In Full Clarity
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In Full Clarity
by coldhope

Summary

In which Sollux Captor begins his freshman year at Anningley College, a small but prestigious liberal arts institution in upstate New York near the Finger Lakes, and finds himself living with a purple-and-black douchebag of the purest ray serene. Features homemade gauze bedcurtains, tropical fish, Theater Parties, pesterlogs, violet capes, underage drinking, graveyards, and one deeply touching journey of self-discovery and profound personal growth.

Notes

Inspired by InkSkratches whose a-fucking-mazing fic The Other Side of the Heart was one of the factors that got me into this ship in the first place. Hope you like.

There's also now an askblog on Tumblr.
Chapter 1

Freshman orientation fucking sucks. You were expecting that, of course; you’d plotted out the different ways it could suck on the ride down with all the shit you cared about packed in the back of your dads’ car (computer shit, computer shit, computer shit, your games and your dvd collection, some basic clothes and a toothbrush, computer shit) and by the time you’d pulled into the long sweeping drive rounding the pond on Anningley’s campus you were pretty sure it would be suck model #4, Cheery Let’s Get To Know One Another.

Sometimes it would kind of be awesome not to be right all the fucking time. You’re on a hall in a coed dorm segregated by floor: girls get the top two, boys—big surprise—get the bottom two. There’s a smoking porch out back, thank fuck, but you bet it’s gonna be thronged with exactly the kind of assholes you want nothing to do with, and you wish again, for the millionth time, that your dads had let you apply for a single room based on your Issues.

Issues plural, but hey, the biggest one being you are fucked in the head so comprehensively you might as well be walking around on another planet about half the time. You can maybe find it in you to pity whatever poor asshole ends up with you as a roomie, and a little stone of satisfaction settles into your stomach at the thought. Sure, they can make you miserable, it’s what the world pretty much fucking does on a daily basis, world has that shit down, but you can give as good as you passive-aggressively get.

Your dads help you haul your machines down the stairs to the lair you’ve been assigned. Gresley Hall 020, all the way back on the left-hand side of the building. It’s shaped like an E without the central crossbar, the smoking-porch/balcony taking that wing’s place. You are deep underground on one side of the room and the only window on the other side looks out on the shitty excuse for a volleyball court that takes up much of the inside of the space between wings.

Great.

You get there first so you get to pick the bed and you get to put your shit wherever you want it. With your dads’ help—okay, directing the both of them to do it for you—you unbunk the beds and claim the one with the longer legs for your own, stacking your boxes of various cables and equipment underneath the bed and hauling one of the excuses for a desk over to rest against the footboard. You’ll have your main desktop with the monitors here, and your netbook can sit there just where you can reach it from bed because fuck getting up to check email first thing in the morning.

“You going to be okay, Sol?” Dad One asks. Dad Two is off moving the car out of the loading/unloading space in front of the building.

Goddamnit you had it together until he looks you straight in the eye and asks the question. You are suddenly very glad you have your shades on.

“Fine,” you say. “I can handle this.”

He nods. “We know you can. But you call us, okay? You let us know if there’s anything we can send you.”

You nod, and then you are wrapped up in his arms and you bury your face in his shoulder and just for a moment you are a little kid again—until a little noise from the doorway makes you stiffen all over.
“Ahem,” the guy says again. It’s not even a cough. He’s actually just saying “Ahem.” You can feel the furious flush in your cheeks as he raises an eyebrow that is almost certainly not naturally that dark. “Sorry, I wasn’t expectin’ to interrupt anything.”

“You’re not,” you say fiercely, pushing yourself back from your dad. Fuck. Is this guy your roommate?

“Family moments are important,” he says, and wow he looks like he needs a good punch up the bracket. He’s a textbook example of Insufferable Hipster. Glasses and all. He’s probably even wearing eyeliner, ironically. A streak of vibrant violet mars his ordinary brown hair just at the very front, where he’s obviously taken care to outline his widow’s peak with the dye, sparing no expense. He’s just missing the *ironic* star tattoos on his neck which he might actually have because you can’t see it under the *horrible fucking scarf* he has on over a purple silk shirt with…

No. Your potential roommate does *not* wear frilled silk shirts. You are going to die. You are going to kill him first and *then* you are going to die.

“—I’m Eridan Ampora,” this douche is declaring, and holding out a hand in implicit challenge; you wince, and you grip his hand—fuck, he’s wearing like eight rings on each hand what the hell why would you even do that—and you shake it *firmly*. There’s a tiny tiny reward in that his purple eyes widen ever so slightly behind his stupid hipster glasses, but then his mouth curls up at the corners as if to say *oho, I know this game and I can play it too.*

*(what the hell purple eyes who even wears contacts and glasses together jesus fuck)*

Your dad gathers up some of the unnecessary boxes, and you manage to cool it enough to say “Nice to meet you, Eridan. I’m gonna go check out the rest of the dorm. See you later.”

You don’t exactly understand the look on his patrician face that flickers for just a moment, only a moment, before it’s gone: a sort of…lost expression, as if he’s reading from a script somebody has just taken away.

Fuck. You hope he does not mind you staying up all night. Wait, no. You hope he does, so he applies for a transfer and you can get some wibbly little bio nerd in his place, someone who wouldn’t look at you like that, as if his stupid purple hair and his stupid purple contacts and his ironic hornrims made him objectively better than you are.

By the time orientation meeting rolls around that evening, everyone’s parents are gone, and among the smaller and twitchier freshmen the beginning of tears is heard in the land. You are *so* not up for this shit. Even if pizza is involved you are *so* not up for this shit.

It’s going to be a long goddamn year.
Wow. Your RA is a jock.

The extent to which this does not surprise you is just devastating. He’s gathered you together in the hall, the bunch of you sitting around in that awkward eye-contact-less clumpy fashion you always get with a group of people who’ve never met before, and he is holding the damn pizza hostage while he declaims.

“My name’s Gerard St. Germain,” he’s saying. “Which is why I don’t use it, I just go by St. G. Couple ground rules first: no underage drinking, no smoking in the rooms, no drugs. Serious about the no drugs, guys. They will kick you out if you get caught with weed. If any of you get your wisdom teeth out or whatever and have a prescription for shit like vicodin, let me know about it so I can reassure the school you’re supposed to have narcotics if they ask. Other stuff, be considerate to your roomies, don’t play your music loud after quiet hours, basically just use common sense. If you have problems with your room arrangement try to work it out between you, but come to me if you really need to transfer for whatever reason and we can go talk to Res Life together. Otherwise, my room’s number 8, the door’s almost always open, come find me if you need anything or if you wanna talk. My number’s on the whiteboard.”

He’s ticking shit off on his fingers. He’s the size of a house and you can tell he probably plays one of the more contact-oriented sports, but hey, he can speak in sentences, you could be worse off. “I think that’s it. Any questions? --Here, dig in.”

There’s a Meat Lover’s, a couple of plain cheese, and one with...ew, ham and pineapple. Your douchelord of a roommate, who had shown up late and spent St. G’s speech twiddling his rings around his fingers, appears to like ham and pineapple. Figures.

You’d gone wandering around Gresley after your dads had left and it’s about as unexciting as you’d expected; you did manage to cadge a cigarette off some dude with an ICP t-shirt (pretty sure that was unironic, too) who was pretty clearly stoned in the middle of moving-in day and lying on his back on one of the picnic tables by the volleyball court. Gotta buy some next time you’re near civilization. When you got back to the room Ampora wasn’t there but his stuff was, and you fucking stared:

He’s got...okay, he’s got like yards of purple and black fabric tucked into the gaps between the ceiling tiles to hang around his bed in actual curtains. You have to grudgingly give him credit for attempting to solve the privacy thing, but bedcurtains? Really? Behind the curtains he’s got...yeah, those would be black sheets on his bed.

A laptop in what is by now unsurprising violet sits on his desk, which has all his shit arranged in neatfreak order. You look closer at it.

Oh my god, you think. That’s a Della. You remember when they came out, what an incredibly dumb move that was. Laptops for Women, cause, uh, women couldn’t use regular laptops for some reason, also they came in pretty colors because girls like that kind of thing.

He actually bought a fucking Della.

The number of levels on which this is truly, hilariously, utterly stupid fucking boggles your mind and you cannot help cracking up completely and flopping on your own bed with your arms wrapped around yourself. It takes you a little while before you can stop snickering long enough to check out the admittedly sweet-ass aquarium he has on his dresser next to...uh. A pewter statue of a wizard.
With a crystal ball.

That starts you off again and you think, giggling, that maybe living with Ampora isn’t going to be unrelentingly awful, if he continues to be this unintentionally funny.

Now, watching him consume pizza fastidiously—if such a thing is even possible—you wonder what the hell he’s gonna major in. Theater, probably. Or art. He could be an art kid. The coefficient of pretension is high enough.

You realize you’ve been looking at him for a while now and abruptly turn your gaze to the other kids on your hall. There’s a short sullen-looking kid with spiky black hair who looks like he might be Indian or something—he stands out because of the air of concentrated fuck-you he’s giving off—and right, there’s that stoner kid who bummed you a cigarette earlier, you didn’t catch his name. And some douche with pale-blond hair who’s wearing his shades indoors in the evening.

Okay, fine, you’re doing that too, but that’s cause your fucked-up eyes always make people ask dumb questions and you are really not in the mood to answer them. One’s blue and one’s a weird shade of brown. Your dads think it’s totally cool, but then they’re your dads and they’re allowed a free pass on some of the lamer shit. Anyway, your shades are just tinted oval glasses, not aviators like that kid’s. When had aviators been in style? Ever?

You turn your attention to your pizza and tune out the other kids talking. Orientation lasts the rest of the week—the rest of the students get back next week when classes start, but the freshmen get a whole week’s worth of Activities to Orient them, and you intend to conveniently forget about and/or weasel out of as many as physically possible. Tomorrow there’s some kind of presentation by the student government organization and then a bunch of sessions where you’re supposed to get to know your classmates: screw that. You need to get a ride into town, hit up a CVS or something for cigarettes, energy drinks, and those goddamn addictive little reese’s cup things that you don’t have to unwrap, you can just eat them right out of the bag and holy shit you want some of those right now.

“So,” someone says and you blink. It’s him. He’s come over and is sitting next to you. “What’s your major?”

He kind of has the edges of an accent, but it’s not obvious enough to be intentional. “Comp sci. You?”

“I kinda figured, what with all the computer shit you have. You like programming?”

“No, I hate it, I’m just a masochist.” You chew pizza, deadpan. “--Yeah, I like programming. Nice computer you got, by the way.”

“Really?” There’s something in his voice that makes you flick a glance at him. His big purple eyes are fixed on you. Those have to be contacts, right? Nobody really has purple eyes. “You think so?”

“It’s a pretty color.”

That seems to satisfy him, at least for the moment. This is one weird goddamn kid you’re living with. “--so what’s your major?”

Why are you still talking to him?

“Theater,” he says, and you award yourself mental bingo points. “I got accepted to a bunch of other schools but this one had the best theater program.”

