brass knuckles, Rox!" Couldn't really hit hard without breaking or bending that broom; wood would have been better for dishing out the pain. It would work okay for the tripping and unbalancing people part of his repertoire though. Plus the head of the broom would hook feet and knees pretty nicely.
"Plan!" he marched back to the conference room door. "I stand here, you do your ninja thing there, I trip the hell out of him, and you punch him right in the back of the head while he's down. Teamwork!"

Roxy grinned back, pulling brass knuckles out of her cleavage (they were hot pink and in the shape of a cat head; she used them as a key chain) and slipping them on. The ears that popped out over her fingers looked extra pointy.

They moved into position, breathing out as they backed against the wall.

"And if he's still feeling salty?"

"Then we run like hell while he's down and let the peeps at the ends of the corridor strafe him down."

"Hm." She nodded thoughtfully, her curls bouncing. "Howzabout they strafe him down from the start? We're kinda in the line of fire here, I betcha we're giving the guys in charge hives."

John shrugged. Yeah, well. Prefab being what it was, the walls around here were kind of flimsy. He didn't want to get Karkat hit with a lost bullet because his boyfriend was an assbutt either.

"Be a bit sad to mess up the alliance talks by killing him if a little beatdown would have calmed his alien tits," John replied. "You know the guys in charge, they'll want lethal force from the start. I dunno, I think if it needed to go that far he'd have shoved Karkat off him and come after us already. This is just insurance."

"Mm, 'kay."

They settled against the wall and waited. Inside John couldn't make out clear words -- not that he would have understood them anyway -- only a faint whisper of sound. Karkat talked a lot more than Gamzee, but Gamzee was recognizable because he was one octave lower than Karkat at his lowest and because usually it came punctuated with John's hair rising on the back of his neck and forearms.

"I'm gonna have such an adrenaline hangover," Roxy mumbled, and cracked her knuckles absently.

They waited for another -- he wasn't sure, five to ten minutes -- before hearing footsteps inside the conference room. John couldn't tell if the person approaching the door was Karkat or Gamzee, so he went into a ready stance.

The door cracked open. Karkat didn't take a step out, which was good because John had already started swinging down on pure reflex. He stopped it before it went very far and grinned from the look on Karkat's face -- a very what the fuck, John, a broom? look.

"Hi!" Roxy whispered from the other side of the door. "Are you okay? Gamzee okay?"

Gamzee grumbled something from the depth of the room. Karkat made a face, sighed. "Yeah, yeah." He leaned out of the door cautiously to check the ends of the corridor -- very empty-looking -- and then winced, ran a hand down his face. "Fuck. This is a big, big fuck."

John nodded wisely. "But not quite a clusterfuck! There, there, we'll fix it."

Karkat growled quietly and tapped his headband. "What is clusterfuck. I need to know. Teach."

"It's when a lot of fucks all get together in one space to make a huge ball of concentrated fuck, and then everything is fucked," John explained cheerily, and put his own headband back on. Hi. So how
are things really?

Managed to talk him into putting off the murder spree but he's still pretty twitchy. I can't tell if he'll trigersplode again when they don't give him what he wants namely me and they'd be fucking stupid to let me go with him just because he intimidated them a bit. They'd be better off killing him and keeping me. (no, no, no, but fuck how are they going to compromise on that no trust no goodwill no nothing--)

John made a sympathetic noise. "Yeah, huh, complicated. Let me just --"

JH: sir? karkat emerged, situation contained for now.
JH: but he says gamzree might well blow again if pressed. is there any compromise possible?
HS: On Karkat getting to leave with Makara? I'm afraid there really is not John.
HS: It's not only a matter of us getting a hostage to keep. I don't think Karkat thought his cover story through.
HS: Gravier was about to point out and I agree most strongly with her for once that a hostile takeover of the ship would be much more believable from a grieving and furious young lord not from one who had managed a rescue somehow.
HS: He would be calmer and cheerier and that would open him to questioning which people would avoid if he still appears furious and looking for a target. The brass over there would doubt him more openly and go looking for holes in his story.
HS: They would find them John.
HS: Especially with Karkat also there and not being able to rely on his own status to keep from being questioned even a little bit.
JH: oh, yeah. urgh.
JH: will transmit, brb.

Karkat grimaced openly when John relayed, but...

Shit yeah that would work better especially if he can sell pissed off from having to leave me here as pissed off because revenge wasn't satisfying enough, he's so fucking dopey/easygoing when he's happy I swear he's almost not the same person.

John could only reply with sheer disbelief at this one. Easygoing? In which universe?

But Gamzze having to go alone, fuck, this isn't playing kiddie games what if he messes up gets caught gets killed--

John propped the broom against the wall, put a hand on Karkat's shoulder, gave him a little squeeze, and then smiled. "Hey, he managed to get here, and I bet it wasn't easy at all. Why don't we ask him what he thinks?"

Karkat startled at the touch, stared at him. "(John, what the hell are you plotting--)"

John stole the headband off Karkat's head and side-stepped him. "Negotiating!" he said cheerfully as Karkat made an angry noise.

"I don't know that word -- give back!" Karkat grabbed his elbow. "Stop. Zhann, stop. No!"

John stopped dragging him forward when he was two steps away from Gamze, and not before. The other alien was sitting slumped in a chair and the look he gave John through his matted hair was malevolent to the extreme.

John smiled with his mouth closed and held out Karkat's headset. "You wanna talk to me?" He
pointed from that headset to the one on his own skull, tilted his head, shook it under his nose. "C'mon, take it, boy."

"John," Roxy hissed behind him, appalled.

"Zhann no! G'mzee--"

Gamzee plucked the headset from his hand with the tips of two claws and peered at it. Karkat made a furious, huffy noise. Gamzee clicked back absently, rolling the ball of his thumb against the neural gel on the inside of the curve.

He looked up, met John's eyes, eyelids heavy and eyes still a dangerous orange. His irises seemed lit by black light. Something skittered down John's spine; John gave a mild blink and waited.

With a shrug, Gamzee put the headset on like a princess diadem over the impenetrable mass of his dreadlocked hair and nudged it back until it touched his horns.

It was nothing as clear-cut as what he got from Karkat. No concepts defined enough to become words, never mind full sentences. He had a second to think to himself, boy did I fuck up, and then there was a feeling of agreement, of dark amusement at his suicidal stupidity, and then...

He didn't get to tell Gamzee anything -- not the Generals' reasoning, not his own, nothing. Gamzee went looking for it. He invaded his mind like a tide made of spiders, scurrying into every hole they could find, and none of the mental tricks John had started learning to redirect Karkat worked worth a damn when Gamzee pushed.

John fighting Karkat. John bringing Karkat down. Karkat in handcuffs being led around, Karkat on a hospital bed, in flimsy not-even-clothes, Karkat dazed and scared dumb and docile and ashamed -- I'll protect him! John yelled, and fist his hands. I was doing it before. I'm not going to stop. (treated him bad scared him that was an accident I won't never again.) When you come back for him he'll be fine. He glared up at Gamzee, who was standing now and John hadn't even paid attention. He'll be fine and (I don't need your help but) he'll be even better now he has leverage (that you gave him are you happy) and they'll have to go through me first.

The invasion paused. John could still feel Gamzee's presence --- like clammy fingers, like one-way mirrors, cold to the touch but no meaningful contact going back to him.

I know it sucks that he can't go back with you right away (you missed him (I'm gonna miss him) so bad) -- so go take that ship and make it safe for him already!

He crossed his arms. Harrumph. ... Argh. And still no response. How was he supposed to know if he had hit even vaguely close to the mark without any return?

Gamzee tilted his head slowly, still staring at him, and drawled something in alienese that had Karkat -- who'd been standing stiff and twitchy beside them all along -- slump and groan. He sneaked John a look and looked away, looking harassed, and muttered a long reply.

Gamzee snorted, and then started laughing. Karkat's lips involuntarily curved up to match. John had the pretty clear impression that they were laughing at him.

"... Hey!"

Gamzee sank back into his chair, and used one of those ridiculously long arms to reel Karkat in against his side and drop a kiss on his forehead.
John told himself it was good that the tension seemed gone, that Gamzee wasn't acting quite so hostile and unstable anymore, and told himself that even if they did kiss each other on the mouth right under his nose then so what. It'd be kind of gross, but he could deal with it. He was keeping Karkat for a while longer while Gamzee had to leave him behind, he could be generous and not bitch about their potential makeouts.

Gamzee snorfled into Karkat's hair and grinned against his skin. Karkat looked embarrassed, turned his face away from John to hide.

Yes/right kiss/stroke him all over/everywhere/all of his skin the second/moment/instant I can, buddy/brother/untrusted ally.

He flashed John a detailed image of Karkat stretched out on his back, shirtless, shivering as his/their lips brushed against his offered belly. John blushed hot at the intimacy of it. "Jesus! I don't want to see that!" He gritted his teeth, glared, face refusing to cool down. "You're an asshole. So are you in or what?!"

Gamzee sighed, asked Karkat something about the plan, if he was okay with it, or something like that. John got almost no return on what Karkat himself answered, but from his body language and the look on his face it was pretty easy to read it as a resigned "I don't like that it makes sense but it makes sense, and I don't think we have a choice."

Something like it, at any rate.

"(Yeah, okay, you can keep watch over/hold onto my precious thing/love/treasure for a bit I guess.)" Gamzee shrugged, looked up at John casually, though the pulse of dark intent under the surface was anything but. He dies/hurt/sad=you die/pain/die.

John snorted, put a hand on his hip. Yeah, whatever, you don't need to tell me.

"So can I tell Gramps it's handled or what?" Roxy asked from the door.

"Yeah, yeah, he agrees. Karkat stays, Gamzee goes and takes over the ship with his superior nobleness and majesty, etcetera etcetera."

Roxy snickered. "You say that like it's gonna be easy."

John sobered up. Yeah, it wasn't going to be. Gamzee would be so fucked if anyone suspected him of being in cahoots with the aliens he was supposed to war against. And infiltrating like that, John wasn't an expert on things but he kind of assumed you had to be at least mildly in control of your emotions so you could mislead people, and... well.

Gamzee snorted under his breath. Still no words, but a feeling of... confidence, of who cares.

He wasn't going to get it done like Karkat would have done it, but Karkat was much too nice about way too many people as it was. Might make a guy a bit jealous, even...

John shuddered. Gamzee gave him a genial smile, and plucked the headset off the top of his head. Karkat had snatched it from his hand and jammed it back onto his own skull in the next second.

Are you okay how many pieces are your brain meats in you daft fucking bastard he's a destructive telepath/mindfucker you gave him the keys to your house and a sledgehammer!

John waved it off. I'm good, I'm good. No damage just creepy. We got an understanding. Ready to get back to the brass and start up the game all over again?
Of fucking course not but when has that ever meant I didn't have to. That stunt ruined my momentum. "(Let's get this over with. I'm so tired I could sleep for a week. This day lasted a year, I swear on my heaving ballsack.)"

John snorted. Thanks for the imagery buddy. Wait I never saw a -- augh augh --

Wait what did you think that translated as JOHN NO. NO, JOHN.

John burst out laughing.

"Oookay, bro," Roxy said. When he looked over his shoulder, still snickering, she pinched her lips and shook her head, and shot Gamzee and Karkat a look.

"(The fuck is wrong with that space monkey now,)" Gamzee said to her, eyeing John sideways.

Roxy shrugged. "No idea! He's always like that."

John thought about being indignant for all of one second, and then thought of how Roxy and Gamzee couldn't understand one word from each other, and still managed to have a conversation, and didn't even know it.

It's not that funny, Karkat said, longsuffering, but he was wrong.

--

General Gravier was the first one to come back in, which didn't surprise either John or Karkat. She was also giving them all a pretty stern glare. Once again, not a surprise. John went to attention. Karkat imitated him. Gamzee didn't stand, but he condescended to nod a greeting.

She stared at them all in turn for a few seconds before she told Gamzee, sternly, "Are you done?"


Tell her it won't happen again, Karkat told him -- no, don't apologize! (weak admitting sorry you win we will submit, we lost enough face damn it--)

John paused, mouth open, closed it with a little frown, cut Karkat a quick look. Uh yeah but he really did fuck up and it kinda does deserve an apology? What do I know personally I'd say sorry it doesn't cost that much.

No! We're in a weak enough position and we're already going to have to give on me staying behind --

Schneeman tapped the general's shoulder to get her to step aside, walked into the room casually. "Another private conversation, Warhammer?"

John reddened a little. "No, my apologies, we're just having another culture clash. They say it will not happen again," he added -- better late than never.

Schneeman sat at her previous spot, off to the side. "Culture clash about?"

"Uh." Shit should I tell her?

Uhh fuck fuck I don't know goddamn it this is already an imperial mess--
"Etiquette, ma'am." When all else failed... He tried on a disarming smile. "I'm not all that knowledgeable about human diplomacy, so I'm not the best advisor for this."

Gravier's scowl deepened. Schneeman lifted a finger at her -- one minute please -- without looking her way.

"Does the aliens' diplomacy often contain... let's say, literal tables flipped?"

Karkat coughed. "Unn. Yes?" The humans had really been very calm, he thought. (scared/impressed? No wrong aliens didn't--)

"Apparently, people losing their tempers like Makara aren't rare? It's cultural, I think -- I mean, it's not that they're faking being angry, they just..."

"Aren't expected to restrain themselves?" she asked. John nodded. She gave a thoughtful hum. "Are expected to act on their threats?"

"Uh--"

She smiled at Gamzee, faint, mouth closed. The next second a gleaming knife thudded home in the back of Gamzee's chair, a bare half-inch off his shoulder.

Holy shit. John had never seen anyone not altered move that fast. Maybe Bro Strider. He stared at the vibrating knife dumbly, wondering where she'd even taken it out from.

"Mrs. Schneeman!" Gravier barked. Schneeman reclined in her chair, watching with patient interest as Gamzee tugged the knife out and turned it over in his fingers. Another knife gleamed from her sleeve.

"Do not threaten us again," she said, calm and almost uncaring. "I personally will not threaten you twice."

Gamzee chuckled, nodded. He flicked the knife over his fingers and handed it off to Karkat, who started mentally swearing up a storm.

*Hand it back trust-respect? (but I don't) Keep it why so stupid my weapon now??(it's just a little knife anyway) John what do your people do I need to know --*

The funniest unfunny thing was that he really expected the situation with weapons thrown as threat displays to be common enough to have protocol mapped out. "Do you want it back, ma'am?" John asked politely as the rest of the party started cautiously making their way in. Schneeman shrugged.

"Keep it. I have plenty." She gave Karkat a slow, amused smile. "If you're not to be a prisoner any longer, after all..."

Wow um. Yeah, so if Karkat were a dog his tail would have been going at a mile a minute. A weapon! For him! Not weaponless anymore and shit he didn't have a sheath and this knife didn't even fold or anything where was he supposed to put it -- his weapon! His! He wasn't really a specialist in small straight blades but -- um. Yeah. Okay.

"Thank you," Karkat said gravely, and slipped the slender little knife into his back pocket for lack of a better place.

HS: That woman.
HS: He's happy about it isn't he. Sigh.
JH: um. yeah, sorry.  
HS: Later remind him to be careful around her she wasn't doing it to be nice.  
JH: he says "of course i know she's just trying to make me feel indebted but it's still mine hah."  
JH: also "um don't tell him that" :p  
JH: also "can you tell him to tell them to get moving, gamzee's transport will leave at this rate but it'll sound bad from you."  
HS: Heh!  
"Mr. Makara's transport will leave him stranded if we delay much longer," Harley said once everyone had sat back down and the room was packed with three times as much security. "To summarize -- he will go back and assume control of the home ship. Rendezvous in -- when will it be safe for you?"

Gamzee and Karkat exchanged a few words. "Four days," Karkat said.

"Four?" Gravier replied, one eyebrow arched. "To gain control of the whole ship?"

"When more than four, he is dead before that."

"That should roughly coincide with another wave of attacks, if we've got the timing right," Deng said, thoughtful. "How will you message us?"

"He take -- our people? My -- like Zhann and Rokshi are. They come with me -- rrh. With him."

"Allies?" John suggested. "Friends?"

"Yes, those. Takes those. Comes to here with them. No one to say he talks not killed you." (That'll be what five people tops fill the ranks with strangers kill them when they see no I don't want that trapping-tricking my people--) "(John, translate -- there will likely be Empire loyalists in the group anyway, you'll need to be ready to catch and imprison them. I want to discuss the terms of any such imprisonment in the next three days.)"

John relayed. Graver nodded impatiently. "That'll be with someone else. Not my purview. But very well, I can agree to a discussion. Anything else?"

Karkat and Gamzee whispered to each other once again. "(Okay, what else. If I'm staying--)"

"(Don't see why you fucking should--)"

"(Gamzee. You know why.)" He flicked John a translate as he turned to the rest of the room. "(I will stay here because it makes more sense for the mission. I will not stay as a prisoner. I want this clear.)"

Gravier waved her hand. "Yes. Next?"

What else did he want, if he couldn't have his entire freedom yet... "(Unrestricted access to my mech.)"

"With the understanding that you may not wander off at any time and ruin your cover."

Karkat made a quiet snorting noise. "I am not stupid. Yes. (Urgh, what else -- John don't translate that. Any suggestions?)"

_Uh, sorry, I'm drawing a blank._
Gamzee nudged Karkat with his elbow. "(Hey. How 'bout making them stop making you sleep in that orgy room, too?)"

"(Oh hellfuck I'd almost managed to scour that one out of my brain.)"

John tried not to groan. "And Karkat wants a room of his own." Not a whole house?

Where the fuck would you assholes get it/still need want to be close to you (nowhere else safe trusted.)
I need to ask for reasonable things.

John tried not to smile outwardly. (Yes! not leaving!!) Heh yeah I guess.

We'll negotiate for a whole house later gotta tempt them more before they'll shell out the big bucks.
Also I'm not gonna know how to cook your foods yet might as well keep you.

Pffhehe.

Gravier frowned, looked at Harley. "Well. You can leave Skaialabs' custody if you'd rather, but if not..."

Harley shook his head. "No, it's fine, we always planned to expand the house and never got around to it, this'll be a good excuse to speed it up. I'll see to it."

... was that a chat room blinking in the corner of John's glasses. Oh ho...?

HS: Paul my apologies you will have to cede your room during construction.
PL: Very well. I will camp out in the living room.
JN: Don't be silly, Dad. Your back will not handle this tomfoolery with much grace!
JN: I'm sure the good Doctor won't begrudge you some space in her own room.
PL: I BEG YOUR PARDON, YOUNG LADY.
PL: THAT SUGGESTION IS ENTIRELY IMPROPER.
JH: aahahahahaha. X'D
RX: LMFAO
JH: yeah, uh. i know we weren't supposed to know...
JN: Stability and all that...
JH: blahblah the children must know without a doubt that they come first...
RX: alas!! we complefuckely know. ':33
RM: LMFAO IM PISSING
PL: *ROMY*.
RM: i so *told u*
BR: No, no, I understand him fully. Living in sin is indeed a terribly immoral example to give children.
BR: You should make a honest woman out of her, P-man.
RX: *rosie voice* if tahts even possibel u.u~
PL: **MR. STRIDER**.
PL: Roxy!
RM: hahahahhh
RM: ofc u can room w/ me u big goober <3
RM: now howzabout we stop distracting em n shit
JH: whooooops br. XD

Are you done you fluttery-brained twit.