You wonder how anybody can tell.
11 p.m. and you are going to kill yourself this asshole is so annoying. He’s spent the past hour and a half organizing his fucking closet, in which you swear to God he is actually keeping a cape in the shade of purple you are now violently sick of, and he is now watching some kind of anime on his shitty laptop with the speakers turned up. You have your earbuds in and you’re lying on your bed with your netbook and even though you have your music blasting you can still hear the interference of high squeaky voices and saccharine soundtrack shit.

(Before this he had spent some time talking to his fish. He has named all of them after great conquerors of history. They are fish. Pretty, but just fish.)

(Also, he hums.)

(Also also, he can’t seem to go five minutes without checking his reflection in something, the aquarium glass or the mirror on the back of the door or the other mirror on his desk. Does he think he’ll suddenly have changed shape or something? What the fuck.)

You force yourself to pay attention to the blog you’re reading but when he starts singing along in Japanese you snap the netbook shut and yank the earbuds out. “Dude, it’s quiet hours. Can you turn that shit down?”

Eridan looks up at you with big dumbass purple eyes (you are sick of noticing that they are purple) and blinks. “Huh?”

“I asked if you could turn that down. Cause I can’t even hear my own goddamn music and it’s past quiet hours and I really doubt everyone else on the hall wants to listen to Pretty Sparkle Magical Soldier Clusterfuck Whatever, okay?”

It’s actually kind of impressive how obviously his expression changes, like flicking a switch. You decide to call this one Affronted Sneer. “It’s Princess Tutu, for your information.”

“Wow, I so do not care even in the slightest.”

“Obviously. I da thought you might have a clue about fine works a animation what with all your computer shit but I guess you’re not as sophisticated as that.” His accent gets stronger when he’s pissed off, you notice.

“Coming from someone who actually bought a Della and who has a fucking cape in his closet and put up bedcurtains in his dorm room? Yeah, sophistication all up in this bitch.”

Ampora’s eyebrows draw together fiercely and he snaps his computer shut. “Shut up about my cape. That shit's couture.”


“So? I can still dress well! I can afford it, unlike some people.”

“Oooh.” You roll your eyes and flop back against the pillows. “I’m fucking crushed, Ampora.”

His face is pinched, pale; you think you’ve managed to actually piss him off instead of just hurting his precious purple feelings. Good.

Asshole.
He shrugs into—not his cape, thank God, but a long black coat with a shitload of buttons down the front. It looks expensive. “Fuck you, Sollux. I’m going out.”

“Turn off the overhead light on your way.”

Of course he doesn’t, and he slams the door hard enough that you know it has to have woken some people up—yeah, there, your neighbor is banging on the wall with a fist. You tell the wall to fuck off and you put your earbuds back in and you hope Eridan Ampora dies in a fucking fire.
Chapter 3

When you wake up at the ridiculous hour of eight in the morning he’s back, or at least something is occupying his black-and-violet regal performance of a bed. Whoever it is sleeps curled tightly on their side with the covers pulled almost completely over them, back to the wall. You are reminded of woodlice.

Well. You got a whole day of utter annoying bullshit to evade. First priority is to get the fuck off campus and find somewhere that will sell you the stuff on which you subsist, because you are betting their excuse for a dining hall does not run to cigarettes and Monster.

(That’s another thing. They’re building a new campus center, having demolished the old one, and for the next year and a half you get to eat your meals and visit various offices in this gigantic fucking green-and-white tent thing. It is the size of a football field and it is horrible. You resolved at once to eat as few meals as possible in there, which isn’t such a big deal for you on account of you mostly live on shitty junk food and caffeine, with the occasional order of Chinese or something when you’re feeling extra tired and shivery. Now that your dads aren’t watching you, nobody is likely to nag, which is a kind of awesome feeling. You kind of want to know how long you can actually go without eating, just for science.)

You sniff yourself and think meh, another day’s fine without a shower, it’s not like you sweat much in any case, and change into battered jeans and a T-shirt. The shit you wear to sleep can totally be worn to sleep for the rest of the week, so you toss your ragged sweatpants and Bowie shirt onto your unmade bed and hop around looking for your other goddamn sock.

The internet isn’t doing anything interesting. You’ve checked your various blogs and social media shit, flicked through your daily roll of sites to catch up on, and all that’s new is that some enterprising soul has finally taken the initiative to put together a trojan that takes advantage of Apple’s Java vulnerability. Fucking finally. That whole smug art-douchery we’re-immune-to-viruses bullshit has always irritated you.

That done, you take your phone off the charger and put it in your pocket, and then you go and you talk to Ampora’s fish. “Hey, Alex, or are you Genghis? No, fuck, you’re Tamburlaine, Genghis is that dude with the whiskery shit on his chin. You guys are too cute. I just want you to know that. You are just the most adorable little world conquerors I have ever seen.”

They don’t seem particularly fazed. You realize after a moment that you are waiting for your asshole roommate to wake up, and then you remember why.

“Hey, Ampora.”

Nothing.

“Ampora?”

“Nrrrgh.”

“Ampora, you’re rich, right? You got a car on campus?”

“Nrrrgh.” But there’s a shifting of black sheets and an intensely amusing example of bedhead reveals itself. The carefully gelled construction of yesterday has been slept on very hard, and is now sort of canted to one side, sticking out at about twenty degrees from horizontal.
Also he sleeps in his contacts. What the hell, dude.

“Wake up, you gotta go get oriented. Do you have a car?”

“...yeah,” he says, rubbing at his face. Christ he looks younger than he has to be. “Why?”

“Can I borrow it? Gotta go pick up some stuff from town.”

That wakes him up in a hurry and one hand flails around on the dresser he’s using as a nightstand, knocking over his water bottle before locating his glasses. Okay, so he sleeps in his contacts that don’t do anything. “What? What the fuck, Captor, why would I ever let you borrow my car?”

D’aww, he’s gone back to calling you by your last name, it’s like you’re kiddywinks in some Brit boarding school. “Cause I’m asking you nicely? Look, I’ll say please.”

You don’t actually expect him to give you the keys. You are just enjoying fucking with him, because fucking with jerks first thing in the morning is way better than breakfast.

“No. Absolutely not. What the hell, I don’t even know you and you’re a jackass, why should I trust you with my car? That thing’s fuckin’ valuable. Besides you said there’s orientation shit.”

“No, I said you have orientation shit. I have no intention of being oriented any more than I am right now. So either tell me where the keys are or get up and go be a good little do-bee for our giant RA.”

Eridan groans again and rubs at his face. He looks pale. “Fuck you, Captor. Fuck you so hard.”

“We barely even know each other, jeez. You come on way too strong, it’s like really offputting, dude.”

That earns you a look of absolute loathing, and you grin. God, pushing this asshole’s buttons is like playing Whack-a-Mole. It’s like hot liquid glee. “I mean if you really feel that way after just such a short acqu--”

He throws a pillow at you. He actually throws a pillow at you. He has a bunch of them and they’re all in fancy pillowcases--why the fuck would one guy need that many, jesus christ, he’s practically sleeping sitting up--and oh but this one has little purple ribbons at the corners. How sweet. “I’m keeping this,” you tell him, and toss it on your desk chair. “Actually you know what, we should just draw a big line down the middle of the room like in those shitty middle-school young adult books.”

“Fuck you,” he says and pulls the covers over his head for a minute or two before sighing the world’s most put-upon sigh and emerging. He is wearing, yes, purple silk pajamas. You are so very unsurprised.

“Man, where do you even get that shit? Do you shop at International Ma...wait, you totally shop at International Male, don’t you, Ampora? Purple fucking satin. That shit is golden, it’s going right on my blog--”

He’s not glaring at you like he ought to be. He’s not doing anything at all other than looking super preoccupied, one hand cupped, the other round his water bottle. After a moment he swallows with obvious effort, and then tips whatever’s in his cupped hand into his mouth, following it with water and another conscious swallow. Fuck, he must be hungover, you think, and you mentally applaud him for getting wasted the very first night at the same time as you wonder if he’s gonna hurl all over the floor.

The moment passes and he pads over to his closet and retrieves a purple-and-black dressing-gown
with EA embroidered on the pocket. “First and foremost fuck you, Captor, in a completely platonic sense. You are a jackass and I’m gonna fuckin transfer the hell outta here soon as physically possible, also you should get checked out cause I think you may be somewhat wrong in the head.”

“Oh I am,” you assure him. “Wanna see my meds?”

The eyes widen, then narrow. “No. Shit, you’re an actual lunatic, even more fuckin reason for me to beg Res Life to reconsider. Second a all fuck you. Third a all I’m gonna have a fuckin shower and if you want to have any shred of a chance a gettin to ride into town you better fuckin shut your face.”

You beam at him. Suddenly he’s adorable in the most annoying kind of way. You’re aware that you hate him, but this is kind of cute—still, it’ll be a relief when Res Life moves him and you get a weenieburger who doesn’t do shit like watch horrible anime with the volume all the way up or wear a fucking cape.

When he’s gone, you mosey over and have a look at his dresser. There’s, hey, check that shit out, there’s an amber plastic prescription bottle with his name on it. Surely princeling-boy couldn’t also be fucked in the head? That might be far too much synchronicity.

You don’t recognize the name of the drug and so you put the bottle down and go back to your computer to look it up, but since you last checked some shit has gone down on one of the boards you frequent and you have to track back to the beginning of the argument in order to figure out who is wrong on the internet.

It takes him a ridiculously long time to get done with the shower. When he comes back, his little basket-crate of bath stuff hooked over one arm like a fifties housewife, his hair is already gelled and sculpted into position. He still has to do his eyeliner and sort out his eyebrows but he’s closer to the Eridan you’d met yesterday, the one who’d stood in the doorway watching your dad hug you and said “Ahem” out loud.

“You fall in?”

“You’re not going to shower?”

“Eh,” you say. “Tomorrow’s fine.”

“You are disgusting,” he tells you and sweeps around behind his wardrobe door. Bits of him appear and disappear as he presumably gets out of the dressing-gown and puts on his clothes; you don’t watch. By now the hall is alive with the sound of freshmen scuttling to be sociable, well-adjusted and oriented. You peer out through the peephole.

“And the coast is clear. They’re probably scuttling to go meet up at the tent thing for that lecture. Hurry, before Giant RA comes to do checks.”

Eridan pokes his head out from behind the wardrobe door. “What do you mean checks?”

“When they come round every half hour or whatever to make sure you’re...”

Fuck.

“Never mind, Ampora,” you say, and even you can tell it’s a shitty comeback. He doesn’t need to know about the familiar rhythm of footsteps in the hall outside: step step step turn-click as the door opens, ‘checks,’ turn-click, step step step, repeat every fifteen minutes if you’ve done something particularly crazy in the recent past. You scowl behind your shades and write a particularly scathing response to some dipshit’s post.
Miraculously he doesn’t push his advantage, and in another twenty minutes he’s shrugging into a charcoal-grey jacket that he makes sure flashes the Armani label as he puts it on. You have no actual metrics for what that means in terms of monetary value but at a conservative estimate you’re pretty sure that coat could buy your gaming rig at least twice, and you swallow back pure vibrant envious loathing.

Douche.