(Hey!) Yeah sorry. He sneaked Roxy and Grandpa Harley a look; they were both repressing smiles.
The rest of the room looked a little less impressed. The conversation hadn't taken long, objectively --
brain-typing and reading were faster than words -- but it had to be obvious to them that it had
happened.

Like the lot of them weren't keeping their superiors updated in real time as well. John bet they were
just jealous that Skaialabs wasn't comprised of dried-out unfunny husks.

(Jesus stop sounding like Gamzee waugh sorrong.)

"Mister Egbert?" Colonel Deng said pointedly, making John feel like he'd missed something, even
though he didn't think he had.

It was probably just because they assumed he was talking to Karkat.

"Yes?" he asked, smiling politely, and thinking how much he disliked that these people thought they
had a right to every single thing that went through his and Karkat's heads.

Oh. Oh, hey!

Karkat smiled inside John's head. Yeah, okay, that's a good thing to demand. I knew you had more
uses than your mouth and decorative abilities.

John tried not to smile back. So compromised haha wow. "And of course," they said together, "after
this point all exchange of information must be free and agreed upon. No more asking questions and
expecting John -- that's me -- to spy on the answers. So in effect, so long as lives weren't at stake I
would be sworn to secrecy until otherwise given permission by Corporal Vantas."

"Preposterous!" Deng said, and hit the table with his fist. Karkat's hand flew to his back pocket.

No hey it's fine just posturing.

"And you! How can you be so fine with it!" He glared at John, nostrils flaring, scar going pale with
anger. "Siding with an alien!"

"Or maybe I'm in his head and I have all the info I need to judge whether other people need to
know, and I've been making life or death calls with the planet at stake since I was fourteen years
old." He crossed his arms. "Corporal Vantas is not requesting complete radio silence. He wants
privacy. Being inside someone's head, it's a lot more invasive than even spy bugs. You can't treat a
potential ally that way."

Karkat was watching Gravier. She didn't say anything -- not to agree with him, but not to stop Deng
either. No doubt she wouldn't mind if he kept pushing.

Beside him, Karkat sighed quietly, and set his horns forward.

"Okay. We are going away."

He got up from his seat; Gamzsee followed a beat behind, eyebrows up in interest and a hint of relief.

"--What?"

"I can not trust Zhann. You do not let Zhann be like I can trust him. So I can not trust you. Talk is
over. We go. We fight alone, we die, they come here, you die."

He gave Hass a respectful nod, pushed his chair back under the table, and turned to leave. Only John
knew how hard his heart beat in his throat, how sick with nerves he felt.
One step toward the door, two steps --

"Sit back down," Gravier said, and lifted a hand to cut off Deng's protests. "Deal."

"(Awesome.)" Simmering down, Karkat looked up at Gamzee. "(Talks maybe not over after all. We stay?)"

Gamzee chuckled down at him. "(Bro, you been making the calls from the very start like the littlest prince/noble/(waterbreather??) ever, why are you even asking me now.)"

"(... Because I'm not totally devoid of -- oh, fuck you. You love it when I boss you around, you're just as depraved as I am.)"

"(Hubba hubba.)"

Oh Jesus buttlord on a tricycle. Hey Karkat, I'm still listening by the way in case you forgot. How am I supposed to forget you voyeur it's a perverts party in here we might as well have an orgy at this rate shit look at our alien romanceloveintimate rituals.

Oh god. Yeah uh. John needed to... not think about that.

Snorting, Karkat pulled out his chair and sat back down, looked at the people seated around the table in turn, eyes flinty and jaw set. "Good. (Let's not waste anymore time. Is there anything left to discuss?)"

A series of glances, shrugs, headshakes.

"(Alright, then--)"

"(I got one need,)" Gamzee said, and John translated awkwardly, because it was one thing to understand him when he didn't think about it and it was already formatted by Karkat's thought patterns, but when he was trying to word them suddenly the sentences were even harder to make right.

"--Yes?"

"(Need proof I came here/planetside/dirtball and got my revenge, yeah?)" Gamzee stretched his legs under the table casually, rounded his back. "(Need proof I'm a badder son of a bitch than any of the warriors/soldiers they've got back at the home ship.)"

"... Yes?"

"(So I need to be doing what none of 'em managed to do.)" He turned to John, smiled lazily. "(Your mech is already fucked anyway, right?)"

--

It was even colder outside after spending so long in the nice climate-controlled building. John narrowed his eyes to slits to keep the cold air out of them as the rappelling line pulled him alongside Warhammer's bumpy chest. It wasn't a comfortable ride; usually you were supposed to use the line when the mech was standing and you could swing freely. He was getting dragged over every single bit of plating and bolts.

The drawbridge door still hung open. He tested it with one foot, his other leg wound around the line, then hopped inside the cockpit proper as lightly as he could. The door creaked under his weight.
Behind him, all the way behind Cancer, Karkat was saying goodbye. John was sure there were security cameras all over the place now and everyone would be able to see the scene from a dozen angles, but he, personally, had things to do in here. Like getting back the handgun Jake had insisted he stash in the overhead compartment, which the aliens would not get to study. Or his -- okay, no, he should probably leave his snacks, for more authenticity. The empty wrappers. Stuff.

John sat down in the pilot's seat, huddled inside the too-large jacket one of the Marines had lent him to put over his flight suit and chafed his legs together. Cold as balls.

He turned the main computer on. Ought to send a last, thorough status report back home, for study.

Yeah.

Jesus, he was so tired. Such a stupidly long day. Stress everywhere. He wanted to sleep for twelve hours, and then he wanted to go to the beach and roll around in sunlight and sand, and maybe swim.

Preferably with a ranty, horned grump to laugh with, laugh at.

But... yeah.

"Okay!" he said to no one, and straightened his spine, lips pinched. Resolve! He'd brood later. Time to add some convincing little details to the trick. Grimacing, he got a small monofilament knife out of the compartment, keyed his nanites to slow down for two minutes or there would be nothing to show for it, and... Urgh, he'd been hurt worse in training, but doing it to himself, deliberately, that made him a bit queasy. He sliced the top of his forearm open, the cut so fine it might have stayed sealed on its own if he didn't move until the nanites closed it again.

He bothered the wound until a few drops of blood pearled out, and smeared it artistically on the controls, and on the seat beside him. Where a desperate pilot might have tried to grab as he was dragged out of the cockpit.

He pocketed the knife and used his superior strength to twist the harness attachment points open -- a little more -- a little more, until, whoops, a part broke off into his hand. Oh well, more verisimilitude couldn't hurt.

Outside of the cockpit the light changed, and he blinked dumbly for a second before he was rushing out onto the drawbridge door.

Capricorn was uncoiling, standing up. Good. It had stopped bleeding some time ago -- the cold helped, Karkat had told him, constricting blood vessels; it wouldn't die yet after all.

In its fore hand it carried both Gamzee and Karkat, Karkat still talking earnestly up at him, a hand on his stringy biceps.

"Hey!" John yelled as the taller alien suddenly wrapped his arms around Karkat's flailing form and fell backwards into his cockpit.

The strange slit swallowed them without a single splash, and they were gone from view. John threw himself back into his seat, keyed a sequence to restart the reactor. No, no, too long, so many error messages, what do you mean safety override?!

"He's not lifting off!" Jade yelled from Remington a too-long minute later. John started breathing again.

Capricorn wasn't really moving, apart from a slow swaying motion on its tail that might have been
involuntary, as it had no solid legs to keep a firm stance, just that long coil of muscles around its spine. No plasma wings, no tensing to prepare for liftoff...

"What the hell is he playing at?!" John growled, and forced his hand to leave useless controls to rake through his hair. It wasn't as soothing as he'd hoped.

Gamzee wasn't leaving, at least. He wasn't saying fuck the plan and blasting off. For a minute John had had no trouble believing he was.

Karkat wouldn't want that, but if Gamzee thought he was saving him...

If John thought he'd be saving him, he wasn't sure he wouldn't kidnap Karkat for his own good, too. But -- damn it.

He waited, perched in the doorway of his dead mech, shoulders tense and jaw clenched. He could see Flintlock and Molotov hovering a little way back, ready to intercept, except they'd said Gamzee and Karkat could give up on the alliance and leave, except that had been before everyone agreed on terms and promised help, so he had no idea what the higher-ups would order at this point in time, if they'd go back on their word as well and try to take them both captive or what.

What were the two of them even doing in there?! (Telepathy. Merging. *Such kinky fun*, he remembered the girl with the cat ear horns saying in Karkat's memories. Because they loved each other, had missed each other, because it was intimate it was special *it was John's--*)

Fuck.

Fuck. What was wrong with him.

He fell into a crouch, huddled there for warmth (he told himself for warmth,) still staring at Capricorn's black shape swaying faintly past Cancer's bowed head.

It had to be the telepathy. He was so -- so attached it was kind of ridiculous. The sense of closeness he felt was artificially induced, he knew that -- they both did -- but...

Whether you started a baby through the old so-called natural way or the newfangled gametes in a test tube way, it still ended up a real person in the end. His artificially induced conception hadn't made John into a soldier-bot only mimicking personhood, or if it did the end result fooled even him and therefore the difference it made wasn't even worth talking about.

It didn't matter why John was getting attached so hard to someone he'd known less than two months, someone who should have been an enemy, someone who didn't even want to be there and would leave the second he could and not miss the place.

It didn't matter why he was attached. He was. It hurt.

"He's not yours," he told himself, muttered in the cold air, into his knees. "He's not yours, you stupid jerk, you're being stupid and a huge assbutt and you need to stop it. He'll really hate you otherwise."

Capricorn's chest plate cracked open with a slick, dark violet slice, and Karkat fell out all wet and landed on his ass in the biomech's palm. John jumped to his feet and grabbed the rappelling line. He was on Warhammer's lap in a second, handgun and knife clunking together in his pocket.

(Had he disarmed the -- yeah, he had, okay, good, he wasn't going to stop for it.) He pressed a hand against his pocket to keep the contents from flapping around and hopped off and on the ground.
"Karkat!"

Karkat blinked at him over the edge of Capricorn's hand. His hair was stuck all over his face from being pushed backwards through the opening, glued to his forehead, licking across his cheeks. His fatigues were gross. John stood right next to the big black-shelled hand and held out his own hands for support.

"You okay?"

Karkat gave him a bit of a weird look, but grabbed his hand to haul himself over Capricorn's thumb. "... Yes?"

He thumped to the ground, and then he didn't want to meet John's eyes anymore; he cleared his throat, shrugged stiffly. His irises were doing that thing where they went huge enough to start covering up the yellow parts, pupils a small dot of black in a sea of red.

"Good. Uh. Cold. Yes. Not good, I have cold. ... Touch? Fuck."

"Huh? Oh -- feel," John said. "You feel cold. Or you are cold, that's correct too. Have a cold is something else. But it's good that you're good!"

He swallowed. A knot was stuck in his throat.

"Apart from the... being cold thing. That's not so good. I guess we should go in."

"No," Karkat said quietly, and shook his head without looking up. "I want look."

"Oh." Oh. "Okay."

Well.

"Let's go there? So he has space to move." He produced a smile somehow. "He'll be afraid to step on you."

"... Okay."

He led him along the hangar, back behind Warhammer. Karkat walked huddled, neck craned to watch behind him, paid hardly any attention to where John was guiding him.

Capricorn lifted off slowly, a few cracks in its shell oozing weakly as it moved. John tugged Karkat past the corner, so they'd have space to retreat; he leaned against the wall to keep as much out of the way as he could, gently tugged Karkat backward until he did the same. From the other side, a couple of hovering troop transports came at Warhammer with electromagnetic clamps. The frame sang with the strain. John didn't want to think about how much worse it would go under Earth's gravity.

Even the Moon's gravity was too high for Capricorn's arms to grab on and lift, anyways. It had a hole straight through one of its shoulders and the other shoulder blade armor was shattered to hell and back and the bone underneath probably busted just as badly. The secondary pair of arms was too small to get a good grip around Warhammer's chest, even if it had been strong enough to lift all those tons of metal.

If it got Warhammer by the arms they would probably break off.

His mech. Blurgh. He knew it'd been fucked even before the battle, but it still ached.

Capricorn turned to look down straight at them. Karkat made a little noise in his throat that John
wanted not to have heard. John stared up at the opening in the crater's canopy, watched his mech be dragged through, Capricorn's sinuous body following it. Flintlock and Remington went last, and the canopy closed back up behind them, a whiteish film over the night sky. An Earth in shadows took up a whole corner of the sky.

John kept watching the sky. If he looked at Karkat right now he'd have to notice Karkat was crying.

"John?"

John pushed away from the wall, stood between Karkat and the door that had just opened. His sister came out. She was carrying something -- a blanket?

"Is there a reason why you're not coming in?" she asked, and he hugged her, blanket and all.

She sounded so normal.

"--John?"

"Shut up, I'm glad you're okay," he muttered into her shoulder, and hugged her harder.

Jane sighed quietly in his ear and freed an arm to hug him back. "Okay might be a bit much, but I'm alright."

"Isn't alright better than okay? Like alright is everything's good, and okay is just... okay? That's not super logical."

She jiggled her shoulder under his face. Ow. "Don't be a brat, you know what I meant. Say, is Karkat--"

"Mnrgh." He turned her around some so he could be sure she couldn't see Karkat. The last thing Karkat would want was for more people to see him crying.

John could sort of hear him breathing a bit ragged back there. He hugged his sister tighter.

"--Oof. John, ribs. John. I need to deliver this blanket. Karkat must be freezing."

The hug had definitely passed 'relieved to see you' a while back and entered 'awkward feelings of awkwardness all over the place' territory. "Leave him alone a bit," John complained, and hung on just to be annoying.

"I'm good," Karkat said. His voice was a little rough. John disentangled from Jane to look at him, found him half turned away, pointedly looking in the other direction. Did he still look too teary...?

"Are you, really?" Jane countered. "Because if you plan on staying outside when you're all wet you will dang well take this blanket and enjoy it. Are you trying to get sick?"

Karkat finally turned to face the two of them. He was frowning at Jane a bit, but underneath that he looked exhausted, the shadows under his eyes deeper, more bruised. His eyes were still a little wet; John knew when Jane noticed, because she softened all at once.

"I'm good," he repeated with his raspy voice, all low and flat, toneless. She stepped forward and placed a cautious hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Jane said, awkward-gentle. Karkat stared at her. "He seemed like a very strong gentleman, very resourceful -- he got all the way to here, didn't he?"
"... Mnh." Karkat broke eye contact, bowed his head.

"Do you, um. Would you happen to... want a, that is, would it make you feel better if...?"

Oh, damn it. Just watching Jane being so flustered made him feel embarrassed by proxy. John stepped in with determination, knowing Karkat would probably call them perverts over it, and herded Jane closer.

"Hug?" he said, and opened his arms in invitation. Jane didn't need more prompting to open hers, mirroring him, her face all full of hesitation (she'd never been close to Karkat, she was wary of him and aliens in general and--) and determination (by God, someone was feeling lonely and sad in her presence and she was going to make it right.)

He loved his sister so, so much. The thought made him grin, wide and bright, engaging. Karkat was staring at the two of them in shock, forgetting he had tear tracks to hide.

"You --"

"Yes?"

"You are -- you --"

With a harrumph, Jane unfolded the blanket and stepped right in to drape it over his shoulders. "There." She tucked it in. "Nothing wrong with not wanting hugs! Never was very huggy myself, I don't rightly know where John gets it from, it's just from time to time they feel nice but of course they have to come from the right person and neither of us are that right person right now, I understand that--"

Wrapped up like a burrito, Karkat let out a sudden chuckle. He looked as surprised about it as the two of them, mouth all soft and unsure, hesitating at the edge of a smile. John moved closer to hold his shoulder and then he wasn't too sure who moved closer to who first but a hug definitely ended up happening.

Mostly from Jane and him, since Karkat's arms were all caught in the blanket, but he leaned into them with a shuddery sigh for a whole two seconds before he groaned.

"Yeah, buddy?"

"This is a ton bad. Three ton."

"Nonsense!" Jane said fussily. "Friends do things like this all the time, and if you are our ally you can definitely apply to become a friend."

She let go, stepped back. John was a little sad, because it meant he had to let go as well now. Karkat was starting to look kind of flustered, though, so this was probably good.

Okay, yes, embarrassing. John herded the two of them inside briskly. "Come on! Karkat, you need to shower and warm up and change clothes, again, you really need to stop getting into strange cockpits like that! I hope someone thought of bringing you fresh clothes, seriously you're hard on them."

Karkat rattle-buzzed an annoyed sound. "Shower again? Again, again, rrghkh't."

John waved absently at the man waiting to escort them to the troop transport as he herded Karkat past him. "Fifteen minutes, Sergeant! Karkat, you're all gross, would you rather stay like that?"
Jane cleared her throat. "Ah, right -- Karkat, we planned on getting me to transport your mech to Tycho base, and then we would take the shuttle -- the big shuttle, for mechs -- but would you perchance rather pilot your mech yourself? Uh, do you understand the words--"

Karkat stopped in the middle of the glass-walled corridor to look at her. "You take my mech, to...?"

"Where Dirk and Dave and Rose are. Then we go down and home in the big ship. Do you want to take your mech yourself? You'd have to shower at the other base, though."

John could see conflict all over his face, in the way his brows twisted, how little pointy teeth started nipping at his lower lip.

"... Take my mech home, I can get in it there, yes. They say yes."

"That's the plan."

He slumped, freed a hand from the blanket to scratch at his drying hair. "I don't want naked in where I go again. New here, shower again! Fuck no."

Jane repressed a smile. John didn't bother. "Hehe, it's like you're marking your territory. This place has seen my butt! Now it's mine."

Karkat narrowed his eyes at him. John grinned wider.

"Well, you could also not shower, but eww."

"How did you do it before, anyway?" Jane asked, mouth pursed doubtfully.

"Home ship? Uhn." Karkat's brows drew in as he hunted for words. "When it makes no more water, makes little bit." He scratched his skull again to demonstrate; a few purplish flakes fell off. "Good clothes for mech, no eww on clothes. I shower on face and hand, not more."

Sometimes not even that much, if John got his vaguely guilty look right, but he wasn't going to say anything; before Karkat had benched him John had been known to skip showering on downtime days. If he didn't have to be locked in a cockpit with his own sweat for hours on end, it didn't hurt and... okay so he was a teenage boy and his father was very disappointed in him for that but seriously now, washing every single day when he wasn't working hard wasn't exactly super-necessary, right? Right.

On the other hand he didn't wallow in slime either. "... That still sounds gross to me, sorry."

Karkat glowered. "You're gross."

Hehe. "No, you."

Karkat opened his mouth to no doubt snap back a devastating 'no, YOU', then closed it, turned to Jane who was watching and rolling her eyes a little, and said conversationally, "I want a lot big lots of words to say how big stupid Zhann. All the words. He tapped his chest, shook his head. "It hurt in my here I can't say the stupid."

Jane chortled in her hand. John pouted.

"I'll teach you more words," she promised. "Now go shower already, shoo."

"Yes, ma'am," Karkat said smartly, and disappeared into the locker room.
Jane left to get Poseidon, and then John was standing guard alone in the corridor. It was a little after eleven at night. This morning he'd been lazing about on house arrest, or as good as, this afternoon they'd crashed an international conference, this evening he'd had a space battle, and a little more high-stakes diplomacy on top. He felt ready to sleep for about a century, give or take a decade.

They were safe right now, it was all pretty much over but for the trip home, and the hangar had a squad of Marines hanging out in it but they were on the other side of the glass, so if he meditated with his eyes closed no one would notice a thing.

When Karkat came back out John jerked awake and almost slipped sideways down the wall.

"Zhann, what the fuck." Karkat rolled his eyes at him, tired enough that it came off as good-natured. He was carrying the slimed-up blanket rolled up under his arm. "Sleep here, no, stupid."

"I wasn't sleeping!" John protested, and tugged on the corner of the blanket. "Why are you even taking that with you?"

A shrug. "I give Doctor Lluond, she needle it not me." John spluttered, grinned. Karkat gave him a little smirk.

Still laughing, John threw an arm around his neck, and then remembered Karkat got twitchy with too much physical affection -- only this time around instead of growling at him he just glanced at the Marines and lowered his voice and went, "Also Doctor here don't have it. They ask please can I needle it, it's good. Strong."

It took John a second to get his brain back in gear. The slime was from Capricorn, the biomechs were genetically attuned to their pilot's blood color, and Gamzee was a color they'd never seen before and weren't likely to see again anytime soon. "Oh, huh. Incentive to play nice. Wow. You think of everything, bud."

"Mm."

John almost asked if that was okay, using something that would effectively allow them to study his lover as a tool to nudge politicians into compliance, and then didn't. Karkat hadn't made this decision blindly, or easily.

He let John lean on him (leaned on him right back) until they had to climb into the troop transport and headed back to Earth.
"What did we used to put over there, again? There has to have been something..."

One bed up, Jake mumbled something unintelligible into his pillow, and failed to offer any insight. John furrowed his brows, deep in thought.

The empty space at the foot of his bed kept being empty and oddly pointless.

"I mean, we're squeezed like a bunch of sardines in a single-fish cockpit in here, there wouldn't have been just some random space, right?"

"Jus' put a chair in it," Jake advised. John considered it.

"But how would you sit on it, though? And you'd be on the short side of the desk, too; that's kind of weird, isn't it?"

"Mnhffhh. Jooohn..."

John looked up at the slats of Jake's bed, then decided it wasn't the best way to have a conversation. He leaned his upper body out and craned his neck. "Yes?"

"I understand you're all out of sorts," the traitor cousinadclone said. John spluttered. Jake kept going, vaguely grumpy. "And I would love to hash things out with you, such as how to decorate our goshdarned bedroom. But you'll forgive me if I remind you it's eight in the friggin' morning."

John spluttered. "But you were awake!"

"Because you keep tossin' n' turning! Cripes. Please can you go play in the living room?"

Huffing in outrage at this totally unfair attack on his good faith, John got up and left the room. Bluh. He supposed he should go shower now. Or maybe breakfast first, and then shower. Or maybe he'd skip the shower today. It wasn't like he had gotten dirty or sweaty since yesterday. He was still grounded; his replacement mech wouldn't be ready for...

For a while. Yeah.

He trudged down the stairs; the living room was empty. Bluh. Breakfast was so boring alone.

He should eat anyway, he supposed. He started cooking.

"Mrow?"

John craned his head. The cat had appeared on the counter, just behind him. Yay, company. "Oh, hey, Mutie. You agree, right, it's not cool to eat alone?"

"Myaoow."

Cruelly bored with him already, Mutie started wandering off. John bribed him to hang out with bacon.

"Yeah, you're not my first choice of company either, you selfish thing."
He wasn't the one who kept track of their food, but while Mutie delicately ate his bacon piece, John went to top off Mutie's and Jaspers' bowls anyway, and then Bec's while he was at it, making sure to rattle the boxes. Maybe it'd make the other two furry nuisances mysteriously appear.

It didn't, and now Mutie was washing his butthole on the counter and paying John zero attention. "Okay, how am I supposed to pretend you're actually listening?" John complained half-heartedly.

Slump. Look at my woe, oozing all over the dinner table in purest teenage tradition. What was he even supposed to do with his day? Karkat would decide once he woke up, but no doubt it would only involve bringing John around as a bodyguard-slash-translating machine. Yesterday had been busy as hell that way, and today would probably be worse on account of now more people would be ready to talk to him.

Jake was wrong, though; John was not out of sorts. It was just weird, was all, to drift through the house alone and pointless while everyone else was out doing their own thing -- and it was boring to know he had nothing to get ready for, not really. He'd been in a space battle two days ago, finally -- just in time to basically be told 'haha! and now you go right back to being grounded indefinitely.'

Yeah. Boredom and pointlessness. That was all.

...That was plenty!

"What do you think, cat? Should I, um, catch up on my reading...? Hah. No. Movie? I haven't watched a movie since Karkat, wow, it's been like two months."

Sitting around passively staring at a screen sounded like a good way for him to end up throwing things and shouting for no reason. Bluuuurgh.

... Training?

JH: broooooo can i come and train with you?
BR: Huh. You wake up with a taste for pain today?
JH: i woke up with a taste of if i don't do something i will probably explode.
JH: i am your masochistic whipping boy today. spank me into shape oh my god please. i will beg.
JH: bro?
JH: mr strideeeeeeeeeeer, siiiiiiiiiiiiiir!! :(((((
BR: This is the most fucking wrong discussion I have ever had with you and we're barely six lines in.
JH: what did i say?? like it's even a secret you live to torture us!
BR: Yeeeelah, I'm forwarding this convo to Dirk. If he sees your face and starts laughing so hard he needs to curl up in a corner and hide, here's your clue as to why.
JH: okay, it really isn't cool of you not to explain!
BR: If I explain, your pater will somehow find out and hunt me down with murder aforethought.
JH: ...
JH: did it sound like i was coming on to you or
JH: oh my god YOU KNOW I DIDN'T MEAN IT LIKE THAT!!!
JH: you're kind of an asshole, you know!
BR: It's only fitting revenge for the *oh dear lord wrong no stop* you just inflicted on me.
JH: you'd have to be a real perv to take SM jokes as actual come ons, i mean, seriously!
BR: I swear if you make me bite my tongue any harder I will deserve to be nominated for sainthood.
BR: Considering what I'm holding back, that's really impressive.

John spluttered. The cat side-eyed him.
BR: Change of topic. Nothing to do?
BR: Karkat's packages just got here with the mail chopper. Come down to the front door and get them, will you?

Oh thank God. John jumped to his feet and power-walked to the door.

JH: will do!!
JH: why can't you bring them up, though?
BR: Deliveryman's an assturd.
BR: I distract him, you snatch up the shit and run.
JH: pff. sure thing.

When John got to the last landing he wasn't sure if he was very surprised to see Bro standing in the doorway, a shoulder casually pressed against the frame, blocking Jack Noir's way in, in case the man would have wanted to come in for some reason.

There were indeed packages on the front step, but they were between the two men. John wasn't too sure how literally he should take the order to grab them and run.

"Morning, kid. Where's your other half?"

"I dunno, he's probably still in bed," John grumped as he made his way to the door. "--And stop making it sound like we're married, okay, it's a really lame joke, Dave was making it three weeks ago already, you should be ashamed."

Noir was staring at him weird. John frowned back.

"What?"

"Nothing. What are you doing here?"

John shrugged. "Taking Karkat's things up to him? What are you still doing here, do you need a signature on delivery or what?"

"Careful with that mouth, kid," the man drawled, eyes narrowing in lazy threat.

John snorted quietly and leaned out of the door to pick up the packages. One of them was taller than he was, narrow and flat -- not heavy at all, but awkward to juggle with the rest.

"Tell Karkat to bring me any bugs he finds in there, yeah?" Bro said, thumbs tucked negligently in his pockets and still staring at Noir through his shades.

"We scanned for that shit already," Noir replied, annoyed.

"Yeah, for everything except the ones you put in yourself, innit?"

They were barely paying him any attention. John wondered if they'd start fighting the second he left, and then wondered if he really wanted or needed to stop them. They were grown men and professionals, if they wanted to beat each other up on their off time he was sure it wouldn't get to the point where either of them needed a hospital.

He had the feeling it had been brewing for a while, at any rate. If he stayed to cockblock them fighting he'd probably only delay it.

"Okay, well," he said loudly as he juggled the packages around until he had them in a solid grip,
"Karkat will find any you guys have missed in a hot minute anyway. I'll just get going then? Bye, have fun, don't break anything--"

"Get the hell out of here," Strider growled tiredly at him. Snorting, John did.

He climbed the stairs two by two, a mess of smaller packages under one arm and the long flat one under the other. He and Karkat had spent an hour yesterday making a list and placing this order; Karkat would want his things straight away, John was sure. Especially since there were some Karkat should be taught how to use before they had to go out and meet people.

John kept going straight instead of turning into the living room, climbed his way up to the Doc and Dad's quarters. Separate quarters.

Previously separate quarters. If he tiptoed while passing Romy Lalonde's bedroom it was totally out of respect for her potential sleepiness and not at all because he wanted to never get visual proof of his dad exiting it.

(No, seriously, them getting together was cute and a great thing to tease them about, but actual confirmation of bedroom shenanigans was major Do Not Want territory.)

At the end of that corridor was his dad's ex-bedroom, now Karkat's, and it was weird as hell that he wasn't even in the same section of the house anymore, that he would open a different front door and everything. Even his windows didn't look in the same direction.

John eyed the palm lock at the door dubiously, and kicked at the bottom lightly as he shuffled things around to free a hand.

"Karkat? Karkat, I've got things for you, you gotta get up now!"

No answer. Huh. He managed to swipe a palm on the lock and -- bingo, his handprint still opened it.

The room was dark, blinds closed tight, though he could still see the emptiness of it. All the pictures on the walls and most of his dad's furniture had been removed, even the bed -- hah, especially the bed -- and it made the room feel strange, unfamiliar. Especially considering what it had been replaced with.

John propped the long box against the wall right by the door and bent over to place the rest on the floor, for lack of end table or chest of drawers to use instead.

Then Karkat erupted from the bathtub in the corner like a B-movie zombie out of his grave, sitting up so fast that red goo splashed out. Wet hands grabbed the sides and he heaved himself up, and John dropped his armful.

Karkat only stopped moving to stare at him when he was already on his feet, a hand still on the tub's edge to brace, bent forward with his shoulders bulging like he was about to pounce.

"... Huhn. Zhann?"

John straightened up in a hurry. "Haha. Yeah. Sorry I startled you, your packages got here and--"

Karkat loosened all over -- shoulders drooping, head bowing with a sigh -- and he stepped out of the tub, dripping slick cockpit goo all over the floor and all down his body.

He'd slept naked.
Karkat coughed up a handful of gross phlegm into his hand like it was nothing, dropped it back into
the tub (euurgh) then straightened up, casual, unselfconscious -- nothing like the nerves at the start,
showering with all of them. A hand came up to wipe at his eyelids. His hair was glued down but for
a few stubborn tufts, licking down his cheeks and neck, horns showing down to the reddest section.
Chalk-white scars showed up starkly in the darkened room and --

*A bit of a pocket brick wall,* John thought, apropos of nothing, and thought it'd be funny if Karkat
beefed up even more with age. His shoulders were already...

It'd be...

"You're a girl?"

Karkat blinked slowly at him, eyelids all droopy. "Mnh?"

John started to gesture toward his crotch, where the lack of light had *oh god, he hadn't meant to
activate the light optimization setting on his glasses.*

... Yeah, no, there was pretty obviously nothing much there. Or more like -- not quite like a woman's
but --

John tore his eyes away, turned his back on Karkat, his face prickling with sudden, violent heat.

Narrow male hips and strong thighs and a pussy.

"I'm a girl?" Karkat repeated slowly behind him. "Like Zade and Rhoz is girl?" He sounded -- he
sounded half-asleep, he sounded *relaxed.* John had never heard or seen him relaxed. "Big dumb
face-ass. You go in my head, see my head things. You know I'm not a girl. You say that why?"

John laughed, wanted to scream a little instead. Karkat gave a little thoughtful hum (still naked,
still naked at John's back, why wasn't he getting dressed??) and concluded, "Weirdo."

"Hey!" John protested on automatic. "I'm not--"

He choked on his words. His face still felt hot, his throat.

"I just, um. You've seen what we have, and, uh, you don't have it. Is all. And hey, how about you
get cleaned up and dressed and we talk about all the things in those boxes, won't that be awesome,
yeah, totally awesome--"

Karkat made a 'can't hear you, speak louder' questioning noise from the attached bathroom. John
hadn't even noticed him walking away. Gawghrgh.

"Nah, nothing," John said, and kept staring down the door.

Kept trying not to remember in detail what it was that he had seen, but his mind kept coming back to
it, worrying at it. It just... it had been unexpected. Very -- yeah. Very that.

"Zhann."

John flinched around, eyes flicking down Karkat's body fast. Karkat was shirtless, hair wet -- with
water, not slime -- but now wearing jeans. John wasn't sure what he felt. No way to get a better look
but he -- that was fine, he didn't want... He hadn't wanted to know what Karkat was packing but
now he sort of did, damn it! Too much information. But the image wasn't clear and somehow that
made it even worse than knowing nothing at all.
"I want my door don't open," Karkat grumbled half-heartedly, and scratched at a little red fleck on his belly. He looked a little more awake, but barely.

But good, too, not angry with life, not exhausted and frustrated and ready to bite. John tilted his head a little, gave an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry I came in. It's just -- hey! I think some of these are your new clothes." He crouched near the boxes, looked at the labels, shook the boxes a little. "Oh, yeah, this one." He handed it out, smiling a little. "Open it?"

Karkat took it from his hand, brow furrowed faintly, and poised his claws and arched an eyebrow at John.

"Yeah, you can wreck it, it's just cardboard. Go for it, dude."

"Mmkay." Karkat's claws popped in and he started tearing methodically at the side of the box. John got back up.

As a sort-of ambassador, Karkat deserved his privacy, now, didn't he. John's father had told him. John probably shouldn't just barge in like he barged in everywhere else in the house.

"I'm sorry I walked in. That was bad of me." He bowed his head, winced. "You were sleeping so well, too, weren't you."

Karkat watched him in silence for a couple of oddly clear seconds, like he was... John wasn't sure. Trying to decipher his expression properly? Trying to figure out if John meant it? Measuring his eyebrow hair? John couldn't say.

"Well is...?"

"Uh. It's another word for good."

"Right. Yes. I know that." A long sigh. "Yes, good sleep."

Good sleep, submerged in cockpit goo. Urgh.

Karkat got the box open finally, made a little approving grunt at the plain black t-shirts the lid unveiled. He dropped the box back on the floor, holding one of them, and put it on. "Good. Yes. I want the red thing, for my..."

He touched the right side of his chest, eyes lowered. John's eyes followed. Oh. Yes. His sign.

The shirt was still pretty tight, brand new. Karkat stuck his hands behind his neck and stretched, cracked his spine with a little grunt. John crouched again. "The pens should be in another box!"

In another minute they were both sitting on the floor and opening boxes. It reminded him of Christmas. It was mostly clothes -- formal stuff and casual, a couple pairs of shoes.

"Oh. Zhann, tell how."

Ah, he'd found the tablet. He was turning it over in his hands to inspect the casing, pads of his fingers delicately brushing against the buttons on the sides. John shuffled a bit closer. "Let's look at your setup... You should probably ask Dirk or Roxy later, but this is supposed to be pretty intuitive."

Karkat's t-shirt still smelled new. Hah, of course it did, John had watched it come out of the box. It was a bit distracting, though.
Or maybe he was smelling the faint chemical tang of that cockpit goo still on Karkat's skin. They'd spent three hours yesterday in the hangar with Cancer, John sitting uselessly on its knee and swinging his legs in the void as Karkat convinced his mech to excrete some of its goo, but special-made, with a different chemical composition. They'd siphoned off a tubful of the thing; thankfully just when John was ready to strain his superior strength to cart most of it up to Karkat's new bedroom, Doctor King had decided they may as well borrow a crane from the mech hangar and use it to lift the barrel to the window.

"So you uh... really slept well, then? Do you feel a little urgh?"

"Mmh?" He looked up from the tablet John was showing him how to turn on, blinked long and slow. "No, no urgh. Uh... Like how chocolate bit is warm, gets all..." He twitched his hand a little. Worst thing was, John thought he understood.

"Melty? Soft?"

"Un. Soft?"

"Yeah, it means both nice to slide your fingers on--" he demonstrated on the leg of his pajama pants - "and squishy like this."

He tried to squish his thigh, and it didn't work quite as well. He pushed a finger into the side of his stomach instead, made poik, poik noises. Karkat made a weird little noise in the back of his throat.

"Um. Soft is 'not hard'. And 'nice to touch.'"

"Hrff. Why one word for two things. Stupid. Like floor!" He prodded at the wooden planks under him. "Why it mean this and the how high in the house."

"I bet you have words like that too!"

"Well of course." Karkat sniffed, sneaked him a crooked, tiny smirk. "But our words is not stupid."

John chuckled. "I'm sure they are. No but you're really weird today. All --"

Yeah, 'soft' was a good word. Soft-edged. Soft-voiced, words sanded down so the growling anger came out ... he wasn't sure how to describe it, 'gravelly' was a bit too rough still. Maybe 'husky'? Maybe that was what husky sounded like. He should ask Rose.

He should never ask Rose. She would arch her eyebrow at him and ask what it was he was trying to describe and he would never hear the end of it, he just knew it somehow.

"Are you even all the way awake?"

Karkat huffed through his nose, sent him a look that was a little closer to his normal levels of exasperation. "Yes, yes." He rounded his back a little, gazed down at the tablet in his hands, fiddled with the touchscreen. "I like now. Good sleep, good head, no hurt or bad. I'm awake but it's -- it's good. In the ship there's... I have to, grrgh, hrst, right now, awake, fight, hssch, but here only Zhann come in. It's not bad if I like it," he finished, maybe a touch melancholy.