“I’m only doin this because I need to go into town,” he says. “You taggin along is just me bein a awesome an bighearted person, okay? Also you fuckin suck and I hate your music.”

You just flip up your hood and slouch along beside him, making every effort to look as poor and shabby as you possibly can.

~

His car is...fuck. His car is nice. It’s not purple, for one thing, you are floored at that, you hadn’t thought he would be seen dead in anything that wasn’t the vibrant hue of Manischewitz wine; it’s gold, a sort of pale gold. And it’s a Mercedes. You don’t know the models or anything, but it’s a sleek little sports car and you are wondering how long it will take before somebody keys it on general principles.

It’s also a stick. Which turns out to be hilarious. Maybe it’s just the audience, but Eridan fucking sucks at driving stick. You almost stall twice before you’re even out of the goddamn parking lot and he tries to start in third when you’re turning onto the main access road. It’s only because he leans on the gas super hard, tach dancing at like 3000, that you even get moving, and you flick a little glance over at him behind your shades. He’s....fuck, you wonder how often he’s even driven before. The knuckles on the shifter knob are white between rings and he has that set intent look on his face of somebody who is sphincter-clenchingly petrified.

“Dude,” you say, stopped at a traffic light.

“What?”

“Want me to drive? This is kind of an annoying road.”

You are totally unprepared for the look of absolute vitriolic furious loathing he turns on you. He takes in a deep breath to presumably unleash a tirade of abuse but just then the light turns and the cars behind you honk, and he has to take his attention off you and get the car moving without stalling or grinding the gears.

You feel almost bad, and look away, watching the road instead.

When you get to Target he gets out without a word and slams his door, stalking away without waiting for you. Jesus, you must’ve got him good. After a couple of moments you get out too and the faint beep as the locks engage is the only intimation he’s even aware of what you’re doing.

You catch up with him inside the store. “Ampora--”

“Shut the fuck up,” he says, and his accent is stronger than ever. “Just don’t say a goddamn word.”

Well. Okay then. You shrug, flip him off behind his back, and slope after him with your hands in your hoodie pocket and your deadpan expression firmly pastede on yay.

He goes straight for the health-and-beauty section and tosses several boxes into his shopping-basket,
without bothering to check if you’re there; you scan the shelves he’s raided. Um. Pepto-Bismol, Dramamine Less Drowsy, Zantac.

Guy must be feeling rougher than you thought. Where the fuck had he even got to last night and who’d gotten him wasted?

You decide not to ask him just at the present moment, and silently follow, scooping what you want off the shelves as you go. Hell yeah, tiny reese’s cups. Hell fucking yeah, you are the best of candy, there is no hope of beating you in a candy-off except when those fucking Guylian hazelnut chocolate things get involved and there is no way Target carries those.

Also Monster is on sale. Good. Serendipity. And *Flaming Hot Cheetos.*

You trail behind Ampora and his basketful of stomach remedies, and when the cashier asks if your orders are together you just shake your head and stick a divider down between them. When it’s your turn you ask for a carton of Camel Lights and she has to get a supervisor over and Ampora is sitting on a bench waiting for you and looking progressively more and more furious with the universe. You’re actually wondering if you have enough to get a cab back to campus if he decides to just leave you there.

Fortunately for everyone, he doesn’t, and you follow him back out to the car with your bags heavily loaded with chemicals and carcinogens. In a rare act of tact and sweet outgoing friendly kindness you don’t offer to drive again, and just stare out the window as he judders and grinds and hisses under his breath, feeling sorry for the poor goddamn Mercedes--and yeah, okay, maybe a tiny bit for this douchebag who can’t admit he sucks at something. What is he, fourteen?

~

When you get back to the dorm it’s deserted, everyone presumably off frolicking in the throes of orientation, and Ampora only pauses to open a couple of the boxes of medicine and swallow a handful of pills before grabbing his shitty laptop and his shitty manpurse/messenger bag and stalking right back out the door again.

Welp.
Chapter 4

You settle back on your bed with your cheetos and your gross wonderful Monster--the original kind, screw that no-calorie shit, what is even the point--and your netbook, and you put your earbuds in and little by little the entire world fades out and there is just you and the computer. You don’t have any serious projects going on at the moment, you’re dicking with a couple of programs you’ve been working on for ages, and in between bouts of that you check to see if any of your friends from home happen to be online.

Score.

-- twinArmageddons (TA) began pestering apocalypseArisen (AA) ! --

TA: hey aa

TA: how2 arizona 2o far?
AA: 0h hey s0llux
AA: its pretty 0k, classes havent started yet th0ugh
AA: the scenery 0ut here is amazing, i t00k s0 many shitty pictures 0ut the airplane wind0w.
AA: tempe seems like a pretty nice city so far
AA: h0ws anlingley
TA: oh my god my roommate iis fuckiing iii2ane, aa.
TA: he2 liike the platonic ideal of douchebag2. ii2 amaziing,
TA: he2 riich, for one thing. whiich ii gue22 ii2nt hii2 fault but ii 2tiill hold ii again2t hii2 becau2e.
TA: and he wear2 a cape.
AA: what
TA: iiit2 ii in hii2 clo2et, look iiill take a piicture two prove ii
twinArmageddons (TA) sent picture 2eeiit2afuckiingcape.png
twinArmageddons (TA) sent picture andthii2ii2hii2bed.png
TA: photographic fuckiing proof
AA: h0ly shit
AA: that is kind 0f preci0us
AA: in a h0rrifying way
AA: did he really put up bedcurtains
TA: ye2.
TA: and get thii2:
TA: hii2 computer ii2 a della.
TA: 2poiiler alert: ii2 purple.
AA: 0h my g0d.
AA: is he d0ing this irOnically 0r s0mething? als0 whats his name
TA: ii hone2tly dont think 2o. or iif he ii2 ii2 liike the mo2t incriii2be performance ever.
TA: oh and he ha2 thii2 totally 2weet car. whiich before you a2k ii2 not purple for 2ome rea2on. ii2 liike brand new. ii bet hii2 parent2 got ii it for him a2 a pre2ent.
TA: but he cant drive for 2hiit. iit wa2 fuckiing embarras2iing, aa. he2 all 2tiiring around in the gear2 liike he2 mixiing cake batter and 2talliing all over. wiith thii2 terrifiiied look on hii2 face.
TA: hii2 name2 eriidan ampora and he ii2 the priince of hiip2ter2.
AA: w0w
AA: s0llux i think y0u may have the weirdest r00mmate ever. mine is c0mpletely b0ring, shes a bi0 maj0r
AA: weve had like three c0nversati0ns since we g0t here like "d0 y0u want t0 walk Over to the
b00kst0re" 0r "what time is that thing we have t0 g0 t0"
AA: y0u will have to keep me updated 0n amp0ras shenanigans t0 make up f0r it
TA: dont worry ii plan on iit
TA: oh fuck the ra ii2 knockiing on the door ii am 2uppo2ed to be at 2ome 2e22iion or other
TA: gtg

-- twinArmageddons (TA) ceased pestering apocalypseArisen (AA) ! --

"Sollux?"

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. You slither off the bed, leaving your chopsticks in the cheetos bag, and
go to open the door: no point pretending you aren’t in. St. G is standing there with a clipboard,
wearing a battered Anningley t-shirt. "Hey," he says. "Eridan’s not here?"

"Uh, no. He left a little while ago?" Your lisp is pretty much under control these days, thank fuck. It
still comes out when you’re super-pissed off, but talking to minor authority figures doesn’t kick it
into gear.

St. G nods. "Okay. Are you feeling all right, or..."

You jump on this. "I have a headache." It’s as good a reason as any to stay in your room.

"And I’m just going to go out on a limb here and say that forced social interactions aren’t your cup of
tea." He doesn’t look pissed off, which is weird. "You’re not the only one. But I need you to show
up at at least one of these meeting things because otherwise you’re not going to have the information
you need to dive right in when classes start. Do me a solid and go to the one right after lunch? That’s
covering all the stuff like the health center and meal plans and drop-add."

"Do I have to?"

"Yeah, you pretty much do."

"Shit," you say, but without much rancor. You figured it’d come down to something like this. "Does it cover how to switch roommates if you got stuck with a total nutjob?"

St. G’s face goes rueful, for a moment, almost distant. "You and Ampora not getting along?"

"You could say that. In fact you could say it in a lot more words with some gestures as well."

"It’s only been a day. Give him some time to get over the shock of being away from home?"

"It’s the being a douche thing I think he needs to get over, and that doesn’t look like it’s gonna
happen anytime soon." You slouch against the doorway, enjoying the fact that you’re actually almost
as tall as this dude and don’t have to crane your neck to look at him.

"Orientation week kind of brings out the douche in everybody," St. G tells you. Shouldn’t he be all
nudging you to get into school spirit or some bullshit like that? You’d thought RAs were little hall
monitors with the power to get you written up. Maybe it’s because you’re the only ones around right
now.

"Yeah, okay, I guess." You shrug. "Where is it?"

"The tent. One-thirty."

"Fucking figures. That thing is an abomination."
He nods seriously. "I know. I feel kind of bad for you guys having to come in and get that as a first impression of this place, the old student center wasn’t great but it was better than the tent. But they’re pretty certain about getting the new building finished on schedule, so you’ll be able to enjoy that before you graduate."

"I look forward to it so hard, man."

St. G chuckles. You get the sense he’s been snarked at by a very great many people over the past twenty-four hours, and that he’s used to it. "That’s the spirit. Look, can you tell Ampora when he gets back that I need you both to make it to that session?"

"Sure, if I see him before then. I got no idea where he went, he just grabbed his computer and left." Maybe he’s hanging out with whoever got him drunk last night. He’s making friends! That’s precious. You do not, however, rat him out to the RA, because that would be bullshit.

He nods. "All right. I hope your head feels better."

You have just enough self-preservation not to go "huh?" as you remember your flimsy excuse for hiding out here instead of being sociable, and instead just mutter something like a thank you.

~

The quality of light in the big-ass tent is weird, green-filtered through the plastic walls; you feel almost as if you’re underwater. You get there late and the only places left to sit are right at the front of the little lecture area roped off from the dining-hall section. Of course Ampora hadn’t shown back up at the room, so you are a little surprised to see him sloping in a few minutes after you. (You are not surprised to see the look of displeasure on his face when he realizes the only seat left is the one next to you.)

He’s got a...purple...phone in his hand and he’s texting somebody. He doesn’t stop as the student leader people turn on the shitty mike and start talking about drop-add and where the bursar’s office is and what forms you have to fill in.

You can’t help glancing over at the little screen. His thumb is moving pretty fast and the display is showing purple text in a pretty small point size but you are very used to reading screens quickly and you can make out a couple of the things he’s saying.

fef this fuckin sucks so hard you dont evven knoww
seriously its like the wworst thing i evver went through i am like so fuckin strung out right noww i am about to fuckin faint

Whoever he’s talking to shows up in a slightly different shade of reddish-purple.