"Did you guys sleep in dorm rooms?" John asked, crossing his legs at the ankles and leaning in. "Like us, many people inside one room? Was it bad? Or did you mean, you had to get ready for missions?"

Karkat grimaced. "You're bad. We have -- little door, no come in."
"Doors on the slime baths?" John asked, pointing at the tub standing in the corner of the room. (In
the other corner was the pile of crap that used to be at the foot of John's bed, but not rebuilt, more
like randomly dropped all over that corner of the floor and then not touched again.)

"Yes. It's good, like... Like in a mech?"

John wasn't sure if Karkat meant that it was a snug fit or that it was safe. Probably the second.

Or maybe he just meant they were all adult-sized womb things, like Cancer's cockpit. Gross.

A ping from his glasses distracted him from the topic. Which wasn't bad because he wasn't sure he
wanted to know more, anyway.

RM: heyo johnnyboy its ur fave mother in law (jk)
RM: u anywhere near karkat atm?
JH: yes? i'm in his bedroom, actually.
RM: kk cool my source did not fail me ;)
RM: can u tell our esteemed guest id love a quick checkup to get a baseline from his post
sleepdrugged state
RM: idk what the chemicals in it do but prty sure they do smth & wd love to know 4 sure
JH: apart from making him all mellow and smiley?
RM: WHOOOaa srsly??
RM: did we slip him alien marijuana or
RM: oh what a tricky young man ur dad will disapprove so hard
JH: pff.
JH: it's not THAT bad, he still gets snarky if i push the dumb too far.
RM: the world has not ended yet!!
RM: now can u relay the question plz, i gotta do other shit 2day
JH: yeah, yeah.
RM: like say, ur dad :D
JH: OH MY GOD, ROMY LALONDE.
JH: just for that i should grab him and go camping around the island!
RM: hey if i dont get a romantic getaway for cause of things keeping on happening in this job u dont
get one either, u feel me
JH: rauuuurghh, this joke is really not as funny as you dumb butts seem to think it is!!!!
RM: wheres ur sense of humor bub, did it fall down a mineshaft or did u sit on it & its lodged
somewhere painful & inaccessible now? brb getting proctologist diploma 2 handle ur buttmad
JH: you know what would make me really happy with you today?
JH: if you could, like, turn down the morning after giggles from boning my dad.
RM: kid, i hate 2 tell u this but this is NOWHERE near the first time i boned ur dad :( 
JH: RAUUURGRHG.

"Zhann. Zhann. What the fuck your head is wrong why."

The way he looked at John... "... Why is your face wrong," John reworded helpfully, though not
without a tired groan.

"Yes. Why."

"My face is not wrong!" John stuck out his tongue and glowered, deliberately over the top.

"I have the eye I can look your face, and you no." Karkat snorted disdainfully.

He was seated with his legs splayed, the tablet propped up on his knee. John was sitting in an
unfortunate place if he wanted not to have his eyes directed straight to the apex of Karkat's thighs.

He wondered if Doctor Lalonde would tell him what was up with Karkat's crotch arrangement, in preferably technical and boring xenobiology terms.

Probably not, and then she wouldn't even need to tell him off for even asking, he'd tell himself off with a single quelling look. Hell, he was telling himself off now just for wondering.

Karkat made an annoyed clicking noise and growl-grunt-muttered to himself for a sentence or two. "Speak."

"Yeah, yeah, sorry. Uh. Doctor Lalonde wants to look at you? To see what the..." he pointed at the tub of goo, "what that did to you."

A short growl; Karkat's irises flicked huge and then tiny. "It did to me sleep."

"You can say no, if you want," John reminded him, voice gentling a little. "You're an ambassador now, not a prisoner."

Well, not super-officially with the letters from his own government and everything, but. Yeah.

"I think..." Karkat paused, chewed on his lip for a moment, then looked down at the tablet. "I think she need my body thing, when my people come here." Quieter, "When they come prisoner."

"... Yeah, probably."

A brief, deep sigh. Karkat squared his shoulders forcefully; though his eyebrows stayed knit in doubtful worry. "Okay. Tell her okay."

JH: he's waiting for you.

"Come here in your room?" John asked, to make sure. "Or do you want another place?"

Karkat shrugged carelessly and climbed to his feet. John was briefly struck watching his bare feet against the floor. It was funny the way his toes gripped, the claws almost brushing the floor but still cautiously kept back from digging in. Also the way his hips swung for balance --

Okay. Okay, no. He needed to stop thinking about that... that. He bounced up on his feet, bent down to pick up the long box with the folding screen, popped it open. "Oh, cool, it's already put together! Where do you want it?"

Karkat waved toward the bathtub. "So people come in and not see my naked," he groused, sending John a pointed look, more amused than irritated.

"I said sorry already!" John spluttered. "Also you've seen me naked a ton of times before!"

"Maybe I do not want see you naked!" Karkat retorted, a hand flung up. "Maybe my eyes are wurghgh no bad now, because I see your weirdo thing, and now my horn see things like, wall and door and thing because my eyes not and I blam on walls. My eyes like jello headband thing and it's hot on them, makes breakfast red thing and fall down the floor! Aliens," he concluded, like it was a swear word.

John started laughing, because the alternative was to whimper and expire on the spot. The image of Karkat's eyes melting and running in fat globs like they were strawberry jam was especially gross. Much better a thought than the nakedness. Why did it keep coming back up anyway, couldn't the
A knock at the door had him jumping guiltily. Karkat twitched bodily and then started muttering to himself. Since the rest of his language was pretty much made of hard consonants and clicks, John could be fairly sure he had heard an approximation of the name "Lalonde" somewhere in the middle. It came out pretty funny with his alien accent.

"May I come in?" the Doc called out. Karkat glanced at John, who shrugged and stuck his hands behind his head.

"Your choice, buddy."

Karkat seemed to be rethinking his earlier decision, but he stood and pushed his packages with a foot to one side even as he called out, "Yes!"

Doctor Lalonde opened the door and walked in, a large bag over one arm. John waved, then realized he was still holding the folding screen with his other hand, and stepped to the side to open it and stand it up before the goo bath.

"Good morning, John, Karkat."

"Good morning, Doctor," Karkat dutifully parroted, with that careful air that meant he was paying really close attention to her reaction, and he'd be rectifying his actions as quickly as possible if she frowned even a little bit.

It was something he'd been doing a little less; John figured he hated checks-up exactly that much.

That, or the Doc read as purple-pink. Pff. She did like to wear clothes in those shades, but her eyes were hardly as weird as Rose and Roxy's. (Or Dirk and Dave's, to be honest.)

She put down her doctoring bag on the floor, grumped something about the lack of table. "We should get you one as soon as possible -- actually, do you want a table?"

Karkat blinked. "Table is...? -- Oh. Huhn." A shrug. "Yes?"

He eyed the bag dubiously as she crouched to rummage in it. John watched in silence.

"You need chairs too..."

She paused, looked at John, and he wasn't too sure why. Then she looked at Karkat. "Do you want John to stay here with you?"

Karkat frowned a little. "Hm. I don't know. You do... what?"

"Take blood, and look at your brain waves." She produced a mass of electrode-looking things strung together like a tangle of Christmas lights. Karkat visibly recognized them; he grimaced a little.

"Oh. That."

Lalonde crouched, started looking through her bag, making little dissatisfied noises. "You really do need a table," she muttered under her breath.

John scratched his chin, thinking. They didn't really have a free table floating around the house, but they could get one delivered... Or maybe the hangars would have one, or the hospital...

"I want," Karkat declared, shoulders pulled back, "thing to sit on, Zhann. Sit here not on the floor."
Go get sit things."

"Chairs -- and I'm not your errand boy," John said, pouting.

"You are when I say," his alien boy replied with his chin down, horns aimed vaguely at the side of John's skull.

It looked like a pretty subconscious gesture, because the next second he noticed and jerked his chin up, his head back, and looked all... Unsure? Apologetic? Like he wasn't sure if he'd overstepped, John thought.

He didn't want John here during the examination. Okay. John had thought... but Karkat didn't need moral support for a little prick and an uncomfortable moment with a thing on his head. He was stronger than that. Didn't need his hand held for everything, now did he, it was okay if John didn't...

"Okay, okay. I'll go get your sit things."

He wasn't sure how he felt. A bit disappointed. He should have been proud that Karkat was so determined to do things in a society of aliens without a babysitter, or relieved to gain some space of his own back. He should be those things. Maybe he was a little; still, it did feel like a bit of a rebuke.

Sighing, he started for the door. Karkat followed to close it behind him, paused with his hand on the doorjamb.

"... Zhann -- I. Nh."

His eyes flicked to John's face, down to the floor, back up, eyebrows scrunching up, mouth turning down.

"I'm not angry, buddy." John cracked a smile. "Two chairs? I don't have three hands for three chairs."

"Do three come here," Karkat suggested with a badly repressed smirk.

"--You jerk."

"I'm all the fucking jerk. Go away, Zhann."

"I'm going, I'm going!"

He went. Karkat closed the door behind him.

--

The last meeting of the day ran past eight PM. It might have run longer, but Karkat caught John's urgh, they're just dragging their feet in a friggin' circle now and said that no one thought well on an empty stomach and maybe they could come back with their arguments lined up properly some other day.

Actually he said, very calmly and reasonably, "No food make stupid in the head. We do again later, maybe you have better planned things, I hear good thing," which made it sound like he was telling his interlocutors of the International Committee for Ethics Oversight that they were sounding kinda brainless and-or incompetent right now, but of course John smiled and went "Well, I'm sure not at my best when I'm hungry, let's go feed you!" as confirmation of Karkat's intended meaning, and after a moment of brief confusion everyone's feathers stayed unruffled.
Of course behind the politeness Karkat had totally meant there was no way in hell he would agree to their latest attempt to bargain him down and they had to be either starved to death or bludgeoned to death if they thought he would.

The two of them took their time, and came out of the conference room last, so they wouldn't bump into any official on the way out.

"Urgh. Glad that's done." For today. Another two days before Gamzee came back and -- if all went well -- they had a sudden influx of prisoners and their mechs to handle. (That or funerals. That and funerals. There'd be casualties. On both sides.) John shook himself and looked at Karkat hopefully. "Dinner now?"

Karkat took the headset off his head with that odd, delicate distaste, like he both wanted to fling it off and not break it somehow.

Suddenly it was flatter in John's head, the rolling waves of Karkat's emotional sea on John's shore gone still, gone silent, all his frustration and heavy responsibility and gritty determination.

Karkat folded the headset in two, stuck it in a pocket. "No," he said, even though John still remembered the feeling of hunger in the pitch of his stomach, not quite the same sensation as John's hunger in a way he couldn't define (was it a different feeling because he was an alien, or just because his body wasn't an exact copy of John's body?)

"--Aw, come on, what is there left to do?"

Karkat lifted his tablet, flicked his thumb, turned it for John to see. A paint chat window was open; Rose had drawn, in her favorite shade of purple, a stick figure lying in bed, being visited by an upright stick figure with orange horns and Karkat's sideways sixty-nine symbol on its chest (the backbone line went right through it.)

"What is that?" Karkat asked, tapping at a trio of question marks in the corner.

Sigh. Hospital, then. "It means a question. It's not an order, she's asking you."

"Hm. Good." He flipped the tablet around and sketched a humanoid form in red with horns and a hornless one in John's usual blue, then carefully reproduced the question marks. Click, sent.

"Hey, what's that, you don't need to check if she wants to see me," John said with a little pout. "Of course she wants to see me."

"It's fucking politness," Karkat replied, rolling his eyes, and started walking down the corridor.

They were in Jack Noir's building -- the federal embassy -- and John knew the place, but not as well as the rest of the island. He ended up following Karkat out; he couldn't remember where the door closest to the hospital was.

Rose's window chimed; just a quick face, with a smile.

When they got there they found her sitting up in her sheets, a mostly empty dinner tray pushed to the side; John's stomach growled, and she rolled her eyes at him and waved her hand at the leftover soup. "Feel free."

"Is it made of grass?" John inquired as he wandered to it and picked up the bowl to sniff. "Pine needles? Pond scum?"
"I think perhaps pond scum. Very organic." But she wasn't looking at John.

John paused with the bowl in hand to watch the two of them. They were staring at each other, and he had no idea what it was about.

"You're not dead," Karkat said eventually. "This is good. I... Like that."

Right. This was the first time they'd seen each other since the fight against Gamzee had almost fucked up her mind. Yeah.

Rose had some kind of electrodes stuck to her temples, under the loose, headband-less hair.

"I'm glad about that', or 'I'm happy about that'," she corrected by what John was sure was pure spinal reflex. "And thank you."

Karkat moved closer to the bed, though he stopped well before he was in arm's reach. "Why no like?"

Rose shrugged. "Like is for happier things?" She smoothed the sheet over her lap. The last two fingers of her left hand shook a little. "What was it you wanted to talk about?"

Wait, Rose hadn't been the one who asked? Huh.

Karkat shrugged, put his hands in the pockets of his dress pants (at least the fingers, there wasn't space for the whole hands.)

"I want you ask me a thing. What thing you want. You're here in this -- here because my Gamzee do this to you." He shrugged, made himself look up at her. "Ask a thing."

"... Anything I want?"

"... Maybe." He hesitated, then made a slightly exaggerated, cautiously joking, doubtful moue. "You have two hands and two foots now, so not all the things."

Rose cracked a smile, John thought despite herself. "If I cut my foot off, would you tell me all the things?"

Karkat snorted back, shoulders relaxing slightly. "If Gamzee cut your foot off. But don't tell him please, he cut maybe your head."

John chuckled dutifully. Yeah, funny, Karkat's boyfriend being a psycho, what a totally ridiculous and in no way believable thing. Then again considering the kind of society they lived in, that was probably heartthrob material right there.

The jealous grumpy thing really had to stop, though, he was pissing himself off. Gamzee being creepy and terrifying was a totally objective thing, but... Argh.

"Mind if Dirk participates?" Rose was asking Karkat, tugging her tablet out of the sheets.

"--Oh. Dirk, yes. I want ask him later, but now is good."

"Good, because I'm crashing this either way," Dirk said from the door. John had seen him opening it, but hadn't realized how quiet and soft-footed he moved. Karkat twitched, fingers tensing under the cloth of his pants, and John could almost see him deliberating on leaving his hands in his pockets, talking himself into it.
"Hello, Dirk, how are you this fine evening," Rose droned, and nodded at the armchair in the corner. "Now sit the hell down before I tell the nurses on you."

Dirk said nothing as he passed Karkat and John to get to the armchair. John watched him move, and found absolutely nothing amiss. Every single one of his movements was economically elegant, perfectly controlled. Which, yeah, major red flag if you knew Dirk Strider even a tiny little bit.

"How'd you even know we were here?" John asked. "Did Rose snitch or what?"

"I've got the passwords for all the cameras in this building, and I'm bored out of my mind," Dirk replied blandly as he perched on the padded armrest instead of sitting safely on the seat proper.

"Pff." Paranoid.

Then again... John had learned a lot about hypervigilance from the aftermath of Jane's... not-accident. Was this a leftover thing from Gamzee's attack?

At the same time it was almost kind of normal for Dirk, or he wouldn't have admitted to it. Hard to say.

"Won't you two sit down?" Rose said. "If I am to wring info out of Karkat I want him not to be so ready to run out."

Snorting, John dragged a chair closer to her bed and sat; Karkat hovered for another second and needed to check visually with her to confirm it was okay. He stayed farther back, too, perched toward the front of his chair...

Bah, he would relax eventually. John turned back toward Rose, toward Dirk, who he could still mostly see past the foot of her bed.

"How are you doing, guys?" he asked, voice quieting a little, because he'd had reports and internet conversations but that didn't mean the same thing as a personal confirmation.

Also if Dirk lied there was an even chance that Rose would snitch on him.

Dirk and Rose both looked at John, mouths closed, and for a moment he really thought neither of them was going to want to tell him that. Because Karkat was here? Too much pride? Shame? What?

Then Rose lifted her arm, mouth twisted wryly, and let him see plainly the fine tremors in her hand.

"It's been getting a lot better, mind; if things keep progressing at this rate I should be fine in another day or two. Makes handling small, breakable things a bit of an issue, but I'm otherwise okay."

So she wasn't going to be able to pilot yet. Not at the level of control and finesse she needed, at least. And if things lingered...

"Dirk? How about you?"

"Same," he said, arms crossed. John totally believed him, and accordingly made a believing face.

"Shut up, Zhann," Karkat said.

John gasped. "Hey!"

Karkat was looking at him, arms loosely crossed, horns forward, kind of bossy. "Rhoz and Dirk is not go away in their head. Not --" he waved his hand like chasing away a fly. "They don't go wah!"
when hear a thing or..."

He fell silent, at a bit of a loss.

"You're saying," Rose said, "it could have been a lot worse."

A sober nod. "Yes."

"You're saying, you expected it to be worse."

"'Expected' is?"

"How you think something will be."

"Ah." A pause. Karkat looked down at his hands, fingers linked between his knees. "Yes. Gamzee is... his head thing is break. A someone like me, they break."

John thought about Dave, and felt a little sick.

"Like Dave?" Dirk said, almost neutral apart from the edge he couldn't hide, the banked anger.

Karkat stared at him for a long second, and then sighed. "Dave is not break. Not like how... Hrfn."

"Do you want to use the headsets?" Rose suggested. "It'll be easier."

John was fine with the idea, already reaching up to where his was hanging from his neck, but Karkat snorted. "No. My head and his head are too much close. All day in his head, give me a fucking break."

"Hey!"

Karkat quirked him a faint sideways smirk, little tooth tips showing, and then sobered up. A muscle in Dirk's cheek was slowly rolling back and forth as he tensed and relaxed his jaw.

"I expect if Dave is... like me, with horns," he told Dirk, "he is dead, or make big noise all the time and you can't touch him. But Dad says he's awake sometimes and no noise and he talks?"

Dirk nodded reluctantly. "So in your expert opinion, he's gonna be fine."

Karkat shrugged, hands held open. "In my expert opinion you're a fucking alien and I fucking don't know. But you get better. One like me, don't get better, or maybe for... what's a big, big time, Zhann?"

"A year? It's the time the planet takes to get around the sun."

Karkat nodded, looked back at Rose, eyebrows knit. "A year. Yes. A lot of year. But we don't know because we kill them before. Maybe your head things are different."

John let out a short sigh. Urgh, alien mental health care. "Okay, so... We don't respond the same way as you guys to your psychic shenanigans, but you don't actually know how different it is. I guess it's better than if we were identical that way..."

"How do you see what happened to Jane?" Dirk asked, all restrained. "In regards to that mind-breaking shit."

Karkat looked briefly surprised, one eyebrow up. "Oh. Zhane is... I don't know. From in Zhann's
head things it's not... Not break. Not like what Gamzee got." His face darkened a little then, and he looked away, maybe sad, maybe embarrassed. "It's like a thing that says your head doesn't say what to do, the other person head says? Your head doesn't touch -- no, she doesn't touch your head."

"When Karkat says 'she' like that, he actually means they," John muttered to Dirk as an aside, in case he hadn't noticed yet. It threw John for a bit of a loop every time, but Jade grinned a lot about it. "It's not a specific girl."

The look that passed on Karkat's face was so strange it made John blink a bit. He shuffled in his seat some, glowered briefly at John and then looked back to Dirk. "You still hear the bad things all over you but it's like Zhann and me. I can't do Zhann do the thing. I mean -- argh."

"The person doesn't control your sense of self?" Rose suggested. "You still know what you want, and that it's not the same thing the person attacking you wants? But you can't stop your body."

"Yes. That." He hesitated, made a mitigating movement with his hand. "I think maybe a little you don't know, if you're a fucking alien and you have no head people like that, but someone like me know. But with Gamzee..."

John grimaced. "With Gamzee it's pretty hard to still know that what you're thinking is not right. But at the same time he doesn't make you do things?"

"... He can make you kill your own you, if he breaks enough, but you still decide. But it's hard to decide don't die after this bad." Karkat shook himself a little, lifted his chin in that way he thought was appeasing, a peace offering, that John was starting to see like that despite himself. "But not the same thing like Zhane."

"What other powers are there?" Rose asked, casual but for the feverish way her fingers ran over her tablet. John briefly wondered why she wasn't using her glasses, then wondered if Gamzee's attack had sufficiently messed with her brainwaves that the hardware couldn't read her typing thoughts properly anymore. Okay, that was a bit scary. He made a note to ask later.

(Then again Rose didn't need her vision corrected, and apart from the chat, camera and light optimization settings... Maybe she was just enjoying not having to wear glasses for once. Meh.)

"Move things," Karkat said, sober like he knew exactly how important the info was. "Pew like Zhann's gun--"

"My blaster?! You're kidding, right? You've got people who can do that with their minds?!" John stared at him, mouth gaping. "That's so unfair!"

"You're unfair and also dumb. Yes, we have. One in... my fingers and foot fingers and your fingers?"

One in thirty? Urk. Still nothing to sneeze at, if there were a lot of them around.


"But can they manipulate small things?" Dirk asked, leaning forward in his chair. "Can they move things they can't see?"


Dirk's eyebrows scrunched down, his nostrils flared oh so slightly. "Of course I think armor
breaking. It's kind of hella fucking necessary to know if the Marines' body armor is going to end up being their coffin."

Karkat sighed, raked a hand through his hair.

"You don't think we should have known that sooner? I guess it's not too late, but Jesus, that kind of weakness--"

Karkat actually cut him off, leaned forward, claw tips drawing emphasis waves in the air. "Your armor is a lot not our armor. Your mech is not our mech, your ... inside the things that do thing is not like our things. When they open one, see what it is, they try, if I break this bit, does it stop. Then yes, when they know how, your armor breaks."

His head was angled horns forward once again, and he probably hadn't even noticed, but with a tilt to the side that didn't read to John as coy so much as not-aiming-at-you(-yet). His voice was firm, now, determined, refusing to be cowed by Dirk's tense anger.

"But I think if we want to win and not die we have to win very fast. When after you have the ship and the people who -- who do things with their head prisoner, you can work and think and put in the armor things so they can't break your things with their heads, maybe. If you go with no armor at all four people come in and three die."

Dirk let out a long breath through his nose, reclined pointedly against the back of his seat. The foot John could see was twitching at the ankle. John wasn't sure if that was the anger or the psychic damage.

"Okay. Okay. The Generals in charge still need to know as soon as fucking possible--"

"Yes, that's tomorrow morning." Karkat rolled his eyes at him, but his expression was both wry and maybe a bit apologetic. "Today and the day before is yes, really this is how my prisoner people are kept. I needed the..."

"Leverage," John supplied quietly.

"Yes. I needed it. I have what I want now, I can tell the head power things to Generals. Also there's people who can hear your head things but they can't push you do the things. But aliens are very hard, it's not like speak...ing?"

"Like the headsets?" John asked. "We understand each other pretty well now."

Karkat slanted him a red, heavy-lidded look. "They put other alien in my head before you," he pointed out.

"Oh." Wow, John had almost managed to forget Karkat's stint in the labs. Of course they had tested the telepathic gel. "Oh, right. It didn't work well, did it? You told me that, they didn't... couldn't get a lot from you?"

Bitter pride and exhaustion and pain, Karkat's memory of...

Karkat might be technically as powerless as a human against a psychic attack, but he had still grown up amongst people who were expected to do these things, and who also might have a somewhat different brain setup that allowed for passive resistance to psychic invasion, though. Humans didn't have the trick of it.

"Yeah, but..." John sighed. "They could get to Jane, is the thing."
Karkat grimaced, looked away. "We don't have a lot of people who make people do things like that. They're... very strong. They're -- people know them. Gamzee knows that. He -- he knows that."

He'd find and deal with them, was what Karkat couldn't bring himself to say. What John was pretty sure they all heard anyway.

There was a short moment of silence and then Dirk said, abrupt, "So what is Gamzee planning exactly, anyway?"

Karkat shrugged. "Don't know."

"We're kind of all depending on him here, I'd enjoy a little more information--"

"Dirkh," Karkat said, careful to pronounce it just right and falling barely short of it. "Gamzee does not tell me because I don't like kill people, and he will kill a lot of people."

He was starting to sound annoyed, and John wasn't sure Dirk noticed. Rose certainly did, eyebrows up.

"But how does he plan to survive? How is that even feasible--"

"Hrrst!" Karkat hissed, suddenly glaring. "I don't want sit here and hear you say this is bad, this is also bad, can't do that, I want to know all the fucking things and then say bad about the things! Godfucking hell. Shut your mouth."

John blinked at him long and slow. "Um. Karkat?"

Karkat raked a hand through his hair, gave the base of his left horn a vigorous, annoyed scratch. He glanced at John, sighed, and then looked at Dirk again, more serious, frowning in concentration slightly more than in anger. "You don't like it when you don't know. Good! I don't fucking like it when my Gamzee maybe dies. I don't know, when you ask and ask, I don't oh I know now! like Zhann don't have his glasses and then oh yes it's here on the fucking bed where he put it all the time."

It wasn't a good time to laugh at the way Karkat said 'bed' like it was another dirty word, so John didn't, but it was a near thing.

Rose cleared her throat delicately. "I think tensions are running a little high on all sides."

Yeah, John agreed, and he was a bit wary of an actual explosion, now that Karkat felt free to let his pocket bulldozer bossiness out. If it collided head on with Dirk's thwarted control issues it wasn't gonna be pretty. He got up on his feet, clapped his hands. "Okay! And I think everything that could be useful has been said, and my stomach is trying to eat the rest of me. If you get other questions you can send them to his tablet, or maybe set up another meeting?"

He looked at Rose, who sighed and nodded, and at Dirk who was sulking on his perch not looking at anyone, jaw rolling, and finally at Karkat, who was staring up at John with his arms crossed over his chest, looking half amused and half exasperated. John smiled down all bright and oblivious; Karkat rolled his eyes.

"Wait," Rose said as Karkat grabbed the sides of his chair to pull himself up; he paused in mid-motion, made a humming noise. "Mind powers we might run into are: knowing other people's thoughts, controlling other people's bodies, moving and breaking things, and shooting energy rays? Anything else?"
"Um." Karkat furrowed his brows thoughtfully. "I think. Yes. Maybe one or three people who is not that, but I don't know now."

John's stomach made an unholy noise like a creature from the deep waking famished from its slumber. He looked down at his own stomach. "Whoops."

"Pff." Rose smiled. "Go away, John."

"Yeah, yeah. Coming, Karkat?"

Karkat gave a long, thoughtful look at Dirk, who was still glowering quietly at nothing, and then sighed a little. "Nh."

They walked out of the room. Karkat was silent for a few steps, gazing at the floor, and then sneaked a side-look at John. John smiled back and linked his hands behind his head, and tried not to wish they were wearing the headsets right now.

"You go see Dave now?" Karkat asked him.

John blinked, sobered up a little. He'd gone yesterday, but... "Well, I'm not sure he's awake."

"Then go and look, stupid." Karkat rolled his eyes pointedly, mimed catching a door handle. "Open, look, close, it's done!"

John huffed. "I think if he was awake and wanted to see people, he'd be online." He tapped the side of his glasses.

... Unless his brainwaves being messed up meant he couldn't use his shades, and having to lift his hands for the keyboard was too awkward. Um.

They drifted to a stop at the end of the corridor, and John hesitated. Karkat was still watching him.

"... Do you want to be alone?"

Karkat blinked back at him, arched a thick eyebrow in pointed confusion. "You don't want Dave?"

John frowned a little, opened his mouth, checked the corridor; no nurses. No doubt there were cameras and he wasn't sure those came with mikes, but hey, whatever.

"I just... I don't think Dave would want to see you just yet...? If he was awake, and it's late--"

"You don't want to go," Karkat said, eyebrows knit like John just baffled him, and not always in good ways.

"Of course I want to go, just not when he's still all..." John trailed off.

The idea of seeing Dave half-unconscious, of seeing him -- raving, confused, fighting tremors, John didn't know for sure but... It just. It wasn't comfortable.

He'd made himself do it with Jane, but Jane was his sister. He was supposed to -- it was expected. And if she felt crummy and had a crying jag and needed a hug it'd be fine.

Dave was his best buddy, but if John had to see him on his hospital bed crying or riding a flashback he would probably be sick.

Also Dave would really hate it.
"I don't know how to explain," he said, quieter. "I..."

"You want he say 'come here' first?"

John startled a little, looking up. Karkat was looking at him with a quiet, almost soft expression; John floundered. "Ah... Yeah. That'd be -- that'd be better. I mean, I..."

"You don't want you see him all... 'No, no, this is bad, want to help'," Karkat said, and nodded decisively, even though he was now looking away like what he was saying was embarrassing.

Which, um, yeah, maybe a little. John started walking again, and Karkat immediately fell into step with him, like he was in just as much of a hurry to get out now that neither of them was staying. "It's not that I don't want to help him!" John said, waving his hands in the air, as he shouldered the stairwell door open. "It's that right now the only things that would help would be, like, a hug or something. I do not hug Dave! I think we'd both die. I'm serious, it would be horrible, we'd probably explode."

Karkat groaned, the way he did when he didn't want to laugh. "Zhann, shut your mouth, I hear you." He threw him a lopsided smirk, eyes hooded in quiet amusement. "No hug for Dave? I think before you hug everyone."

"Hey, what's that mean, how come you're making it sound slutty?" John protested playfully as he went down the stairs. "I so don't hug everyone."

The alien started counting pointedly on his fingers, taking every finger between the other hand's index and thumb and shaking it under John's nose. "Zade, Zhane, Rhoz, Rokshi, Dad, me--"

"So what! That's not even a lot!"

"That's a ton." A firm nod, a commiserating grimace. "You're fucking slutty."

John spluttered and shoved at his shoulder. Karkat jumped over the last three steps and shoulder-checked him the second John landed after him.

"I'm not slutty!"

"Yes, Zhann, I hear you," Karkat said mock-patiently, and walked out of the clinic building. "I hear you say a big-like-a-mech wrong thing. The wrong thing is a moon of wrong, with a mech on top. You're a hug slut. You're the first hug slut."

There really was only one possible response to that. John wasn't too sure why Karkat jumped like he actually hadn't been expecting it.

"No! Ashrrth--" He devolved into alien swearing as he scuttled sideways like a crab, batting at John's reaching hands all claws out. John was pretty sure he was yelling something akin to Jesus dick don't you dare.

John dared a great many things. He chased Karkat with his arms wide open straight to the other building.

"Aw, come on! You look a little tense! Don't you need a hug! Who better than a specialist!"

"Zhann I will piss on your face when you sleep!"

"Kinky," Roxy said from the door, both eyebrows up and trying not to smile. Karkat discreetly
edged closer to her -- not quite like he was thinking of hiding behind her back, but like he thought her presence would quell John. Showed what he knew.

But she looked a bit tired behind the smile. Umm.

"What's up? Did you have dinner already? We were trapped with politicos all day, it was a nightmare, we were about to kill the slowest one and eat him." He glanced at the sky. It was now at least eight-thirty. Still light enough out, but...

"Yeah, just did. I'm going to see Rosie," Roxy added. "Gramps is here and he and Daddyo are... you know."

John tilted his head. "I know?"

"Well it's not like they have any more hard facts than they did the rest of the day or anything, but they've been playing the what-if game and kinda throwing politics everywhere. But like, existential politics." Roxy made a face.

John's face scrunched up pretty much of its own volition. "Oh noooo."

"Yeah, sorry. I mean, I know it's important and all but this is just stressing me out at this point, so I'm totally outie. Good luck!" She patted him on the shoulder and stepped off the front steps.

"But we've been doing that all day!" John glared up at the living room windows, lit and inviting and completely traitorous. Roxy shrugged at him and waved over her shoulder.

"What?" Karkat asked when she was gone and John was still psyching himself up to walk in. "Gramps is?"

"General Harley." John sighed, made himself ask. "Did you want to talk to him?"

Karkat hesitated. "I don't have new thing for him. I have Rhoz thing but... Rhoz says, not me?"

John blinked. "Wow uh, yeah, we've been out for five minutes but it's really not likely that she hasn't told them about your psychic guys already."

"Mm." He shrugged, fingertips in his pockets. "Ask if he has new thing for me?"

"Yeah, sure--" John paused, shoulders slumping. "Uh, if he doesn't have anything new for you, did you want to not see him? Because if we're around them, they'll totally drag us in and--"

"I know," Karkat said, and rolled his eyes, but in a pretty mild way. "I'm not slow. I make you sit with talking people and war again, you kill people with your face things." He made a little tsking noise, like John murdering people with his own glasses would be gauche, so they might as well avoid the situation to be polite. "No people to eat with, then later people?"

"Oh." John brightened.

It wasn't like Karkat still needed a chaperone to eat with people, and John was starting to know really well that feeling nervous and small around Harley and his dad didn't mean Karkat was going to shyly avoid them anymore. Nope, he was going to headbutt the crap out of his awkwardness and his sense of being out of place, and front like a mofo.

He could have told John he'd manage alone and that John could go and hide somewhere already.

JH: hey me and karkat were planning to eat out tonight, is that ok or did you need to see him?
HS: Eat out really? :B
JH: yeah ok, have a picnic on the beach or something. we've been locked in a room all day!!
JH: but he's thinking we should check in with you and dad first.
JH: especially if you've already heard from rose?

A short pause, during which John shuffled from foot to foot, a hand on his glasses, and Karkat watched him and pointedly said nothing.

HS: Just did and yes i would enjoy asking more questions at leisure.

Oh.

JH: oh. :( 
HS: Its not like the possibility wasn't presented before especially considering some energy attacks we've weathered with very peculiar signatures but it does mean that some unlikely scenarios have now become a lot more likely.

"Ugh," John said, grimacing at Karkat, and gave the staircase going up a guilty look. Looked like they were going to have to plunge straight back in.

HS: Im going to have to interrupt a lot of people during their dinner.
JH: sorry. :( 
JH: should we come up?
HS: I dont know. Your father encourages me strongly to let you boys have an official break for brain health. Which means yes on dinner out and people shouldn't im you through it either but at the same time should i call you back i want you back immediately so stay close okay?

"Alright!"

JH: :D no problem! we'll be right by the end of the path, we could be back in ten minutes if needed.
HS: But at nine fifteen karkat needs to be back if we have any hope to get him to bed at a reasonable hour tonight. Kid has i quote enough sleep debt to fund the whole loan shark industry end quote.
JH: makes sense. i was hoping for the whole evening off but that was kind of maybe a bit too optimistic. this isn't so bad!
HS: At this stage of battle preparations yes rather! Considering hes involved with planning not just piloting john.

Ugh. Yeah. Why couldn't Karkat just be a grunt like him.

HS: Your father is making you sandwiches are you anywhere nearby?
JH: yeah, we're downstairs!

He gave Karkat a thumbs up.

"Success! They'll want to talk to you when we come back, but we can eat on the beach." He grinned, then paused. "Uh, do you want to go... not to the beach? Um. The woods? Rooftop? Somewhere?"

Karkat watched John point around with his arms loosely crossed, and then snorted at him, mouth quirked wryly. "Beach is good."

"Right, you already know there aren't any monsters."

"Monsters not yet," Karkat corrected him, and pushed the door open. "I need small pants, later."
"Oh -- right. Yeah." John watched him climb up to his room. The slacks and dress shoes might be... yeah, not appropriate for the beach. Also kind of awkward to sit on the ground with, even if he didn't dirty the hell out of them, with how they pulled taut on --

JH: we'll need to get changed before we go anywhere, so brb!!!

He crossed through the corner of the living room and up the stairs to the pilots' dorms at a tromping gallop.

Goddamn, he'd managed not to give that a single thought all day. He walked inside his thankfully empty room already tearing his shirt off.

--

Ten minutes later he had an honest-to-God picnic basket swinging from his arm and Karkat at his side and they were walking down the dim path under the trees, and they were alone without anyone throwing heavy political stuff at either one of them.

Or angsty ambushes of bro woe.

They got set up on the sand, each at one end of the towel and the basket between them. The clouds were turning pretty colors, the sun just barely touching the sea. It was so nice and quiet.

In three days people would be waging a battle in space that might well lose them the entire war if they failed.

"You're thinking. Stop that."

John snorted, and grabbed a sandwich right out from under Karkat's reaching claws. "Easy to say, but I bet you're thinking about it too!"

"Of course." Karkat shrugged, and got himself a bacon sandwich. "But I'm good for head things and you're not."

Karkat was especially good at coming up with every possible catastrophic scenario, likelihood irrelevant -- and even the "possible" part was up for debate. John went pff. "Sure thing, buddy."

Sigh. He just wanted to have this one evening where it wasn't happening, where his life was still normal and familiar -- fly his mech like a boss, kick outrageous amounts of butt, come down for relaxation purposes, have fun with his friends and family, banter with his cool alien allypal Karkat ... Okay so bantering with Karkat hadn't been part of the routine before, but...

He took a bite, chewed halfheartedly, lowered his sandwich to his lap. His dad had made it, it should be pretty tasty. He stared down at it, like he could maybe figure out where the failure was.

"I always knew we were at war, but -- it never seemed, I don't know. Real? The battles were fun and exciting and we were all awesome and we would all keep winning and... Yeah, that was dumb. I knew it wasn't going to be like that forever, it was just a holding pattern, Rose and Jane and everyone kept saying it was weird it was lasting so long, but I didn't -- in my head I knew it but I didn't... feel it?"

When he sneaked him a side look, Karkat was holding his sandwich like it contained a live snake. He grimaced faintly -- not for show or communication, just to himself, and John winced.
"Yeah, I know I was stupid, you don't have to tell me. Rose has been on my butt talking about my avoidance issues for like three centuries. Like her overanalyzing everything ever isn't the exact same dumb thing."