Eridan, calm down, you’ll be okay!!!

no i wwont

oh god

fef im gonna puke i really am

You glance up at his face: hey, yeah, kinda seems likely, he’s even paler than before and he’s kind of slimy-looking, sweat sticking his stupid hair to his temples. Fuck, you are not okay with being hurled on: you lean away.
He’s still thumbtyping. Either the people giving their presentations don’t notice or don’t give a shit.

had to go pick up a shitton of otc stuff this mornin but it aint doin the trick

You’re just nervous! And stressed. Take deep breaths.

He tries. You are, crossly, almost feeling sorry for him, wreck that he is, and resent being made to wonder what’s got him so wound up.

oh god i feel so fuckin sick fe

i gotta come home i cant take this shit

It’s only been a day!!! Give it a chance, Eridan, you’ll feel better!

"--if the person in the front row could put his phone away for a minute we’ll go over the options again and then move on to the sexual harassment policy," says the speaker. After a moment you elbow him in the side, not as hard as you might have.

"That’s you, dude," you whisper. He yelps at the elbowing and swallows hard and you think for a moment he really is going to puke, but he gets control again and awkwardly looks back at the podium. The phone in his hand is still lit up, but he isn’t looking at it, even as messages scroll up the screen.

Interesting. He can take a direct order from somebody in a position of authority. You weren’t entirely sure.

The rest of the presentation goes about like you’d expected, a huge number of desperately boring words stacked on one another. By the time it’s over you think you have a vague understanding of how not to sexually harass people, which, fuck, why should you even be told that at this age, that shit is pretty basic social interaction, even you know that, but whatever; you also know how to navigate the online student services portal and how to change your meal plan or get refunded for blocks you don’t end up using. Bluh.

Eridan hasn’t moved, sitting still, while everyone else gets up and troops out into the fresh air.

Fuck. You hate the fact that you are saying this. "Ampora, you okay?"

"No," he says tonelessly. "Fuck off."

"You want some water or something?"

"I said fuck off," he snarls, giving you that same vicious dagger-stare he’d done in the car. You raise your hands: we got a badass over here.

"Whatever," you tell him. You have better things to do than stare at your mess of a roommate and wonder what the hell his deal might actually be.

On the way back to Gresley you light a cigarette and perch your bony ass on a low wall, pulling out your own phone to see if you have any messages. Nope. AA must be at some event herself. You send her a text to update her on the fucked-up roommate situation ("he types liike a jacka22") and look through your news feeds.

"You got a light?" somebody asks, startling you in the middle of an article on bees. It’s that scowling kid from the hall meeting. He’s still scowling, but in daylight you think that might just be how his
face is; there’s no real fuck-you in his voice.

"Uh," you say. "Sure." For some reason the lisp is audible, just slightly. Thure. You hand the kid your lighter, which is blue on one side and red on the other.

"Thanks," he says, and after a moment of apparent decision plops his ass down next to you on the wall and sighs out a huge put-upon cloud of smoke. "You’re roommates with that purple-haired asshole, right?"

"Fuck. Do I have douchebag on me or something?" You twist around to look at the back of your shirt in case lameness has rubbed off on you through proximity. The scowly kid laughs, a cracked unpleasant-sounding rattle.

"Nah, I just saw you at that hall meeting talking to him. Listen, can you do me a big favor despite the fact you don’t know me at all? Can you tell him to go fuck himself, preferably with a chainsaw or something similarly destructive, in a recursive infinite spiral of self-fuckage such that he spends the rest of eternity engaged in going and fucking himself?"

You burst out in totally spontaneous laughter. "Jesus. What’d he do to you?"

"Not me, my friend Gamzee. You might remember him, he’s like eight feet tall and wears these godawful ICP shirts. Your roommate fucking walked in on him in the music studio while Gamzee was freestyling earlier, there was some dumb orientation-to-the-music-facilities bullshit, and instead of turning around and going away or waiting till he was done like a normal human being proceeded to actually interrupt him and give this huge condescending shitspew of a lecture on how he sucked and rap sucked and anybody who had ever told him otherwise had been acting against his fucking best interests and he, your roommate, was doing Gamzee a favor with this reality check he was handing over."

You stare. Your new acquaintance really has a way with the run-on sentence.

"What the actual fuck?"

"That was pretty much my response," he agrees. "Wait, I tell a lie. My response was a lot louder and had more words in it."

"I bet. Jesus Christ. I’m sorry, man, that shit is so far from okay it’s like....in a different time zone. I already got a bunch of instructions to go fuck himself queued up but hey, I’ll push yours to the front, just for that."

"Thanks," he says. "Uh. I’m Karkat Vantas."

"Sollux Captor." You don’t offer to shake hands; neither does he. But you both settle a little more comfortably on the wall, and in a little while, when he pulls out his pack of smokes again, you hand over your lighter without saying anything at all.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It turns out Vantas is into computers as well although by the way he talks you get the sense he kind of more wants to be into computers than he actually is. You’ll have a class together when school actually starts. Hey, check this shit out, you think, you might actually have made the beginnings of an actual friendship, based on the fact that he swears even more than you do and you both fucking hate Eridan Ampora.

(Based on that last criterion you are friends with everybody else in the universe, of course.)

You tell him about the bedcurtains and he doesn’t believe you so when you get back to Gresley you have to show him. He marvels at them. They are definitely marvelous in the simplest sense of the word. Also he’s obviously impressed by your various machines and your collection of monitors, which is kind of nice, you gotta admit.

“I got no idea where he is,” you’re saying. “He was at that meeting thing and he looked like he was going to puke all over the floor--dude is like on a crazy number of meds, I dunno what’s up with that--and he was super rude at me. I’d say stick around in case he shows back up here so you can yell at him in person, but I can’t guarantee satisfaction, you know?”

“Fuck it,” says Vantas. “I gotta go check on how Gamzee’s doing, he was pretty unhappy about this whole bullshit episode. Understandably. Violet Prince has a goddamn nasty way with words.”

He runs his hands through his crazy hair, further crazing it. “--Hey. You want to come with? Reassure Gamz that verbal beatdowns are in the offing?”

Whoa. Yeah, this is like...this could actually end up being something like friendship. Shit is all touching and after-school-special, man. “...Yeah, why not. I basically have nothing to do anyway other than not go to that...what the fuck was it, tug of war match? Seriously tug of war?”

“Fuck that in the ear,” he says succinctly. “C’mon, come meet my roommate, he’s like the fucking polar opposite of yours.”

Several hours later you have a new respect for the number of times it is possible to use the word motherfucker in any given sentence, a kind of horrified admiration for Karkat’s ability to spin massively complicated metaphorical sentence structures out of thin air while maintaining syntax and grammar and cursing like a sailor, and a truly wonderful high. Karkat doesn’t exactly relax under the influence of Gamzee’s magnificent weed so much as mellow slightly; the difference is minute but noticeable if you look closely. You personally just find everything fucking hilarious, which it is.

Their room is totally unlike yours; they have a double facing the woods behind the dorm, tucked away behind the stairwell, which is why you can get away with smoking in the room. You’re still not convinced it’s a really smart thing to do, given St. G’s dire warnings, but on the other hand who cares.

Gamzee’s side is totally taken up with horrible posters and hanging lamps and christmas lights; Karkat just has a really nifty batik bedspread hanging on the wall and a shitload of books, it’s practically ascetic by comparison. It’s interesting watching them, you think in the happy haze: they’re so totally different that you’d have thought they would never get along but somehow it works. And
you want to punch Ampora even more now that you’ve met the kid he verbally shit all over, because Gamzee is fucking sweet. You don’t even mean that sarcastically, he genuinely is a sweet kid, even if he has horrible taste in music; he’s generous, interested in other people, kind in the way that you personally could never manage (or want) to be.

He’s talking about exploring the campus. “–so then I was getting my motherfucking ramble on, you know, checking out this wicked fucking fairyland forest shit we got all up in our backyard, chilling with my little birdbros and squirrelsisters and shit, and I up and come upon a motherfucking miracle. Straight-up miracle it was. Some dude with a wicked inspiration kicking in his mind all up and built a fucking spiral little house right there in the motherfucking woods. All these branches being like standing in the motherfucking ground all close to each other and shit, like arranged, round in a big and most righteous spiral with a motherfucking firepit in the very fucking middle.”

You try to picture this. “In the woods back here? Behind our dorm?”

Gamzee nods, messy hair flopping. “In our very backyard, Solbro. It’s like some motherfucker just up and knew a brother needed a place to get his serenity on, you know? Get his mind serene. That miracle spiralhouse shit is all up and mad serene.”

“He fucking needed it after Violet Prince did his thing,” Karkat says, but without a great deal of vitriol. Gamzee nods again, and you feel awful that your roommate was shitty to him, even if it has nothing at all to do with you and you couldn’t have stopped him anyway had you even known about it. Fuck. You’re getting all maudlin.

“I’m gonna explain to him just how much he sucks,” you say. “With gestures. Possibly a powerpoint to back up the data. What a douche.”

“Chill, bro,” Gamzee says, reaching a long arm over to pat your knee inexpertly. “Don’t be getting your harsh on. Purple haired motherfucker all up and got his own shit to be dealing with.”

Karkat makes a noise like an irritated teakettle and prods Gamzee with his foot. “Stop being so damn nice. Wait, okay, no, don’t. It’s kind of bizarrely awesome.”

“Whatever you say, best bro,” his roommate drawls, apparently content with the universe. Comfortable silence stretches out until somebody’s stomach growls, and it is totally not yours because that is bullshit and lies. Gamzee chuckles.

“Wicked herb’s all giving me the munchies too, Solbro. Time for a brother to up and get his eat on.”

“Ugh,” says Karkat. “I haven’t yet come up with words sufficient to describe how much I fucking hate the tent. The tent is distilled evil, polymerized and extruded in sheets and heatsealed together to form panels of green fucking plastic hate. --You got your ID, Gamzee?”

“Right here, best bro.” Gamzee fishes around in one of the cavernous pockets of his pants—which have doodles in Sharpie all over them—and comes up with the card. “I am all kinds of motherfucking set.”

You’ve come down enough now not to be giggling at everything, which is probably for the best, but you’re still pleasantly high, and when Gamzee wonders aloud on the way over how the goddamn tent all up and stays up like that, it’s a miracle or what, you agree that although the tent itself sucks rancid wildebeest dong it is kind of a bitchtits wicked feat of engineering.

It feels...yeah, okay it feels great cause you’re fucked up right now, but it feels good to have people to walk to dinner with. And you resolve to start your how-long-can-I-go-without-actual-food
experiment later, because they have some actually edible shit to choose from and you are seriously in
the throes of the munchies. Oh, hey, look, they have the good kind of institutional pizza!

Gamzee is wandering around piling shit on his tray with a look of blissful serenity until Karkat
retrieves him and gets him to go swipe his card and find somewhere to sit. You think it’s kind of
adorable how Gamzee follows him around like a tall gangly baby duckling following a short growly
dude. Wait. That got away from you.

You pile a couple of donuts on your tray for dessert and go to join them. All around you the white
noise of hundreds of people talking over one another settles into a comfortable background and the
three of you talk about stupid funny shit while you scarf down pizza like it’s really not bad pizza at
all. You talk about how you’re going to get a look at the computer science labs tomorrow when they
have their open sessions; Karkat says he’ll come too since that’s his minor. (His major is biology,
which you think doesn’t fit him all that well, but hey, you don’t actually have to declare for a while
yet.) Gamzee says he’s gonna check out the motherfucking theater. You almost warn him that he’s
likely to run into Ampora again, but why bring that asshole up when he’s not really germane to the
conversation?