"Zhann," Karkat groaned. "Don't tell me the things in your head, I know the things in your head, I go in your head. If you tell me the things it's--" A short sigh. He turned a little to look at John's face, a bit frowny, but more tired-giving-up than annoyed. "Okay, I think it's... maybe not bad for you. Rhoz is not angry if you tell me your head things?"

John blinked. "Um. No? Why should she?"

"... Zhane?"

"Uh, no. Seriously, I don't--"

"Dad? Dave no, yeah, you said. Zade? Someone?"

John blinked slowly, heels making little hollows in the sand as he tried to guess what Karkat was even getting at. "The only reason anyone would care is if they think you're going to use it to hurt me, but I know you're not. I mean, I'm in your head, I think if you were plotting my downfall I'd notice."

Karkat groaned again, shoulders slumping. "See, if I tell you all my head things like that, Gamzee gets angry."

"...Oh."

Oh.

Well.

"Sorry," John said, and stared down at his sandwich. "I didn't... know that. Probably should have guessed but haha, you know me, I need everything spelled out and--"

"Zhann. Shohn."


Karkat sounded all quiet and cautious and weird, and John hadn't even been sure he could hear the difference between a Z and a J properly, much less say it, and Karkat wasn't quite there yet and...

"You can keep calling me Zhann. I don't mind. I'm pretty sure I'm not saying Karkat right either."

Karkat let out a rough snort. "You are really, really not." John could kind of hear a smile in his voice now. "But your ears are very bad. Sad fucking thing."

"I could try again," John offered cautiously. "Say your name?"

Karkat scoffed at him, but quietly enough that it could have been a chuckle.

Clack-growl-clack-snap.

"Krr-khht."


"Where are your vowels, bud. Khhrr..."
"No, back your mouth. Back -- more back. Mneh. Now the after part."

Laughing a little, John tried again, spectacularly missed again. He was tempted to say never mind, I can't, haha, silly.

Karkat hadn't had much of a choice about how hard he tried, so John kept trying. He could feel the back of his throat straining, trying to figure out how to approximate the sounds with a body that wasn't set up with all the right organs.

"Krrrrrk--hfft. Haha, no, that was bad. Okay, aspirating doesn't work either--"

"It's not Gamzee and no one else," Karkat said suddenly, startling him. "But it's. Gamzee and... my people? My, my here people. My -- aughshsh."

"Close friends? Um. Family -- no, you guys don't have families..." John bit the corner of his lip. Oh, not just his boyfriend who got to hear all about his inner thoughts then. "Is there anyone else like that on your ship?"

Anyone who was closer to Karkat than John was.

Anyone he'd chosen to be closer to than John was. Yeah. There was the rub.

Thoughtful, a little sad, Karkat made a little grunting noise, bit into his sandwich, chewed. "Now, no."

-- Huh.

"... Before, yes?"

Karkat shrugged. Yeah, John bought that one. He bought it like it was on clearance and he was Dave all ready to go with a metaphor about Black Fridays three miles long.

"It's okay if you don't want to tell me," he said, even though he wanted to know like burning. He wanted to know everything, everything he hadn't even asked about Karkat's life because he knew everything about who Karkat was already, and what he'd done was kinda irrelevant and hey, how about I show you everything about my own life and never wonder about yours past the times I trip all over it by accident.

"No but... Maybe. It... goes there, but then a thing happen, so it doesn't -- it stop and doesn't go there."

"Get there," John corrected quietly. "Going is when you start going, getting is when you finish going."

"Yeah," Karkat said casually, avoiding his eyes. "We did not finish. And now it's... not."

"Oh," John breathed. "Did, uh. Can I ask?"

Another shrug, Karkat too busy gazing indifferently at the temple island to glance at John. "Ask. Maybe I tell you, maybe I not tell you. Who fucking knows. You shitfuck alien."

"--Wait, are those my questions?" John asked. "Like you gave Rose?"

Karkat rolled his eyes at him, said something in casual alienese that John was fairly sure would have shocked him and his descendants to the fourteenth generation if he could only understand it.
"Okay, okay." John breathed in, released it slowly. "Did... that person die?"

"No," Karkat replied, so blank-faced John winced before even really hearing the word. "He does a thing for me and his... His boyfriend -- girl boyfriend?"

"Girlfriend."

"--And they see and they take him away."

Oh god. 'Take him away'. It didn't sound like the guy had just gotten reassigned --

Two pairs of horns, an endless scream, tentacles swallowing him alive burrowing under his skin, his organs, his -- (did he still have a body left under there--)

"Why," John whispered, and realized he was hugging his knees.

"Because," Karkat rasped, "he can make things with his head very strong and he don't tell them. Because he knows it's bad if they know. That stupid fuck."

Oh.

Hell.

He'd known, and he'd done ... something anyways. For Karkat and for his girlfriend.

(failed you so sorry)

Oh. So that was what it had been about.

"Did someone tell you that if... If you got down to here and won, they would give him back?"

Karkat turned his head away. John flinched.

"I'm sorry, I'll stop, you don't have to--"

"They don't tell me, I tell me," Karkat rasped out. "I tell me maybe, a planet, just me, that is big, that is good, they say it's good and they can't say 'no, you're red, you're bad, you can't do it' because I have do it. They have to think it's big, it's good, they have to."

He laughed briefly. John clenched his fists.

"I'm fucking stupid."

"Aw man." John grimaced, caught his lip between his teeth. "Aw man, no, you're not, it could have worked--"

Karkat snorted out an incredulous breath of a laugh. "Listen to you. So compromised, holy shit." He shook his head, a hand lifted to halt John's protests. "No, it work bad, he's big head things and I'm nothing, I'm because Gamzee get angry if I get dead. It's not because I can do things, it's because if I dead, Gamzee does things. If I do this planet thing then it's good for them, but they don't want good for me. I'm not dead, in their head it's a lot good and shut up."

"But you did do things," John said, feeling his way through. "You were a pretty good fighter, and you're-- um. Yeah."

Snort. "Oh, yes, I do things now. Big fucking things. My people will have so much happy for me."
Augh. John didn't -- he kind of wanted to, but Karkat wouldn't... "I don't suppose you want a hug right now."

Karkat threw him a sideways glare. "You put your arm on me, I put my teeth on you."

Alright. Sad and angry, but angry more right now. "Okay. Do you want to spar?"

"Spar?"

"Play fight? Like with Mister Strider."

Karkat let out a long sigh, shoulders relaxing. "No." He kicked pointedly at the sand. "This is stupid. I fall, my finger knife gets in you, all your inside body things fall out. Whoops."

John let out a short laugh. "Yeah, that'd be pretty bad. But if you want to spar later, that’d be fine."

He remembered he had a sandwich balanced on his thigh and finished it in a couple of bites, reached for another. The sun was almost all the way out of sight behind the horizon now.

"Maybe," Karkat allowed, and went fishing for a bottle of water.

They ate in companionable silence for another sandwich, watching the horizon. Overhead, Poseidon's shuttle was coming in for a landing, leaving a trail of gold across the purpling sky. Jane would be in bed by the time they came back in.

He still wanted to ask; he wanted to know what that other boy had been like and how they had met and everything. How they'd gotten that close. It would be cruel to push it now, though, to ask for more.

"You know -- if he's in a ship not too far away," John said, and then shut his stupid mouth because oh, great plan, mister unbridled, unfounded optimism -- who was he now, Jake?

"If he's in a ship, and you win my ship, and my ship wins another ship, and my mech shits and it's crispy bacon," Karkat replied cynically, and then sighed. "I think that before. But I can't -- think that a lot. When it's just me who die or not die, it's okay. My life is shit. It's not okay when my ship and your planet maybe die. I have to have more big things in my head now. I can't--" He made a little grasping motion, catching nothing, and let his hand fall on his lap.

"Yeah, I get you," John said, and tried not to sound too wilted.

Karkat sighed. "Eat a bread thing, Zhann."

"Heh. Okay." John ate a bread thing. "They're called sandwiches, by the way. It's when you've got bread and something else and another bit of bread."

Karkat made a weird snorting sound. John peered at him.

"Was that a laugh?"

"No."

"Liar."

"Yes. Eat more sandwich."

"You're trying to get me to shut up, aren't you!"
"Yes," Karkat replied placidly, and picked up his bottle of water.

"What's funny about a sandwich, anyway?"

Karkat sighed, pinched his nose. "You don't shut your mouth before I say, huh? I thought if you say the bread word for people too. I need more word like shit and fuck, shit and fuck is small word that make want to sleep, not big enough--"

"Boring?" John mimed a bored look, sighing, leaning heavily on his hand as his eyes went heavy-lidded. Then he laughed a little, because of course.

Karkat made a short, sharp gesture with the hand that held the bottle, splashing his thigh. "Yes! I have three word, so I can say three-on-three things -- shit fuck hell, fuck shit hell -- not more?! My people laugh me! -- Ergh, water. Shit." A pause, and then an offended glare. "... You see?!"

John didn't bother laughing only a little this time around. "Yeah, we do say sandwich as a sex thing. Heheh."

Karkat wiped water off his leg industriously. "--Oh, I think four word. Slut?"

"Pffft. Yeah, slut is not polite."

Karkat nodded like he was satisfied. "I don't say when Dad or Harlee is here?"

"Oh heck no. They'll probably spank you! That's hit your ass in punishment, and no, it's not a sex thing -- or, um, okay it can maybe be a sex thing sometimes but with them it really wouldn't be, it'd be because you're a bad b-- oh my god someone kill me."

Karkat was staring at him, and smirking for all he was worth. John groaned and buried his face in his hands.

"A bad... b...boyfriend?"

"I hate you so much."

"Hate is?" Karkat asked, unconcerned. John emerged to glare heatedly, leaned toward him, making strangling motions and maybe growling a little.

"Hate is wanting to wring your neck, you jerk."

Sighing through his nose, he sat back down, brows still scrunched down forbiddingly. Karkat's eyebrows were both up; he looked enlightened.

"Hate. Heeyth. Huh. Good word. Yes. I need the word."

"Yes, because you're a jerk."

Karkat made a little noise of unconcerned agreement and went looking for more sandwiches in the depths of the basket.

"... Okay, I don't really hate you," John admitted a few seconds later. Karkat snorted loudly.

"Oh no! I have a big sad now. I will swim in the big water and never come back here. Zhann doesn't hate me, it is a big bad surprise. I break and go die now."

"You're really weird, though," John told him, briefly disgruntled.
They chewed in tandem for a while. The sky was darkening fast now that the sun was down. Karkat's irises had gone tiny, a thin slice of blood in between gold sclera and bottomless pupils. John wondered how well he saw with them.

"... Who do you talk with? You aliens," Karkat asked him, quiet and cautious and stubbornly staring at the horizon.

John squirmed a little. It was so weird to be embarrassed over something as natural as the human need for connection, for warmth.

Heh, maybe the operative word was 'human'...

No, Karkat needed just as much approval and care, John could feel it in him every time they connected, he just...

He was just born in a society that seemed like it was the offspring of a Victorian Miss Manners and a Klingon.

"Friends?" John hazarded. "Family. Uh, your boyfriend or girlfriend, of course."

"Hm."

"I guess a shrink, too. Uh, I mean a psychologist. A doctor who works on the way the mind works. I mean, not the meat part but how thinking happens and why people get bad thoughts and, and bad mind habits and mental trauma and all that. They help you fix your thoughts so you feel better."

Karkat gave him a half-fascinated, half-horrified look. "You don't mean like tell me everything or I hurt you. Or like stop thinking that thought of Empress is bad--"

"--Oh Jesus. No! Someone who helps! A good person! Nice!"

Karkat swatted one of John's flailing hands down. "Okay! Shut up. I know. You're all sluts and talking and help with your head, it's not weird for you." John scowled; Karkat's expression actually softened a little in apology. "Sorry. I don't know the polite word."

"I don't think that there's a polite word for slut. Also slut is a sexual term, and I'm not sure what's sexual about psychology! Well, apart from the cigars and daddy issues, but."

"--Oh. Sex things only?" Karkat frowned his thwarted frown. "What is for not-sex then?"

"Uh... I'm not sure there is one, actually."

Karkat muttered something he was pretty sure was "figures" in alienese. "And family is..."

"My family is Dad and Jane, and also Jade and Jake and Grandpa Harley, but not as close. Um, General Harley, only General is his job, see? It's for, uh. Someone who tells soldiers what to do. In a war. We don't call him that when we're not talking about jobs. You remember how me and Jade were made from bits of two people, and Jane and Jake too?"

"Oh -- yes. It's... big? For aliens. Big thing?"

"Important?" John's voice softened a little. "Yeah. Very important. It's the first important thing we start with."

Karkat mulled it over for a few seconds. "Dave and Rhoz and them is not family, right?"
"No, but they're friends. And we've known each other since we were small, so we're almost that close."

"Hm." Karkat dug a hole with his toes, slipped his foot under the sand, brow furrowed with distant irritation. "Friend. Tell me what is friend in your head? I think I know the word but maybe I don't know the word. Maybe the word is another word or maybe it's a word and another word together or -- like how your bed is flat soft place for sleep and my bed is flat soft place for fuck."

John swallowed a burst of guilty laughter. "Yeah, okay, that's a good point! Language is weird."

"Mm."

"Friends are people you like -- they make you laugh, or they understand you well, or they're -- I dunno, they're nice and you want to spend time with them and do things with them, or even maybe just sit together and not say anything, it depends on the type of friend. Jade and Dave and Rose are all my friends, but we don't do the same things together, like with Jade we have fun and she kinda barks at me if I do stupid stuff, and with Dave we just goof off and have fun and joke around, and if there's something serious we sort of... we talk around it? Because it's weird to tell him very serious things straight on, I dunno. But it's not as weird with Rose or Jade, but Jade doesn't really have the patience to do it for very long if she thinks I'm being stupid."

"... But Rhoz and Zade is the same friend thing," Karkat said, slow like he was having trouble with the idea. "No, Rhoz and Dave -- friend and also friend? Not -- different things?"

John scratched at his chin. "Friends can be very different, I guess? Also you can be friends with your family, but it's not really the same thing. And some friends," he added, remembering what had started Karkat on it, "are pretty shallow -- they only tell each other the funny things, not the big, deep things that hurt, it depends a lot."

"But they don't have a better words," Karkat concluded, grumbling his dissatisfaction. "Hrrsk."

"Who do you talk with?" John returned, gently.

Karkat gave a short shrug. "Gamzee."

Oh. Ouch. "No one else?"

"... A little Nepeta." Karkat shrugged, traced a looping curl in the sand. "She is small and green and she tells me the cockpit thing with her boyfriend."

"Oh, her."

"But not a lot because she wants I'm her boyfriend and I don't want that and it's bad to make her feel big things for me when I say no after."

John blinked. She had a boyfriend (with whom she did kinky mindmeld stuff, even!) but she still had a thing for Karkat? Who was already dating someone else, too. Well, um. Those things happened, he supposed. 'The heart wants what the heart wants' and stuff. "Leading her on? It means encouraging her to feel things for you when you already know you don't want them."

"Yeah. That. And ThRr'zee before when she's my girlfriend but then we stop being girlfriends and she goes away in another ship."

"Huh, you're not gay?"
"Huhn?"

John closed his mouth pointedly and then grinned, trying for innocent. From Karkat's furrowed eyebrows, he missed. "Haha, nothing. And you talk to... no one else."

Karkat shrugged despondently. "As friends, yes. Small talking. In the ship, people don't like I'm red and people who don't care I'm red don't want a problem. I have before friends in the ship but not... I don't talk big things to them, it's weird."

So, just that Nepeta girl, who he had to avoid leading on by sharing too much, because aliens were complete prudes about any hint of affection. Uuuurgh.

And not John. At any rate. They would find things out about each other either way due to the enforced voyeur thing with the headsets, but it wasn't his to ask about.

"Okay," he said, capitulating. "I don't think I get it very well, but I get it a little." Sigh. He rubbed the back of his neck tiredly, crooked Karkat a side smile, as sincere as he could make it. "I'll stop trying to make you talk."

Karkat stared at him for a couple of seconds, face unreadable apart from the way his eyes had gone narrow in thought.

"Okay," he said with sudden decisiveness, and climbed back up to his feet. John winced a little; Karkat snorted down at him. "You're idiot." He stared down at John, as if trying to impart how meaningful what he was trying to say was. John blinked back, baffled. "If you tell me a thing, I want you know why you tell the thing, not just haha what. And if you don't tell the thing I want you know why too."

"Um?" John blinked up. Karkat thrust a hand in his face, palm up; John took it hesitantly, not even sure that was what he was expecting. (He didn't see what else; hand Karkat his half-chewed sandwich?)

Karkat stared back down, eyes narrowed even thinner, mouth pinched grim in a way that was a little teasing. "And now I put you in the sea," he said, even as he pulled John up onto his feet, and smoothly threw him across his shoulders.

John yelped, started squirming; Karkat wobbled in the sand and almost dumped him head-first in a dune, and then stabilized, a hand gripping John's wrist and another keeping his knee trapped as he stalked determinedly to the closest waves.

"Hey, hey! Not fair! What did I do?! Karkat, I'm very serious, I'll dunk you right back--"

Karkat stomped through the surf and chucked John right in, flipping John over his horned head and sending him spinning like a pancake.

John grabbed his shirt on the way down and dragged him along.

--

DV: ok so to summarize
DV: hes like i think this is a bf territory thing
DV: but im not telling you to stop doing the thing
DV: just not to do the thing if youre not doing the thing deliberately
DV: john
DV: johnnyboy
DV: johnathan
JH: okay! one, not my name, and two even if my name it would not be spelled like that.
DV: john even know what denial is
DV: saint john the negationist
JH: oh my GOD of course you were going to spin bullcrap about it and be about as helpful as udders
on a bull! why do i even tell you anything.
DV: rose isnt online and even if jade was she would use even less sarcasm to cover up the truth
bombs shes dropping on your face
JH: **WHAT** TRUTH BOMBS, YOU GIGANTIC, IDIOTIC JERK.
JH: he's in ****love**** with gamzee!!!! dont even tell me he was telling me to go ahead and hit
on him, what is WRONG with you???
JH: that's gross, and also insulting!
DV: im not doubting his true romansu calm your tits egbutt i mean if he walked into a vat of
telepathic gel with the dude and walked out with his head not caved in the other asshole must have
been satisfied re: faithfulness and butterflies
DV: it sounds more like he thinks *you* have a crush
DV: im just saying
JH: argh!
JH: yeah, our various and varied misunderstandings on the topic of human friendliness being pretty
much the same thing as shameless alien flirting keep being freaking hilarious. ha ha.
JH: sigh. something must have gotten lost in translation.
DV: like?
JH: maybe it was just general advice on how to interact with aliens. i mean, we'll be meeting his
friends soon -- like in TWO DAYS soon?? -- and also a lot of people who are not his friends but also
aliens, i guess he wants to make sure if i hit on any of them that it'll be deliberate. considering our
history i mean.
DV: ...
JH: yeah, must be it.
DV: yeah totally
DV: i can see no other reason
DV: now you must excuse me the nurse is about to tenderly stab me in the butt cheek and put me to
bed
DV: btw just in case you're wondering why jade isnt online atm its because shes sitting at my
bedside fixing my typos and taking out accidental punctuation so you dont think im roxy
DV: hi john!!!! you HUGE DUMB BUTT.
JH: ... HA HA HA WHAT A HILARIOUS PRANK

-- JH logged out! --

--

"John, you need to wake up," his father had said, at five freaking AM, and John had bypassed the
waking up stage to land straight on *battle-ready holy shit*.

(He'd also knocked his head on Jake's bunk, but Jake was up on patrol, Dirk would be on refuel and
maintenance, and Dave's bed was, of course, still empty.)

"Attack?" he'd asked, and his father had shaken his head, but with a worried knit to his brows that
said 'not yet'.

"Advance satellites picked up four alien transports."

He didn't need to say much else. They were early. They were ten hours early.
John took the telepathic headband from his father's hands and put it on before he was even dressed.

(battle time oh shit too early/gotta do it anyway/so in over my head/gonna kill everyone I know via sheer incompetence/you gird your fucking loins) was a background chorus neither John nor Karkat nor Karkat/John paid much official attention to.

They spent the next three hours being yelled at. Karkat for not telling people about the psychics sooner, John for not going digging in Karkat's brain for things Karkat hadn't seen fit to share yet.

Karkat yelled back, but under that was a wave of guilt (should have told earlier/but my leverage/wrong decision??), and worry. There were only three reasons for the attack to happen so early -- either Gamzee had had to change the plan on the fly (well we knew it was risky but oh man), or he'd betrayed them (No), or he had failed and was now dead and the people who'd stopped him were about to put a stop to the rest of them.

Karkat did not approve of that last part, and come to think of it neither did John.

(Dead love/dead friends no) I wish I was in charge not brought out to do tricks of babble and then yay I get to sit at the -- adult table? Do your immature/larvae/young usually not -- okay irrelevant. Wish I was in charge only I know jack shit about your military (or about any tactics for anything wider than a squad fuck gotta learn.)

John casually slid his foot to the side under the table from the end of which they were watching the highers-up shoot ideas at each other. Hass Harley was arguing it up with a trio of dudes on screen who were probably in China or Austria or somewhere like that. You control freak! yeah I know nothing about wider strategy either but it's okay we have Rose and Dirk for that (ok also the General-type people but ehhh) I like small elite-shock troops (small hard fist slipping through your defenses bam in the ribs!!)

you and your elite bullshit! (so unfair) I'd rather train up a bigger group of normal people it'd go the distance/killing jabs only good for when you can close in/risk-reward ratio is insane--

"And John Egbert will be flying escort for Corporal Vantas."

"What?" John and Karkat accidentally chorused, heads jerking up to stare at Harley. They lowered their hands to the table (they'd been resting their chins on them) and frowned. "But Warhammer Two is still nowhere near ready," John said (because Karkat's mouth wouldn't shape the words right) though John's surprise was starting to morph into how??, into oh god please yes I will be so good.

"You'll use Excalibur," Harley said, briefly turning away from the other adults in the room and on the screens.

"Oh. (oh man, Dave.)"

"It's being prepped with your flight data as we speak," Harley added, tapping the edge of his glasses to signify a message sent.

"What do we need them around during the assault for?" someone asked. "I concede that having one more mech in the air would be a relief, so Warhammer going up makes sense, but I was under the impression that the Cancer biomech was half-dead and wouldn't handle a battle. Why aren't we having Vantas come up later in one of the shuttles?"

"Or having him and his official translator stick close," someone else muttered. John snorted a little. Like they were still so terrified of losing someone else to mind control at this point, with the fate of the planet in the balance, that it'd be less of a net loss to have one of six available mech pilots
grounded than to push some random dude who knew nothing of tactical importance at Karkat to pick up translating duties, if they really had to.

(I would fucking bite I would not abide) (I would if I had to/don't want to have to, no no don't touch me no)

(shh no strangers it's okay)

Karkat threw him a sharp look, though it ached underneath. *No promises you can't keep.*

... *can I promise to vet them for you first/weed the assholes out?*

... *that sounds somewhat potentially acceptable maybe (yes thank you.)*

"I want them in the air," Harley said, "for the dang good reason that Vantas here has equipment to plug into the enemy's communication network, if he hasn't been locked out...?"

Karkat shook his head. "No sir. I'm dead for them, so who cares."

"Sloppy," one of the other generals muttered with a disdainful sniff.

Yeah what if we'd gotten your mech working or reverse engineered it, seriously now.

... *you guys are pretty tricky I guess but I think you still fucking underestimate how much we outnumber you.* Karkat huffed, slid him the mental equivalent of a side-look, though this time the body didn't bother to follow. *Also that isn't how mech telepathy-communications work you can't hack it like that! Firewalls mean alien brain in the meld = braindead alien. (... should probably tell Harley I bet someone will want to try it...)*

Harley was in a conversation with some highly decorated dude that it might be better not to interrupt, so John shot him a quick message about it. *Done!*

"All right, that's settled! Vantas, your jobs will be to liaise with Makara, and, if you can, to tag enemy and ally biomechs -- we need to know which is which and I don't think your beau will have had the chance to tie giant kerchiefs to the white hats' upper arms. Egbert, your jobs will be to input Vantas' intel into the tactical map, and to shield and evac him in case anyone gets through the frontlines -- which must *dang well* be last resort. Neither one of you will be going as a combatant."

John tried not to feel disappointed, felt a bit disappointed anyway, and then thought -- in a battle like that? With so many human troops who had never before fought together, and several factions of aliens? Some of them psychic? Yeah, the chances of them staying safe all battle long were. Kinda not high.

God, if he and Karkat fell, it would be a *disaster.*

*I won't let that happen,* he promised grimly.

*(we'll hold,) Karkat echoed without even thinking about it. *Intel-giving is good/some influence thank fuck...*


*But they're nowhere near done talking!* Karkat protested, even as he stood up.

John gave a philosophical shrug and walked out with a polite nod. *Yeah but now they're gonna talk*
What if Gamzee betrayed us, Karkat finished cynically. *(betrayed me/hah impossible no)* What if I also turn to side with him.

He sighed, raked a hand through his hair, fingers slipping under the jello interface; John knew he was about to take the headset off before Karkat even moved his hand up.

*(guess I can see why I cannot know,)* was the last morose thought that came through, and then he was slipping it around his neck.

John took off his own headband, slipped it in his pocket. Sigh.

They came to a stop on the doorstep, bracketed by a pair of military men from one of the Generals' retinue, and a pair of Noir's men waiting facing them on the dusty ground between the buildings.

"I see my mech," Karkat told Noir's men, and then turned to look at John, eyes a little narrow, but unsurprised. "You see Dave. Yes?"

"... Yeah."

They'd never really piloted each other's mechs. The machines were all based on a common design, sure, but then much tailored, retooled to fit their individual fighting styles, the weight and swing of their weapons of choices -- and they spent so much time in those cockpits, the only real privacy they ever got...

It was necessary, he knew that, and Dave had to also know that. And it wasn't like they legally owned the things. But John would still feel better if he got to ask for permission.

And hey, maybe some joking around would help put him back in the proper cheerful-ready mindset.

Well, unless Dave took it upon himself to talk crap about him and Karkat again, but a little snark session might do the same thing, so hey.

--

"F-fuggin c'm in, Shon. Close y' m-mouth while you're at-at it--"

John stood in the doorway of Dave's hospital room, mouth open like a moron as his cheerful "hey Dave" died on his tongue.

There were straps holding his friend down, around his chest and hips and tethering his wrists. There were straps that didn't disguise the sudden trembles, the jerks and twitches, the way his hands curled like a dying spider's legs. There was a black eye on Dave's face where he had no doubt smacked himself, maybe fallen out of bed for all John knew.

As John stared, the twitching seemed to get worse, until Dave's back arched briefly off the bed and he landed back with a slight bounce, the straps at his wrists snapping taut when he yanked them up. His face -- John turned on the spot, turned his back and tried to breathe without shrieking.

"'Least close th' fuckin' door," Dave rasped, tone bitter, and John took a neat step backwards into the room and closed the door in front of his face.

He didn't turn around straight away.

*He's not screaming himself hoarse or lost in his own head*, he remembered Karkat saying, or almost.
Could be worse.

Not broken. This was not broken?

"... Fuckin' bitch," Dave mumbled, the sound muffled like he'd turned his face away in the middle, like he couldn't look at John either.

God.

Jade had been here yesterday evening -- "correcting" his "typos," was it? She hadn't told John. Rose and Dirk had to have seen him, or heard -- Dirk had access to all the cameras, there was no way he hadn't seen him, he'd. Why had no one told John? Why had they all let him keep on with his stupid unfounded optimism and his -- his -- shit.

Okay. Space battle in a few hours. He couldn't -- couldn't go up there so unsettled, so that meant he needed to. Crap. Okay. He breathed out as slowly as he could and turned around again, a smile pinned somehow to his face.

"Whew, sorry buddy. Startled me."

It was a little dim in here, blinds rolled almost all the way down, because -- no visor for him today, not even shades, and that meant Dave's eyes were bare; sunlight would hurt. The look he threw John was so cynical -- so flat. Defeated. His lower eyelid on the left kept jumping, and the corner of his mouth.

He wasn't buying the sudden casual tone, of course, but if John kept pretending, Dave would... let it slide. Let it go, let John keep play-acting the world where nothing ever went bad and they always won.

"Nerve damage?" John made himself ask, before something else made it out of his mouth and he lost the courage to bring it back up. "... Brain damage?"

"Docs don't know. Fu-fus-fucked brain activity. Bit like e-epilepsy." Dave flicked his wrist like he was throwing something inconsequential away, was brought to a stop by the restraints before he could complete the gesture. "Physical damage, though, they've got no idea."

"Oh." John rubbed his hands against his thighs, shoved them in his pockets, rocked on his heels. "That, uh. That sucks. Is it -- like, getting any better? Sometimes?"

"Calm is good. Can't get excited," Dave said, deadpan as possible, and John cracked a smile that hurt.

"Oh no, that must be terrible."

"The terrip-th-terr--" He could see Dave give up in the middle of the word, the brief flash of humor dying down into shame. "Yeah."

Cautiously, John stepped closer to the bed. "I'll do my best to keep things calm and boring," he promised solemnly.

Dave slung him a heavy-lidded side-look. Even in the dim light John could see the darker trail of veins in his papery eyelids. "Yippy yay."

"The day is saved," John said, and rocked his weight a little, hands stuffed deep in his pockets, looked down at his feet.
Dave's wrist on white sheets, barred by the padded strap. Trembling faintly.

"I can stay, if you're bored," he made himself offer, blurted out before he could overthink it. "I've got stuff to do, but I can take a half-hour, or even an hour, that's fine. Tonight's going to be busy but--"

"Oh baby Jesus no." Dave was shaking his head, and John was even sure it was mostly deliberate. (Mostly. He wasn't looking at John.) "I keep, keep f-falling asleep 'nyway." A pause, a deep breath. His red eyes opened and he looked at John straight on this time. "You're here about my baby, yeah?"

John nodded. "Did. Did they ask you first? I--"


Such a frustrated, furious, ashamed mess he was -- and then the whole left side of his face jumped and John had to swallow the knot in his throat.

"Yeah. I'll take care of Excal. You'll get her back like new. Maybe a little dinged. I'll treat her pretty much just like I would treat my own!"

He couldn't help but laugh, half surprise and half nerves, from the eyeroll Dave gave him then. "Dude, Warhammer left in pieces. Like. Three pieces."

"... Slightly better than I treat my own!" John corrected, holding an air of eager deference on his face.

"Get the fffuck out b-before I throw my bedpan at your face," Dave said with a snort, and quirked him a faint, lopsided smirk.

"Yessir," John said, and smiled back, and saw himself out.

Walking back down the stairs and past the nurses would ... he pushed open the corridor window right in front of Dave's door and dropped two stories down.

--

"And we're done here. John, you got everything?"

John blinked up at Marcia, who was peering through the open cockpit door. His hands were underneath the seat, fiddling with the seat height -- Marcia and Pablo swore up and down that it was the exact same as what they'd gotten off Warhammer's specs, but the specs must have been wrong.

That or the shape of Dave's ass hollow was throwing him off.

He rested his hand on the side keyboard, checked the way it swung out over his knees -- not like he should need to reprogram Excalibur in midair, after all the adjusting they'd done all afternoon for things like reaction speed and counterbalancing and automated follow-ups, but you never knew. Roxy had had to make her onboard computer into a server just the other day, after all.

"I've got to supervise weapons adjustments," Marcia told him, brown eyes wrinkling in worry at the corners. "You're staying in here?"

"Yeah," John answered, and managed a smile. "Gotta commune with Excal a bit, sweet-talk her, you know, get the mood going..."

"Haha, you're already channeling Dave." Hah. Ouch. "Don't go kissing his girlfriend now, he'll be
Grinning, she disappeared from view. John let himself wince, and thought longingly of his days helping the mechanics -- but not today. It was fine for the days where nothing was going on but basic maintenance, and they had a well-oiled routine in place for when timelines ran tight; today he would only slow them down.

Seven hours to departure.
Seven hours to get his head in the game. Seven hours to -- damn, but no matter how annoying Karkat found it, no matter how embarrassed John was growing to be about it, there was a reason why his default reaction to bad news was to stop thinking about it.

Stopping thinking about Dave was really, really hard when he was sitting in Dave's mech.

"Ah, I have the right know in my head," Karkat said, unsurprised, from the cockpit hatch. John's head jerked up, his hands briefly clenching on the (thankfully deactivated) controls.

"What are you doing in here?" John spluttered without thought, eyes gone wide as he took him in.

It wasn't even that Karkat was in the hangar -- which was forbidden grounds to him -- because honestly now, who would care again after today?

Karkat wasn't in slacks and a button-up shirt anymore -- or even jeans and a t-shirt. He was encased from fingertips to throat to toes in his old alien flight suit, night-black with the blood red accents, and it changed...

It changed the way he moved, it changed -- his shoulders, the set of his chin, it did things to them even when Karkat just stood there the same way Marcia and the other hangar crew had, holding onto the top of the door and leaning in to see John.

"Food," Karkat replied with a shrug, and handed him a paper bag before swinging himself down. He sat sideways on the jutting edge of the cockpit's sealing door, five inches up from the floor, his back to the doorjamb, one of his heavy combat boots on the drawbridge door and one in the cockpit proper.

Blinking, John opened the bag. Oh. Cold meat cuts and pasta salad. An apple. It was three in the afternoon, and smelling the food made his stomach wake up with a sudden growl.

"Thanks," John said, already digging in.

"I come to tell you, Dad says sleep."

"Mmh." John chewed, swallowed. "Yeah, soon. Why are you wearing that already? If we're not leaving for -- for a while?"

Karkat snorted, ran a possessive hand down his side. "If I put it not on me, the doctor is 'give me one more arm bit, give me one more this, that,' later I put it on with holes."

"Thought they would already have made holes in it," John said, and leaned in to get a better look, keyboard pushed back in its slot to the side and the food container firmly caught between his knees. On the right side of Karkat's chest was drawn his little sideways sixty-nine, and underneath a line of characters that was probably his name in alienese. The sign was picked out on each shoulder too, a red so bright it seemed almost fluorescent in the comparative dimness inside the cockpit, with half the instruments turned off.
"Yes. Before. When it's hot on a body it... makes no more hole?"

"Fixes itself?"

Karkat nodded, arms stretched out to rest his elbows on his knees, hands falling lax at the wrists. "Un."

"With body heat? Cool." Also a bit creepy. He bet it was alive too, somehow. He bet every single piece of technology the aliens had would be alive. Sooo creepy.

Karkat wrapped an arm around his knee, the pad of his thumb gliding thoughtlessly back and forth over the red seam on his inner thigh. John pulled his eyes away, stared down at his pasta salad. Oh, there were egg chunks. He went hunting for them with dogged perseverance.

"You're here why?"

"Uh, I had work to do? To make the mech do what I want. It's set up for -- you know. Not me."

Karkat could hardly have missed the fact that this was not Warhammer. Even dismissing the thing where his boyfriend had left with its remnants in tow, or what Harley had said... Excalibur's white body was threaded in a red almost as bright as Karkat's, and John had never -- it wasn't really his color. Yeah.

He kept shoveling food down his throat, ignored the scrutiny he was under. Karkat looked weird in a flight suit -- too martial, too alien, not even a little bit like a normal part of the background. It was hard not to stare.

Had it really only been two months? It felt like years. Like Karkat had always been tagging along around the island, massacring the English language and getting baffled and offended at things John would never have looked at twice in his life, like parents and microwaves.

He looked battle-ready, bushy eyebrows and wide mouth set to 'grim determination', shoulders squared -- or maybe that was the cut of the uniform, pulling them back...

"Dave is bad, huhn."

John closed his eyes tight. Breathed through his nose.

"Yeah," he said, voice rougher than he'd meant it to be. "He's -- it's bad." *He can't walk*, he almost said, *can't speak properly, can't control his own face, he can't--* John hadn't even thought to ask if Dave was in pain, too, it had felt horrible enough, but what if?

Fair bet that Dave hated it enough that John had seen him, and definitely wouldn't want Karkat to know the details as well. John swallowed his words, repeated a last, inane "It's bad," and concentrated on methodically stabbing at his pasta with his plastic fork, and stabbing it again until the piled-up wriggles fell off in a mush.

"There's no one else who can do the same thing Gamzee does up there, is there?" he asked, to make sure. "With his head."

A faint wince crossed Karkat's face. "No. Purple-blue like him can do that, not others."

And the main thrust of the whole plan was that no one out-purpled him up there. Okay. Good enough.
"Okay," John said, and started eating again, eyebrows down in concentration. The only ones in danger of that happening to them would be the enemy aliens. Good enough.

... Not good enough, but he wasn't sure how to tell Gamzee to keep it to non-permanent-damage levels of utter terror. How to get the message to Gamzee, how to get him to *agree*, and after those, how to keep in check the enemies who wouldn't stop being a problem for anything less.

He ate. Karkat waited for him, straddling his doorjamb, seeming for once content to sit and do nothing. His head was tilted back so that dark, messy hair pressed against the edge of the door, sunset horns pointed back, rock-gray throat bare where his high collar gaped...

**Soldier on the Eve of Battle, John thought, and tore his eyes away.**

He didn't know this Karkat. Cancer's pilot -- great defense, so-so offense, one of the very few aliens to have a solid concept of teamwork -- almost boring, predictable patterns of attack until suddenly he was a cornered wild beast and then you were hanging out in your eviscerated cockpit facing down hard vacuum and his space-black pincers, coming back for another serrated swipe.