“I’m gonna get more coffee, you guys want me to bring anything back?” you ask. You’re being
social. It would shock the hell out of people at home. Then again you’re also still somewhat under
the influence.

“If they got any of that fake chocolate mousse shit left can you grab me some?” You grin. Earlier it
had come out that Karkat is an admirer of the fine art of the chocolatier just as you are.

It’s weird to realize that you’re actually something close to happy.

Then you catch sight of Ampora and actual reality comes back. He’s sitting by himself, of course,
wearing his grey Armani jacket and a scarf you haven’t seen yet (it’s purple). On his tray is a small
plate of....what looks to you like plain macaroni. No cheese, no sauce, nothing. Just...plain boiled
pasta. And a roll of Tums. It’s half-empty.

The fuck is his deal, you wonder. He’s drinking milk instead of soda or coffee or whatever a normal
person has with dinner. And he’s got his phone out and he’s busy texting away while he pokes at the
macaroni and occasionally eats a bit of it. Whoever “Fef” is, he or she--you’re guessing she, for some
reason--either has the patience of a sedated saint or has got some kind of auto-response thing
programmed to deal with him and his flaily ranting. There’s an idea, you think, removing your
attention from your fucked-up roommate and returning it to the task of fetching coffee and dessert.
You wonder if you could manage to get the algorithms sophisticated enough to get close to passing
the Turing test, although honestly chatbots and people tend to sound pretty similar over text message.

Karkat glowers at you when you get back, but you’re pretty sure it’s the kind of glower that
translates as benign. “What took you?”

“Nothing. What did you call Ampora? Violet Prince? I like that, it’s official. VP is over there on his
lonesome eating plain macaroni with no cheese and textbitching at top speed on his stupid purple
phone.”

“Wow, that’s boring. For a guy who dresses that flamboyant.”

“Wait, wait,” you say, settling down at the table, “no, it’s ironic, it has to be. Everything he fucking
does is ironic, or it’s sophisticated, I can’t figure out which it’s supposed to be.”

“Sounds like a brother got some heavy motherfucking shit on his brain,” Gamzee says.
“He’s got some heavy motherfucking hair gel on his brain,” you say, but amiably, and take a bite of your donut. It occurs to you that maybe his stomach is still bothering him, and then you hope to fucking Christ he doesn’t have some kind of virus because if he does you are not going near your room until everything has been lysoled within an inch of its existence. You are not going to catch stomach flu. You are just not. It is not a thing which is going to happen.

He leaves before you do, and as he passes your table carrying his tray you can see he’s barely eaten any of his pathetic excuse for dinner. You hold your breath until he’s well past you, in case any germs are following him about.

The three of you wander back slowly to Gresley, mostly because why hurry and slightly because you don’t want to follow him too closely. Karkat’s cigarette glows and fades angrily in the gathering dust: he smokes the way he seems to do everything else, intensely. “You want us to come get you for breakfast?” he asks, abruptly, and something in your chest goes very warm.

“Sure,” you say casually, but inside you’re kind of making a really dumb goofy face. “I’m gonna need coffee in me before I face the terrifying reality of their computer labs. I bet they’re all running fucking Gateways with glass-bottle monitors, man.”

Karkat laughs his rattly cracked laugh. “Fuck you, Captor, I’m gonna have nightmares now. Mice with no goddamn scroll wheels.”

“The horror,” you agree, and you’re smiling. It feels good. (You know yourself well enough to be aware that it’s not going to last, that soon enough the world will be fucking horrible again, it’s just an amusing side effect of your brain straight-up hating you, but right now you’re on the upside and that is just fine with you.)

He and Gamzee leave you at the door of your room with promises to come get you before they leave in the morning, and you let yourself in with considerable trepidation to find—fuck, yeah, he’s there. He’s also apparently going out. The Armani jacket is neatly hung back in his closet, a black suit jacket spread on the bed, and he’s tying a cobalt-blue silk tie in the mirror, which means he has to step back smartly when you unlock the door so as to avoid being hit in the face. You expect him to go off on a tirade, but he just looks at you as if you are a clot of drain-hair and exhales audibly as you go past.

Ugh. “Ampora, you don’t have the flu, right?”

“What?”

“You aren’t gonna get me sick? Cause if you’re contagious...”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Captor?” He looks at you in the mirror, straightening his tie with little irritable gestures. His shirt is...blue, too, not purple, a much lighter shade than the tie, and he shrugs into his jacket.

“You looked like you were seriously about to puke earlier and you’re, like, chewing on tums like they taste good or something, and what’s with all the dramamine and shit?”

“None a your fuckin business is what’s with it,” he snaps, pale. “I do not have the Christin flu, so you can rest your goddamn line a inquiry, an also fuck you, leave me alone.”

You do the DeGrasse Tyson hands again. Such a badass we have over here. Without further conversation you settle at your desk and call up the program you’re working on. It is not lost on you that Ampora takes at least four more pills from various bottles, probably more than that, before he
gives his eyeliner a finishing touch and takes himself off with a trademark doorslam.

There’s being a douchelord and there’s being a douchelord who’s actually swerving close to fucking himself up profoundly. You have a little experience in the world of taking a whole fuckton of pills, but the shit you took wasn’t over-the-counter antacids and motion-sickness meds. This is also why you have experience with the world of fifteen-minute checks and institutional pizza.

You don’t know for sure but you are betting, betting really hard, that wherever he’s going tonight he’s gonna get drunk again, too.

Fuck. You point your attention firmly at your work and you are so not your awful roommate’s keeper. You’re glad when AA pesters you.

-- apocalypseArisen (AA) began pestering twinArmageddons (TA) ! --

AA: hey s0llux
AA: did y0u get in tr0uble earlier 0r what
TA: nope not really
TA: ra ii2 actually not a douche
TA: how2 2hiit going over iin janbrewerland
AA: ugh d0nt remind me, i hate that the pr0gram i really wanted and g0t int0 had t0 be in ariz0na
AA: tell me ab0ut anningley, is it tiny and claustr0ph0bic
TA: no actually iiit2 kiind of pretty. and there2 2ome awe2ome woodland2 and 2hiit two walk
around iin. speakiing of which ii made friiend2 aa, you 2hould be 2uper proud of me.
AA: way t0 g0! On y0ur sec0nd day even!
TA: ii know, iiit2 fucking weird.
TA: 2o okay, douchebag roommate apparently went off on thi2 kiind of adorable juggalo kiid for
literally no rea2on
TA: ii wa2nt there but ii can iimagine iiit
TA: all telling hiim he 2ucked and 2hould liike never open hii2 mouth again
TA: hiit2 roommate, thiit2 guy karkat, came up two me and told me about iiit and wa2 liike can you
pa22 along a me22age that ampora 2hould go fuck hiim2elf forever. he wa2 way more eloquent
about iiit than that, dude iii2 crazy fucking good wiith word2.
AA: im having a hard time picturing a kid wh0 is a juggal0 but als0 kind 0f ad0rable
TA: ii know but iiit2 true. 2hut up and let me fiini2h the 2tory.
TA: anyway ii wa2 liike 2ure ii would be happy two pa22 along that me22age good 2iir becau2e
2eriou2ly fuck that guy and hiit2 purple bedcurtaiin2.
TA: and he diidnt believe me about the bedcurtain2. 2o ii took hiim back two the room and 2howed
hiim, and then he wa2 liike dude come meet my roommate you can be all rea22uriing that verbal
beatdown2 are on the way.
AA: this is ad0rable all right, s0llux. 0u0
AA: n0 that l00ks stupid
AA: i need a smiley em0tic0n
TA: pff iii2 look 2upiid
TA: 2o ii go two their room and meet gamzee who ii2 2eriou2ly a nice guy even iif he doe2 2ay
motherfucker all the time and have the wor2t ta2te iin mu2iic. liike you would have two be a 2uper
twin turbo champiion douche to 2ay mean 2hiit two hiim. we hung out and then walked over two
dinner together, iiit wa2 kiind of awe2ome.
AA: ok just this once i will forgo the zeros and just say :3 :3 :3
TA: that ii2 a lot of :3s aa
TA: al2o :3 :3 :3 right back at you
AA: y0u r0ck and i am super glad y0u have s0me c00l pe0ple t0 hang 0ut with. that makes me feel
better ab0ut being all the way acr0ss the c0untry.
AA: not by much but hey.
AA: i gotta go but email me more about everything ok? i want to know all the things.
TA: will do. take care.

-- apocalypseArisen (AA) ceased pestering twinArmageddons (TA) ! --

Chapter End Notes

Eridan's deal will be revealed shortly, I promise. In the meantime Sollux is Engaging in Interactions with his Peers, which he isn't practiced at.

The spiral fence/hut/sculpture thing exists. It was generally known as the Hippie Hut and rumor had it that it was often the site of people indulging in recreational substance use.
Chapter 6

He isn’t back by the time you wake up—you got some solid work done on your program and went to bed around four, so waking up at eight hurts but you’re gonna have to get used to it if you want to make it to any of your classes on time. He isn’t back by the time you’ve hauled your ass to the showers and done your teeth and caught up on what’s happened on the internet since you went to sleep. He isn’t back when Karkat and Gamzee—you’re already thinking of them as KK and GZ, it’s dumb—show up to collect you for breakfast.

In fact you’re just the teeniest bit worried about Violet Prince. VP. There’s an undeniable flicker of something like relief when you pass him coming down the front steps; you have to admit that he’s rocking the walk of shame pretty well, considering. His tie is straight and his suit is as pristine as it had been the night before, but he does not look like a dude who is feeling his best and most perky. Where, you wonder, is the party at, and how come he gets to go party every night with people who warrant a suit like that?

And then he gives you that special look of I hate you go die which he’s apparently reserved for Sollux Captor alone, and you roll your eyes and walk past him without acknowledging his presence. Tent breakfast awaits and...holy fuck, they have those little derpy muffins you liked so much. Those muffins and the pizza were pretty much the only good things about your time in the Facility. Which is a thought you aren’t interested in following right now.

You amuse Gamzee by making a couple of the muffins—they’re like a quarter the size of real ones, they’re fucking adorable—do a dance along the edge of the table, and you catch a weird expression on Karkat’s face just for a moment, a kind of fondness you wouldn’t expect to see on a kid your age.

It’s kinda sad that mass-produced Sysco breakfast baked goods can make anybody smile as hugely as Gamzee is smiling, but you do not point this out. "So it’s the computer lab horrors until what, like noon, and then...they had that boat ride thing, right? Do I need to go hide somewhere until they quit looking for people to jolly into it?"

Karkat dumps more sugar into his coffee. "Fucking computer-lab tomb raiding. Yeah, they have the magical mystery tour around the lake thing where you get on the boat and it chugs across the lake and bangs into the other side and then turns around and comes back again. There you go, lake. It’s supposed to be an Experience according to the orientation packet. I would really like to meet whatever shithead is responsible for writing that drivel, just to ask them, you know, were you born that obnoxiously, cheerily stupid or did you have to get a fucking masters degree in it."

"Shit, you think they’d let an amateur idiot write their copy? That has to be professional, man. Uncertified fuckwits need not apply."

It’s rewarding, making Karkat laugh. Gamzee joins in, too, and you feel that weird warmth in your chest again just for a second.

As it turns out the computer labs are relatively up to date. None of it’s as good as the shit you have except the design lab, which is of course all Mac all the time and nobody has yet gotten better at displays than them. You drool a little over a particularly gorgeous monitor.

Figuratively.

The guy who’s leading this workshop or tour or whatever it is explains some basic shit about the curriculum which you already know perfectly well because you read about the comp sci major
before you got here, like a person who isn’t cataclysmically retarded. You zone out and it’s only when KK’s elbow and your ribs get acquainted that you realize you’ve been wondering again where the fuck VP gets off to every night.

Heh. Gets off to. Also, ew, ew, ew.

"You know if there are like big clandestine freshman parties or something going on?" you ask him as the guide drones on about electives. "Like, ones you dress up to go to?"

"The fuck? Where would that even happen?"

"I dunno, but VP goes somewhere every night and comes back in the morning looking more like ass than ever."

Karkat frowns. Dude has an impressive set of frown lines. He’s about to say something but then the guy leading the session tells you to get logged in so he can walk you through the student portal, what the fuck, anybody who needs instruction in that shouldn’t be allowed near a computer in the first place. Fucking sigh, you can tell you are surrounded by intellectual giants up in here. This is going to be an insanely boring hour. And you can’t pull out your phone and screw around with texting people because the dude is going to notice.

Unless, shit, why not? You open up one of the other browsers (thank God it looks like they don’t default to IE at least) and log into one of your gmail accounts. Anningley does the basic firstname.lastname at domain email layout, so you’re pretty confident in guessing Karkat’s address. You send him an email:

FROM> twinArmageddons@gmail.com
TO> karkat.vantas@anningley.edu

hey kk. i am literally going two die of boredom iif ii cant talk two somebody.

p2. the email ii2 coming from iin2iide the hou2e.

Because he’s logged into the student portal he gets an alert and the opening of your message appears on his screen; you watch sidelong as he frowns at it and then frowns more and then looks over at you with a you are fucking insane glower. You think it’s the good kind. You hope.

He types rapidly.

FROM> carcinoGeneticist@gmail.com
TO >twinArmageddons@gmail.com

SUBJECT> YOU TYPE LIKE A GODDAMN RETARD

WHAT THE FUCK, CAPTOR, ARE YOU TWELVE OR SOMETHING?

You grin and reply:

iit2 iironiic.

It doesn’t surprise you that he types in allcaps, or in grey. Your own weird mustardy-yellow color was originally the result of a dare, but you’ve had it for so long that it would feel strange and wrong to use any other text color. Even if it does make long emails hard to read. So what. Life is fucking difficult, get over it.
20 where do you think vp ii2 going all dolled up pretty in hi2 be2t black dre22?

I CANNOT FUCKING GET OVER THIS, YOU ARE THE BIGGEST MORON I HAVE EVER MET, THAT'S AMAZING.

WITH REGARDS TO VIOLET PRINCE PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THAT IS GOOD IN THIS WORLD BE IT VANISHINGLY SMALL AND INSIGNIFICANT PLEASE TELL ME YOU MEAN THE DRESS PART FIGURATIVELY.

ehehehehe cap2lock ii2 cruise control for cool, kk. you are the coole2t, iit ii2 you.

ii am tempted two tell you in graphic detail all about hi2 couture gown2 and lacy liingerie but ii think ii might barf. no. he wa2 wearing that 2uit he had on thii2 morniing when we met hiim on the 2tep2. walk of fucking 2hame, man.

UGH, FUCK. I'D ALMOST APPLAUD HIM FOR THE BRAZEN GODDAMN EFFRONTERY OF GOING OUT AND GETTING HAMMERED AND POSSIBLY ENGAGING IN BEHAVIOR I DO NOT WANT TO CONTEMPLATE OR THERE WILL BE BARF, WHILE HE'S A FRESHMAN DURING ORIENTATION WEEK. I MEAN. DUDE DOESN'T EVEN WAIT UNTIL SCHOOL STARTS TO GET HIS UPSETTING MACK ON? IS HE TOTALLY DESPERATE OR DOES HE JUST WANT TO GET HIS ASS KICKED OUT OF THIS PLACE AS SOON AS PHYSICALLY POSSIBLE?

that ii2 an excellent que2tion. ii wa2 thinking more in term2 of logii2tiic like where even would you have a party when the only people on campu2 are fre2hmen under 2upervii2iion of liike a million ra2 and 2tudent leader2?

FUCK IF I KNOW. I AM INSANELY BRILLIANT IN MANY WAYS BUT LOCATING SHITTY PARTY VENUES IS NOT AMONG THEM. GAMZEE MIGHT HAVE INSIGHTS IF HE IS NOT ALREADY TOO FUCKED UP TO HOLD CIVIL CONVERSATION WITHOUT TALKING TO AIR MOLECULES. SHIT, LECTURE GUY IS COMING, LOOK BUSY.

You close the window smoothly, no hurried clickings or grabbing for the mouse. What, you were just totally exploring this online student portal, it is an unfamiliar and fascinating challenge.

As it turns out Gamzee has all the answers you could ever need and many, many that you do not want. He's sitting on the low retaining wall by the arts and theater building and smoking--jesus fuck-a clove cigarette. He looks at one with the cosmos.

"I'm telling you, Karbro, this is some motherfucking butchits shit up in here," he's saying as you light up and sit on the wall next to him. "These motherfuckers got their wicked understand on. Fucking thing of beauty."

"Ganz, walk it back a bit," Karkat sighs. "What is the topic on which these motherfuckers have their understand, and who are the motherfuckers themselves?"

"Everything, bro." He gestures with the cigarette, sending incense-smoke rising in slow coils. "The universe, man. Motherfucking universe. How a brother just gotta up and go with what his heart tells him to be doing. You gotta meet them, best bro, you up and come with me to this motherfucking miraculous gathering tonight, it will be fucking out of this world. --Hey, you too, Solbro. Gotta include a brother in this beauty shit."

"I have no idea what you just said," you tell him.

"That's cool," he says, kindly, "I ain't all requiring a motherfucker to up and comprehend my flow."
"Who are you talking about?" Karkat asks, and his voice isn’t all that insistent, but it is slower. Something about it gets through to Gamzee, though.

"The motherfucking theater people, bro. The theater people. They’re here."

~

You knew a kid back home who wanted to be a screenwriter, which was pretty fucking funny considering his idea of a great cinematic masterpiece was an average Nicolas Cage schlockfest. You weren’t really friends with him but he was friends with everybody, or at least he thought he was, and he’d pass out copies of his work in the hopes that people would read it. You did, sometimes, for shits and giggles.

His trademark was apparently to end scenes with what he parenthetically described as "a crazy awesome line." You would have given Gamzee an eight out of ten on the crazy awesome scale; the buildup to his mysterious revelation and the way his eyes widened and he did that hand-spaying gesture might kick it up to a nine. The theater people.

Definitely Egbertian, that moment.

Between you and Karkat you’d managed to winkle some nuggets of actual information out of Gamzee. It turned out that in fact the freshmen were not the only people on campus during orientation week; a group of students who were working on a project had asked for, and received, permission to move in a week early to get shooting done on the film part of their project while the campus wasn’t thronged with people. That explained the booze, anyway, some of them were upperclassmen or had good enough fake IDs for good supply chain management.

Gamzee had a harder time explicating what a theater party entailed. You think you get the gist of it, though, and so when your favorite person in all the world hauls himself back to your room that evening after a busy day of being a douchebag you have a pretty good idea what his plans for the night include.

He so does not look as if he’s up to it. He’s...yeah, he does not look good at all, even to your jaded eyes. You’re used to seeing the bags under those eyes and the sharp angles and hollows of bone, used to the pallor, but you guess on another person it kind of stands out more. He looks like he should be going directly to bed, without company, in fact.

You know exactly what response you’re going to get, but you say it anyway, when he’s back from his shower and getting dressed. This time it’s dark trousers with a fine deep-purple stripe to them and a kind of...you suppose you’d call it a military tunic if you were inspired to say anything other than what the fuck, Ampora. It’s black with purple trim and it fits him like a glove and if you didn’t hate the guy so goddamn much you’d tell him he looks like one of his dumb anime characters. Because he does.

"Eridan?" you try. "You really don’t look so hot, man. You sure you should be going out and partying?"

Icy purple glare. Heh, it’s like frozen Welch’s.

"Think I already expressed my opinion a your fuckin intrusive busybody bullshit, Captor," he says. Goddamnit. "Look, seriously, you’re kind of freaking me out here with this shit--"

"Fuckin good," he hisses. He actually hisses at you. That’s new. "Go the fuck ahead an freak out, you piece a shit. This has nothin to do with you."
It looks like he’s about to add more, but he swallows hard, one hand going to his chest just at the bottom of his ribcage. Under the gross fluorescent light he’s sweating. Without saying anything further he wrenches open one of his bottles and spills another couple of tablets into his palm, doing that thing where he has to concentrate real hard on swallowing. You kind of recognize that from your migraines, when keeping anything down was challenging and even swallowing the fucking pills that sometimes knocked the headache back a bit wasn’t always possible.

Jesus Christ what is this guy’s deal.

And then he reaches into his closet and he pulls out his fucking cape and he clasps it around his throat with a gold chain like the one Victor von Doom wears.

You really just do not have any words as you watch Eridan Ampora sweep in regal violet down the Gresley first-floor left hall. It’s like...

It's like what might happen if Darth Vader and Prince had a kid and then RuPaul taught him to walk.

Goddamn.
Chapter 7

It's past midnight.

You are not used to feeling like this. Well, okay. You are not used to feeling a lot of shit other than various interesting flavors of self-loathing and loathing for others, with interspersed moments of fervid excited super-happiness. It’s annoying but you’re used to it and whatever cocktail the various asshole doctors have you on now mostly blunts both the highs and the lows. You’ve learned to deal with the side effects for the most part, and only at the very heights of your upswings do you really honestly think you can do without the drugs.

This is what’s called progress.

Ampora is fucked up on something and you are seriously not in the least sure what to do about it—he’s made it pretty clear he’s not interested in telling your ass anything about his situation, but you’re honest to God considering going and finding your hulking RA and telling him about Ampora’s funky habit of downing handfuls of meds like Skittles and also staying out all night. Which sounds dumb when you think about it but...he really had looked sick when he’d left.

Fuck.

You know perfectly well in his position you would fucking loathe anybody who went all happy-assholing off to tell on yoooou to some authority figure, cause this is exactly what landed you in the Facility, and....fuuck.

You can’t deal with this. Instinctively you go and fire up your computer and hope to hell AA is online. She’s...yeah, she’s logged on but she’s away.

No, really, fuuck.

You have a go anyway.