If Jade had been five hundred meters farther away, John would have died. He wondered who would have followed Karkat down to Earth then -- Dave? Dirk? Jade herself, maybe? If Karkat had killed him by then, he wasn't sure they would have had as much mercy... How would Dad have reacted? Jane...?

It felt to him like Dave was the first real loss they'd had -- that John had had -- this war. It had felt like that for Jane, too -- infuriated grief, confusion -- and then she'd gotten better, mostly, was still getting better, and John had... *Nah, it was a close call but everything is fine now!*

He hadn't known Jane's squad of Marines personally, he hadn't known the hundred or so Marines they'd lost here and there whenever an alien managed a long-ranged attack that hit the secondary perimeter. He hadn't known any of the crews kidnapped or evaporated in space before John and his family were old enough, the need pressing enough to graduate them from flight simulators to the real thing.

They'd gotten back none of them, not even in pieces, and never would.

"Zhann."

"--Yeah," John said, head jerking up. His pasta salad was now pasta puree. He hadn't taken a bite in about three minutes.

Karkat's head was craned to look up at him, brows furrowed, tilted up in question. "You're angry to Gamzee?"

"No," John said. "Yes. Maybe." He sighed, secured the container between his knees and raked a hand through his hair. He felt under-dressed in his slacks and half-unbuttoned shirt, a civilian playing at war. "It's war. It happened. I'm more angry at him for being an asshole, or because he was *toying* with them. I don't -- what he did to Dave, I..."

Capricorn had gone after Echidna. Dave had decided that no, it did not get to reach her. He'd succeeded, too. That was why he'd gotten hurt. The fact that Capricorn was piloted by a lazy, erratic bag of douche in love with John's -- sort of friend... that didn't seem to belong to the same world.

Whether the price was too high, that was for Dave to decide.

"I just don't like him," John said, and didn't even mumble an apology for once. It was hardly a secret...
at this point, just fact. "I don't know if I'm angry for Dave too. It's war," he repeated, as if to convince himself; "no hard feelings."

Maybe some of John's own victims' friends and lovers would have hard feelings against him.

Well. Then they would have hard feelings, he supposed. John was going to treat them with respect, and then kill them. No mind games, no teasing his targets, he was just going to kill them. The people attached to them could feel whatever they wanted toward him. He would accept it.

"I'm good," he told Karkat.

Karkat snorted, wet and explosive like a horse. "You're a box of shit. A box of shit on a bed of shit, that smells like Zake's foot things and sun making hot on shit."

"That does sound pretty shitty," John said, mouth pursed. Karkat rolled his red eyes, flicked him a side smirk, and then another look, less amused, more inquisitive. John sighed, let his face ease back into a neutral expression.

"Zhann."

"I don't know if I'm supposed to tell you this, buddy. You've got such weird rules for what we get to talk about."

A rueful snort. "We maybe die tonight. Tell me now, so you don't tell me when I'm in your head. Surprise, motherfucker, watch a TV of all the things now! Yes-thank-you Zhann I want this a fuckton."

... Yeah, there was that. John rolled the apple between his palms, pensive. "That's just it. People are going to die."

"Mmh."

"No matter what we do."

"... Mmh."

"And we have to stay back, because the best possible position for the both of us is in the rear, trading intel."

Karkat snorted quietly. "I'm red, now you're fucking red, we stay with your aliens? The fight will go to us." He reclined against the doorjamb, waved his hand, a cynical look on his face. "People out there, they see me with you, get angry like a fish, think hey, a good day to get me dead."

"Angry... like a fish," John repeated, fighting not to smile, and then snickered. "Okay, I believe you. Yeah, it's... I can see that happening. Probably shouldn't look forward to it, we'll help more people by helping coordination than if we wade in and personally punch enemies in the head, anyway -- it's just hard to hang back."

Karkat made a quiet noise of agreement. "I think more hard with you. When I'm small I thought when I'm big I... rrarshh," he said, and swiped the air with his hand, all claws out, poking from slits at the end of his gloves. "Then I got my fucking ass kicked up and down the gym," he added -- like he'd heard the sentence from Bro maybe and memorized it wholesale; there was even a bit of Strider's mocking twang in it. "Then I fix in my head. Want to, can't do, shut up, Khrk't. But Zhann, you can fight, and you want, but they say no. It's more hard."
John felt a bit guilty for laughing, imagining a cocky, younger Karkat getting his britches adjusted -- but not too guilty, because Karkat had wanted him to laugh.

"It's got to be hard, too," John said, gentler, "to want to help and ... your body won't work well enough for it, won't do what you want it to. It's got to be frustrating."

Karkat gave a dry little shrug, not looking at John. "It's life. You shit-kissing blue."

"Hey, I'm not -- argh."

Karkat gave him a disbelieving look, and then a faint smirk when John pouted. John's put-upon sigh transformed into a chuckle, despite himself.

"Oh man, we moved all the controls to where I'm used to having them," he exclaimed, and reached up to prod at some toggles over his head, just to make sure, again, that they were in reach. "But it's a fair bet Excal won't react like Warhammer at all. Also everything feels a tiny little bit too far. That's going to be so distracting!"

Karkat shifted around to sit on his haunches, a hand on the edge of the seat beside John's thigh for balance as he looked up. "Hm. When I go in Gamzee's mech..." His face did something weird, like real, somber thoughts and then a put-upon, overdone frustration. "Eugh. It has one legs. I move how?"

"Well it's not like you guys are walking in space," John replied with a snicker, smiling down at him, as he played with the joysticks on both sides of the seat.

"You don't walk in space."

"Ah, but we walk on Earth!" Not that they were technically supposed to operate in Earth's atmosphere much, never mind on the actual ground, but shh. It was good for parade purposes. "In a spaceship, can't you have optional gravity?"

"... I don't know the words," Karkat told him, eyebrowsfurrowed in faint puzzlement, and unfolded from his crouch, his hand moving to John's armrest. There wasn't a lot of head room; he ended up looming over the pilot's seat. John watched him crane his head to eye the screens and buttons and slides, making faces all the while. "So much a lot of things. Maybe you're stupid because your head is too many cockpit things in it--"

"Hey!" John protested, and pushed at Karkat's booted knee with a tennis-shoe-clad foot. "I'm not stupid, I'm very smart. I bet you couldn't even remember half the buttons," he added, waving at the control panels.

Snorting, Karkat squinted at the controls. John briefly wondered if he should let him, if this was a security breach somehow. (It totally was.) He doubted Karkat would remember them and be able to either hijack a mech or reverse-engineer it from a single glance; piloting took a lot of muscle memory too, and the way the outside of the panels were set up wasn't going to help him unravel their metal technology and everything that happened underneath...

But hey, could be wrong. "Do you know how to pilot from my head?" he asked, curious.

"Hm. I think..." Karkat huffed, and then rotated the right joystick to the side so he could sit on John's right armrest. John shuffled to the left as much as he could in the snug seat, watched with eyes a little wide as Karkat's gloved hand rested on the left joystick, fingers twitching through the start of patterns. "I feel I know, but I don't know," he mused, his back leaning sideways and blocking half of John's view. "I feel my hand goes here, I feel 'oh yes weapon here' but my hand don't know."
Close. His back to John, and John knew-felt all the times he'd left a room sideways rather than offer his blind spot to attacks, with how short his horns were, how if affected his early warning awareness...

John slid his left hand under Karkat's palm, nudged it up a bit with the back of his knuckles to make space. "I should probably not teach you this," he said, and laughed, and it came out oddly choked. "Thumb--" he wriggled it, "--pressing down, now you can move the mech. Index is for--" things he probably shouldn't... shouldn't --

"Oh, for weapon," Karkat said, and crooked his index over John's; John felt the point of his claw tick against the button, and then Karkat took his hand off.

"But if you're ever in a cockpit and you have to pilot it, I'd rather you run away than try to fight," John said, and tried for lightly, and failed.

Karkat craned his neck to glance down at John over his own shoulder. "Weapon their shit face, then run?"

"... Yeah, okay."

Karkat hummed, then said, turned away, pretend-careless, "I don't teach you my mech, you just get in and think I want to run and it run."

"That easy?"

"Pfft. Yes, but -- it's like the headsets, you want to say a thing but you say other thing too and then oh fuck your head's under your knee and you punch in your dick."

John cracked up, flopping against the left armrest so he could laugh properly as he grinned up at his alien bropal. "Oh my god. Tell me you punched yourself in the dick in training."

"... Nnooo," Karkat said, very unconvincingly. "And in the face. Didn't do that. I get in the cockpit I'm like Strider-sir, hello asshole, put your mouth on my foot now you shit people. People all yes Kh'rkt fuck me good please you're very good--"

Yeah, no, John was giggling too hard to even pretend to buy the adoration of people he was pretty sure Karkat was making up entirely. He shoved Karkat in the hip and Karkat skidded. For a second it looked like he was about to land in -- in -- in John's lap -- and then he caught himself, slapped John's closest knee in revenge.

"You're fuckface asshole."

"No, you," John shot back without thought. His face felt hot. Was the sun getting in the hangar? Maybe someone had forgotten a window. Oh. "Hey, it's pretty obvious this isn't a two-person cockpit, huh. You're almost sitting on me, heheh." Heh. Woooow. Super awkward. God, his face wouldn't stop burning. "I mean--"

"Space small?" Karkat asked, and pivoted on one ass cheek so he could look at John, one of his knees digging into John's thigh and kind of -- proving John's point. Kind of that. "When you go in my cockpit, you go in my head, shitfuck," he said, tone more musing than aggressive. "That's small."

Goddamn, the muscles in his thigh were in slightly odd places, but dang if they weren't kind of obvious anyway. Which was a pretty weird thing to notice but the red accent going down the outside of Karkat's hip and -- "Yeah okay point."
Okay. Karkat was even more rabidly territorial than Dirk, where personal space was concerned. He would lean back and step out of John's cockpit any second now.

Any... any second now.

Only he was looking at John, and.

"You are seriously going to slip and fall on my lap, brofriendly, you have like half a butt cheek on the armrest and it's not really made with butts in mind, I mean it's kind of narrow, well not like you have a huge -- um."

Karkat was watching him, and his expression just --

"Karkat?" John choked out. "Why're you staring like that, buddy?" He was looking at John's stupid red gaping face, wasn't he. Did aliens even blush -- had Karkat ever blushed? Right now John couldn't even remember. Maybe Karkat was just wondering about John's weird alien biology--

He brought up a knee and brought up a foot, planted his heel in the tiny edge of free space between John's thigh and the other armrest, across John's -- *knees*, and the fluorescent-red line along the outside of his leg flexed with it.

When John looked up there was a weird smile on his dark goth lips, floaty and small and -- and John didn't know, *weird*. A couple of his pointy little teeth peeked through, briefly dug into his lower lip, and then his smile -- widened -- got closer, got closer to John, his smiling (so strange) mouth and his nose with the slightly odd nostrils that John had never noticed, haha, wasn't it funny the shape of them, and John was *burning up*.

"You talk I fall on you a lot, Zhann," Karkat said, almost lilting with amusement, with *teasing*, and John made a choked-off sound. "Maybe you want that."

He was never sure afterwards who had leaned in first. There was a hook in his guts pulling him closer and he was -- terrified, electrified, something not quite adrenaline gathering under his ribs and pushing up. The kiss started out too hard and a little off-center and (he was kissing Karkat, what the hell?) didn't feel like release, only made that odd tension worse. He made a noise, nasal, faint; the low, quiet grunt Karkat replied with shivered against his lips.

The tip of a tongue teased at his lips, his teeth (so flat, he knew Karkat was thinking), the roof of his mouth a little, ticklish; John made another noise and forced his hands to open on the armrests before he crushed them. He was kissing back so slow, so -- Karkat would think he was bad at it, so little experience and the last time had been so long ago -- but Karkat was letting him suck on his lower lip, was starting to make a throaty, rolling noise (oh, yes, that's good, keep it up) and, and the point of careful teeth, and their mouths pressing together again, open and breathing too fast into each other's mouths, bodies alive and ready for --

He was pushing Karkat's shoulders to arm's length in the next second -- closing his hands there, didn't want him to, to -- what if he fell, hit his head, and now John's body was cold, Karkat was so warm and *present* and there was a, a *distance* now that he -- and -- John didn't want a distance, he wanted to *cling* to him so much he could have screamed, throat gone tight with tears but he.

Kissing.

It wasn't like aliens didn't know what a kiss was for. It wasn't a mistake. It wasn't.

What *was* it. What the fuck was it. What the *fuck*--
"Zhann?" Karkat asked, staring down at his contorted face, baffled and tense suddenly, gloved hands having already snapped closed like manacles on John's wrists, like he could force them off him if John decided to make it a contest of strength.

He didn't want that but he wanted to let go even less. He wanted to cling to Karkat and be as close as he could (oh) -- and if kissing was that then -- if Karkat wanted to do that (he wanted to do that? But. But.) then John -- then -- okay?

Okay. But.

"What was that," he managed, throat dry, mouth tingling with heat, with the littlest breeze. "What -- why...?"

This made no sense. John knew how much Karkat loved Gamzee, knew it from the inside where there was no watching them embrace and touch each other's face and concluding they were brothers.

"You looked at my mouth," Karkat said blankly, and then he -- John's face did something, and Karkat's nostrils flared, his lip curled back to show teeth; he yanked himself backward. John let him go, out of surprise mostly; his horn glanced off the ceiling. "You look at my mouth and my legs and my everywhere and you make shit body joke--"

He devolved into a torrent of alien snarling, hands flying up and around to illustrate his rage. John stayed seated, watching him in stunned-blank shock.

"I didn't mean--"

"You did the mouth thing too!" Karkat yelled back at the top of his voice. "You fucking asshole--"

"Oh my god, don't yell!" John shouted back, hot and dizzy with it. "Don't -- I know I did, I just--"

Incandescent with rage, Karkat slammed both hands on the armrests, hit John's forehead with his, a short, sharp impact that left John -- not hurt, but reeling. He pressed a hand to his forehead, gave Karkat an injured look, but Karkat was still right there in his face, still furious.

"You say I'm wrong and it's not boyfriend things for you, and then you do more boyfriend things, but no it's not, even when you make your mouth to my shitfucking mouth -- do you want me or not?!

"Not if you're going to leave!" John shouted back, shoving him in the chest. Karkat stumbled back, caught himself on the doorjamb, stared at John all weird -- furious but thinking, like --

... Wait.

... Oh.

Oh man.

Oh fuck.

John thunked back against the backrest, pressed his hands to his face, shoving his glasses up into his hair. Laughed, because seriously, what? What the hell was that?

He didn't want Karkat to leave, he didn't want him to go anywhere, and damn straight he was jealous of Gamzee because Gamzee got to touch Karkat without it being weird and stand as close as he wanted and play with his hair, play with his horns probably even. He didn't know, didn't understand
what it was, this need to crawl into Karkat's space and never leave again, if it was the headsets or what but it was right here, it existed under his ribs where no amount of digging would get it out. It was huge and it was too much and he--

Didn't want it to stop.

Only he wanted Karkat to want that too, and Karkat only wanted to go home.

He forced his hands off his face, blinked with sticky eyelashes (oh), looked. Karkat was half-out of the cockpit by now, one foot on the edge, both hands holding on to either pounce or retreat fast, like his body thought it was still a fight, but his face...

"... Zhann," he said, and John swallowed and. He should apologize, for, for freaking out, and then he could listen to Karkat -- he'd confused the guy, led him on, he'd been told again and again he was too much and apparently he hadn't -- hadn't even been aware that Karkat might not be totally, oversensitively alien (might not be totally wrong) (oh.)

"Karkat, I--"

"Get the fuck down from there, Vantas!" someone snapped from the ground. John let out a frustrated shout.

"Not now, Noir, we're busy!" he yelled, rocking forward to the edge of his seat as Karkat pivoted on one foot to look past the scaffolding, looking as startled as John was.

"Well you can get fucking busy outside of a fucking classified location, what's wrong with you? Vantas, don't make me come get you."

Karkat threw John a look -- eyebrows drawn in, frustration and lingering anger, but already trying to think it through, trying to figure John out and not managing. John looked back, powerless, tried to imagine getting out of here and walking with his face all teary and panicked, blotched red from being kissed, from--

"Okay," he said somehow, "okay, we'll go--"

"Harley needs you yesterday, Vantas, you need to pay attention to your fucking tablet," and Karkat winced and opened his mouth like he wanted to apologize to John, but in the end he didn't say anything, just gave a weird nod and turned to leave.

John burrowed back in the pilot's seat, put his feet on the seat (Dave would bitch) and pressed his face against his knees. He hit the cockpit lock without bothering to look up, to open his eyes; and then, sealed away, instruments turned off, he yelled out all the air in his lungs.

Stupid, shitty, horrible day.

It wasn't even half over.

It wasn't even half over and now he was going to have to fly with Karkat in his head and --

No. He didn't want to think about it anymore. He wasn't going to. He was going to avoid the shit out of this huge, ridiculous clusterfuck and to hell with anyone who would make judgey faces about his goddamn coping mechanisms.

He brought up the wrist with the band that controlled his nanites, went into old subfolders he hadn't used in ages, or ever.
There. Melatonin production. He gave himself a nice dose of hormonal sleepiness, settled himself better into the seat. Set his alarm for one hour before departure. Dad would know where to find him if they needed him early.

Despite his best efforts, he fell asleep imagining Karkat's body curled up (impossibly) in the chair with him.

End Notes

Interested in teasers, discussions, and writing progress for this fic? Here's my general Battlefield Terra tag, and here's my BT-specific Writing Progress tag. (This tag contains mostly teasers and word counts and general grousing about the fic being difficult, but also partial updates that I make on the Kink Meme before posting the completed chapter on AO3.)

BT isn’t written on a schedule. I don’t write on a schedule; telling myself that I HAVE to sit down and write is the fastest way to give me writer’s block that can last several months. I can't tell you when it'll be updated -- I don't know either.

when it's abandoned i'll tell people it is; in the meantime, assume it's not. If you're really curious about the fic's status you can head to my tumblr and check the BT tags I linked higher up, and if the last post is older than a couple of months you can send me an ask about it. (note, asking is fine, i'm always glad to talk about the process and it's neat that other people like my stories, but whining and guilt-tripping just make me feel like the fic itself is a chore, and then i don't want to work on it. i've got REALLY BAD writer's block this year so it's really not smart to add to it.)

Works inspired by this one

Battlefield Terra: In Which The Characters Prove Exactly Why They Shouldn't Have Kids Ever, But They Have Them Anyway And It'd Be A Pain To Return Them Now So Hey Why Not by Asuka Kureru (Askerian), Battlefield Mentis by horchata, Battlefield Terra Prequel - The One Where Bro And Noir Hatefuck by Asuka Kureru (Askerian), Six Months by Haurvatat, play me 'til your fingers bleed by orphan_account

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!