-- twinArmageddons (TA) began pestering apocalypseArisen (AA) ! --

TA: aa
TA: iif youre there ii need to talk two you
TA: ii2 kiind of iiimportant

Nothing.

Fuck, redux.

Who else can you talk to? Honestly, is there anybody you’re even on good enough terms with to bitch about your crazy roommate and ask advice as to what the fuck to do about him?

-- carcinoGeneticist (CG) began pestering twinArmageddons (TA) ! --

CG: HEY CAPTOR.

Oh.

TA: sup kk
CG: I DON’T SUPPOSE YOU’D CONSIDER NOT CALLING ME THAT BY ANY SHRED OF A CHANCE?
TA: nope not one
CG: I FIGURED. ACT OF PUREST FUCKING OPTIMISM TO HAVE POSED THE QUESTION IN THE FIRST PLACE.
CG: LISTEN, SO GAMZEE WAS GOING TO GO OFF TO THIS ‘THEATER PARTY’ SHIT. LUCKILY HE KIND OF PASSED OUT INSTEAD AND HE’S NOW SNORING A MERRY LITTLE CHORUS WITH HIS FUCKING UGLY STUFFED PLUSH BEE CRADLED TENDERLY IN HIS ARMS.
CG: IT IS A SIGHT TO MELT THE HEART, I AM TELLING YOU.
CG: POINT IS. YOUR VIOLET PRINCE IS PROBABLY THERE.
CG: FROM WHAT GAMZ TOLD ME THIS IS NOT REALLY THE KOSHEREST OF SHIT, WERE SHIT TO BE TECHNICALLY QUALIFIED AS KOSHER IN THE FIRST PLACE.
CG:...
CG: CAPTOR ARE YOU EVEN THERE.
TA: yeah
TA: iim here
TA: tell me about the theater partiie2
CG: ARE YOU OKAY?
TA: yeah iim fiine
TA: youre right he2 off to 2ome fuckiing party or other
TA: he ii2 actually wearing hii2 cape
TA: for 2eriou2. he look2 liike 2ome unholy ma2hup of liike dracula and frank n. furter
TA: 2hiit ii2 banana2
CG: WOW.
CG: B A N A N A S.
CG: LISTEN. I KIND OF THINK MAYBE THOSE PARTIES ARE NOT THE BEST POSSIBLE THING FOR A BRAND NEW WET-BEHIND-EARS FRESHMAN DOUCHEBAG TO BE ATTENDING.
CG: ACCORDING TO GAMZEE THERE IS SOMETHING CALLED ‘NAKED TIME’ AT ONE A.M.
CG: ALSO BODY SHOTS AND DRAMATIC READINGS OF CHUNKS OF FUCKING SHAKESPEARE. POSSIBLY THERE IS ALSO CASUAL RECREATIONAL DRUG USE. YOUR PRINCE SHOULD BE IN HIS PURPLE ELEMENT BUT I DON’T KNOW IF HE IS ACTUALLY CAPABLE OF HANDLING THIS LEVEL OF HARDCORE THEATER SHIT.
TA: me eiither
TA: he looked liike 2hiit and death when he left. 2hiit and death iin a purple cape.
TA: pretty 2ure he2 been liike on the verge of pukiing liike every tiime ii 2ee hiim.
TA: and not ju2t cau2e he ha2 to 2ee me eiither. riim2hot.
TA: 2omethiing ii2 wrong wiith that kiid.
CG: FUCK.
CG: YOU WANT ME TO GO AFTER HIM?
TA: no
TA: man ii appreciate iit though
TA: 2eriou2ly you do not need two be dealiing wiith thii2 2hiit
CG: NEITHER DO YOU.
CG: KIND OF FUCKED UP TO EXPECT YOU TO RANDOMLY DEAL WITH THE BIZARRE AND SO FAR INEXPPLICABLE ANTICS OF YOUR GODDAMN ROOMMATE ALL GRACEFULLY AND SHIT.
CG: TELL YOU WHAT. IF HE DOESN’T SHOW BY LIKE... I DUNNO. TWO. COME GET ME. I’LL BE AWAKE.
CG: WE CAN GO FETCH HIS STUPID PURPLE CAPE WEARING ASS AND ADMINISTER A DOUBLE VERBAL REACHAROUND BEATDOWN THE LIKES OF WHICH HE HAS NEVER SEEN.
CG: SHIT WILL BE EPIC.
TA: ...you're on
TA: if only because i want two see you yell at him
TA: thing of beauty man
TA: like the immovable douche meet the unstoppable rage
TA: i should tell ticket
CG: OH FUCK YOU, CAPTOR.
CG: SERIOUSLY. COME FIND ME IF YOU NEED TO, OKAY?
CG: THIS SHIT IS NOT COOL.
TA: ...yeah.
TA: thank you.
TA: i mean it.
CG: AS WELL YOU FUCKING SHOULD. OK, TALK TO YOU LATER, CAPTOR. GOOD LUCK.

-- carcinoGeneticist (CG) ceased pestering twinArmageddons (TA) ! --

You stare at the greyed-out name on your chumlist. You still have no idea what to do. As you generally end up doing in situations like this it is time to drink some sugared caffeine and go have a cigarette on the balcony while you try to make your brain work.

You can see Venus over the trees. It’s already too late to make out Jupiter, sunk beneath the skyline, but Venus glows bright as hell, brighter than any star, steady and blue-white over everything. Not for the first time you kind of wonder what the fuck is the problem with this world where you have to deal with each other and your brains actively fighting you at the same time. Your brain is only under the tenuous control of a shitload of chemicals you have to take every day. Without it you’d be...well, okay, yeah, you probably wouldn’t be. Which is fucked up. Who came up with that shit? And why?

You chain another cigarette off your first. By the time you get back inside it’s getting on for half past one in the morning, and you settle back at your desk with that weird gnawing acidy feeling in your insides that means you forgot to eat anything in the past however long. Shit, right, you should have gone to dinner.

That whole not-eating experiment thing strikes you as a super cool idea for a moment, and then you see Ampora again, pallid and sweating, hand pressed to his stomach, furiously stubbornly refusing to acknowledge a goddamn thing, and you say a bunch of naughty words and go rootling through your drawer for a couple of powerbars. Close enough to food.

After the first bite you’re suddenly super hungry, and you don’t even notice AA is online until the second time the pesterchum chime goes.

AA: s0llux?
AA: what the matter
AA: you said you wanted to talk about something?
AA: ...
AA: s0llux?
TA: fuck sorry aa
TA: yeah
TA: it kind of do
TA: it2 my roommate
AA: what he done now?
TA: it2 kind of 2tupid but it think he ii2 maybe in trouble
TA: gamzee wa2 hanging out with the trippy fuckiing theater people
TA: you have to thiink of them iin itallic. theater people.
TA: they liike exii but outiide the normal 2udent populatiion or 2omethiing.
TA: apparently a bunch of them came back two campu2 early two work on 2ome project. and they are all haviiing the2e crazy fuckiing partyie every niight.
AA: let me guess
AA: amp0ra is trying t0 get in with them
TA: yeah pretty much.
TA: which would be ok except that he2 kiind of obviou2ly 2iick
TA: and the non2top partyiing ii2nt helpiing
TA: aa he2 liike takiing 2tomach med2 liike thei2re candy and he looked liike fuckiing a22 and death earlier
TA: but get thi2, he put on hii2 terriible cape anyway and 2talked off 2omewhere.
TA: ii have two admit he can 2talk with the be2t of them.
AA: do y0u kn0w where this shindig is being held
TA: no. that2 the thing. gamzee wa2 going two go but he ended up cra2hiing iin2tead. we dont know where the partiie2 are.
AA: in that case i suggest y0u stay where y0u are f0r right n0w.
AA: n0 sense y0u wandering all 0ver campus l00king f0r this assh0le.
AA: what time is it there?
TA: iit2 liike one thiirty.
AA: 0k
AA: thats still in the 0k d0nt panic range
AA: i suggest y0u wait for an0ther h0ur, if there’s n0 sign 0f him and y0ure genuinely w0rried g0 wake up y0ur ra. its n0t y0ur resp0nsibility t0 find him.
TA: ok.
TA: that 2ound2 rea2onable.
TA: thank2 aa. a2 u2ual.
TA: you are the be2t.
AA: i really am
AA: 0k g0nna sign 0ff and g0 study but i have my ph0ne 0n me, text me if y0u need t0.
TA: ok. thank2. 2eriiou2ly.

-- apocalypseArisen (AA) ceased pestering twinArmageddons (TA) ! --

You fuck around online for a while, glancing down at the time readout on your monitors every few minutes. What the livid fuck, this is so stupid, you hate the dude, why are you all knotted up inside right now? Goddamn you kind of hate being you.

No, you just straight-up hate being you, but that is pretty much not news. You post a couple replies on some threads you’ve been watching, check out a video of a turtle trying to mate with a shoe, listen to some track one of your WoW guildmates recommended, open another Monster.

It’s fifteen past two when you have to lock the computer and go pee. You aren’t a big fan of beer--your dads let you have a little bit of wine or beer with dinner growing up, so you aren’t all looking to get fucked up immediately to taste forbidden fruit--but it can be pretty nice. Even nice beer is something you just rent. Energy drinks are way higher interest.

You haul yourself out of your chair and head down the quiet corridor to the bathroom. There are three stalls, three urinals. Showers are through the connecting door to the plantar wart factory that is your hall’s ablutorium. Some wag has scribbled a bunch of couplets on the tiled wall at eye height, and you wonder why people can never get their apostrophe misuse consistent.

You’re done, kind of dreading going back to the wait in your room, when a little unpleasant
hiccuping noise catches your attention. Oh, right. Someone’s in the far stall. By the sound of it he’s probably just waiting for you to vacate the premises so he can get on with ralphing.

You’ve washed your hands and are about to get out of there because you are not interested in listening to anyone being sick when you notice the crumpled fold of royal violet cloth visible under the stall door.

“...Ampora?”

There’s another hiccup and a groan.

“Ampora, dude. You...anything remotely close to okay?”

Pause. Then a tiny "no." Tiny.

Oh, fuck. You go over to the stall door. “Fuck. You want me to, to get someone?”

“No,” he says, more forcefully, but it ends in a gurgle, immediately followed by fulsome and violent sickness.

“Fuck,” you say again over the noises. “Let me in, man.”

“...what?” he says when he can speak.

“Let me in, I’m not going to fucking leave you here.”

Silence. Another hiccup. “Don’t.....don’t tell anyone."

“Pff. Tell anyone what? What happens in the guys bathroom totally stays in the guys bathroom.” You realize the connotations but he just sort of hiccup-snickers, and after a moment there’s a scrabbling at the lock and the door swings open.

Shit. He looks awful. He’s the color of...well, fish bellies, a greyish-wet-white. The hair is stuck to his face in sweaty locks, his careful gel work quite undone; his eyeliner has traced black snail-trails down his cheeks. His purple-and-black outfit appears to be muddy as well as stained with sickness, and the cape...

The cape may be a lost cause.

You make a small unhappy little noise and close the door behind you. “Fuck,” you say. “Ampora.”

“'s my name,” he croaks, and you have to reach over to feel his gross clammy forehead. He’s warm--not scary-hot, but definitely warmer than he should be. “Wow, Captor. I feel shocking.”

“No kidding?” you ask, trying to work out what to do with him. First off you flush the head. “--What did you drink? Where were you?”

“I dunno.” He lets his head droop to the toilet seat, eyes mostly-closed. “Townhouses. A screwdriver.”

“Just one?”

“Didn’t.....need more than one.” He gulps and settles again but almost immediately he’s convulsed with another heave, the tears you cry when you’re being sick tracing more black stains down his face. You know this bit from your migraines as well, the stupid useless expulsive efforts that do nothing for anybody that just go on and on after you’ve brought everything up that you’ve ever
You also know about the whole lol-let’s-get-the-freshman-drunk thing where upperclassmen hand over a mixed drink— in one of those red solo cups, for tradition’s sake—that’s like 70:30 alcohol to mixer, relying on the kiddiwinkles’ inexperience to not protest the ratio, and then stand back and watch. It’s bullshit and you can also see how it might be funny as hell— only right now, here in this little grey-painted bathroom stall with Eridan Ampora trying to turn all the way inside out, it doesn’t seem all that fucking hilarious after all.

“I bet you didn’t. Okay, look. You’re... pretty much hurled out, okay? Here’s what’s going to happen." You don’t tell people what to do except online. It feels weird in real life. “I’m gonna bring you towels and shit and you are going to have a shower, even if you gotta fucking sit on the floor, it’ll help, trust me.”

He looks up at you and wow his eyes are fucking purple, you can’t see any ring around the iris to indicate it’s a contact lens, that’s... the color his eyes actually are, what the fuck. He’s staring, and after a moment or two he drops his gaze and just droops against the wall, and the tiredness hurts your chest.

Crossly you get an arm around him, he’s so light, what the hell, and you help him haul his carcass round to the showers and hie yourself back to the room for his stupid basket o’ shower stuff and his Oscar Wilde bathrobe thing. And then you... wait.

You don’t even realize it but you’ve slid down the wall outside the bathroom to sit on the floor with your back braced against the cinderblocks and your face resting on the pinched fingers of your right hand.

“S... sollux?”

It’s such a tiny voice that you honest to God do not actually associate it with Ampora until you turn to see him leaning in the doorway, wrapped in his dumb dressing-gown, still grey-pale but up on his own two feet. You scramble upright.

He looks at you, miserably. You don’t exactly know why but you scowl at him, trying to look as forbidding as Vantas. “You should get to bed, man.”

Small nod. You see him sway a little and, oh, why the hell not, this whole night has been batshittery incarnate, you put an arm around his shoulders to steady him and guide him back down the hall. This is the same douche who went off on Gamzee for no reason; this is the same douche who listens to his stupid fucking anime with the volume up and no headphones, this is the same douche who wears a cape.

Which makes you think, where is it? He must’ve left his shit in the bathroom. Okay. You can go fetch that. Right now the thing is to get this asshole to bed.

He doesn’t protest. You fetch him the trash can and make sure there’s a bin liner, you are so not washing that out. Or making the poor janitors do it.

By the time you get back with his cape and his gross clothes from the bathroom— which you dump straight into his hamper no questions asked— he’s settled himself almost sitting up against his huge mound of pillows and has his covers tucked tight around him. The bits you can see between his shock of purple-streaked hair and the black sheets and comforter are still a really gross shade of grey-pale. Whether he knows it or not, the effect is pretty impressive.
“You, uh...” you really do not know what to say. “You want any water or anything?”

He closes his eyes and nods a little, and okay, good, you have something to do, something concrete. God, he looks so sick. You fill his water bottle at the drinking-fountain, padding down the midnight hall, and wonder if you should be calling someone, or waking up St. G. Maybe...well, fuck, let’s see if the jerk can keep some water down first.

You think he’s asleep when you get back, and sigh, turning off your desk lamp and setting the bottle by his bed on the dresser, but he stirs a little. His eyes are very, very bright in the dim glow of your various LEDs. They glitter.

“Man,” you hear yourself say. “You are really fucked up, Ampora. Like, seriously.”

And immediately you regret it, because his face somehow crumples, and suddenly he is sobbing in terrible strengthless heaves. You...yeah, you remember that one too. It sucks about as bad as it looks like it does. Without even thinking about it at all you lean in to put an arm around his shoulders because you can’t not, and he is shaking all over and he stiffens when you touch him but only for a minute and then he has socked his hot face against your shoulder and is sorta kinda clinging to you and you can feel the shudders running through him like electric current. One of your hands has crept round to his back and Christ but he’s all bones, he’s skinnier than you are, the knobbles of his spine pushing under your touch like piano keys. Oh, fuck. Goddamn.

Goddamn.

“...feel like shit,” he says into your shoulder.

“Yeah,” you say. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”
Chapter 8

He cries for a long time, and you’re afraid he’s gonna make himself sick again, but maybe he really is just too exhausted to manage anything that energetic. It’s...not the most comfortable angle, sitting on the edge of his bed with the stupid purple curtains all around you, holding him as he sobs into your shoulder, and you’re pretty sure there’s violet-prince-snot all over your shirt, but whatever. Under your hands he’s too warm and definitely too bony. You suddenly get what everyone means when they tell you you’re fucking skeletal.

Eventually, though, his breathing evens out from the juddering hitches of tears. He’s still clinging to you and you think probably he would be clinging to anybody at this point, it has nothing to do with the fact that you hate one another a whole bunch. He’s just that much of a fucking mess.

He mumbles something you don’t catch. "Hmm?"

"...said you’re bein weirdly awesome about all a this."

Your chest hurts sharply. Damn it. "--What’s going on, man? Seriously. You’re...you’re not okay."

Snurfle. He presses his face harder into your shoulder before finally letting go and flopping back against his stack of pillows. You would not be able to handle sleeping with that goddamn many pillows, what the hell.

He wipes at his face. Absently you hand over the box of tissues from the dresser. "I’m not," he agrees, his voice still cloggy and a little unsteady from crying. "I’m a gigantic fuckin mess is what I am."

"Truer words were never said, Ampora, what the hell is your deal?"

He winces, closing his eyes, crumpling up the tissues in his hand. "It’s stupid."

"I got that part already."

"...you’re a douche, Captor." It’s still a very small voice but you’re ridiculously heartened to hear the hint of his normal sneer in it.

"I’m not a douche," you correct. "You’re a douche. I’m an asshole, get this shit straight."

Amazingly he laughs--a little hitching uncertain giggle. "P-point taken."

"What is it? Seriously, man, what’s wrong with you?"

He looks away, and Christ you can tell he’s actually blushing, it looks so weird because of how pale he is; two spots of color flare and fade high on his cheekbones. "I think I caught something. Feel kinda feverish. Um. And my...my stupid fuckin ulcer isn’t helpin."

"Oh, shit." Yeah, that would make sense. That would make a lot of sense. You have a vague idea that stomach ulcers are a Big Deal. "Jesus. You need to see a doctor? The, the health center thing isn’t open until morning but I think there’s some urgent care clinic in town--"

He waves this away, looking more like a king’s youngest son than ever, those bizarre purple eyes half-shut. Now that he’s cried away all his horrible eye makeup you can tell his lashes are actually that black by nature, and his eyelids are translucent, show the darkness of the eye beneath. "Nah.
Just...stupid. Fuckin stupid. Shouldn’t a gone to that goddamn party but..."

You don’t really need him to finish the sentence. But he’d wanted them to be impressed. He’d wanted them to be all like goddamn this guy is way too smooth and sophisticated and a big deal to just be a dorky freshman, we must gather him to our collective bosom and make him feel appropriately adored.

Christ but you think you might fucking cry.

"What happened?"

"I got like halfway down my drink an my stomach started really hurtin but it was like...naked time was startin up an I thought I had a chance at maybe, you know, gettin somewhere with this one chick but..." He swallows hard. "Let me tell you, Captor, there is only one fuckin thing less smooth than havin to quit sloppy makeouts to go puke your guts up and that is doin the pukin part right in front a the other party."

"Fuck, dude." You want to tell him to stop, he doesn’t need to paint you a picture, you can pretty much guess how godawful the night ended up being, but he just goes on. He’s lying very still with his eyes shut.

"So that was pretty much that from the social acceptability standpoint a the evenin. They were pretty cool about it, considerin, but I pretty much just wanted to get the fuck out a there an maybe go die in a hole if one happened to present itself. I was keepin count a how many times I threw up but I totally lost track after I fell in that fuckin stream thing between the arts buildin and the road to the townhouses. I guess that was a good thing actually, washed off some a the grossness, but God it was cold."

"Eridan--"

"That’s basically it. Got back here, planned to spend the rest a the night in the bathroom. Then you showed up."

"Eridan, fuck." You rub at your face with both hands. "That is...the worst story I have ever heard. You are a goddamn wreck."

"Sol, you’re already winnin the King a Statin the Obvious title, you don’t gotta keep tryin so hard."

"Shut the fuck up," you tell him. "Ugh. Your stomach thing. Are you seriously okay or should I like drive you to the hospital? I will drive you to the hospital, Ampora."

He opens his eyes in the dimness and you can tell he’s getting ready to arm and aim another snarkbomb but he just pauses, and looks up at you with an expression you totally cannot parse. "-- No. It’s okay. I’m not like perforatin or anythin just...just dumb. Gonna go see the health center people tomorrow, I guess."

"Is that why you’re running a temperature?"

Eridan shrugs. "Probably not. I bet I picked up some gross virus or somethin on top a all this bullshit. --Fuck." His expression changes, and you think he’s maybe going to hurl again. "Oh, fuck, Sol, I’m sorry, I bet I’ve given it to you."

You blink. Suddenly that is utterly hilarious, and you have to laugh, you can’t help it. "What the hell, dude. You’ve had the world’s single fucking worst night in the history of worst goddamn nights and you’re concerned about me catching your stupid virus? You are dumb and your priorities are dumb
and you should be ashamed of yourself."

He blinks up at you and then he’s laughing too, a little whispery wreck of a laugh, but it makes you feel so much better.

You’re about to say something else when your computer chimes and you suddenly remember, shit, you’d been talking to KK about this earlier, you should probably let him know your roommate’s back and not in need of verbal beatdowns. "Hold that thought," you tell Eridan. "I gotta take this. You should go to sleep, by the way."

"Mmh," he says. "Um."

"Um what?"

"No, never mind, it’s dumb."

"What about this night has not been dumb? Spit it out."

He rubs at his face. When he speaks again his voice has gone tiny. "There’s...this tea stuff that sometimes helps when my stomach’s really bad."

You remember you noticed him drinking something out of a purple mug the other day, and mentally wince. "Got it. Where’d you keep the teabags?"

"My desk drawer. Sol, you don’t gotta..."

"Shut up," you tell him, not unkindly, and you go to rummage through his stuff. Sol. He’s not the first one to shorten your name like that. It sounds weird. Not bad weird, though.

When you come back from the second-floor kitchen with his funky-smelling herbal tea he’s most of the way asleep, but he wakes up enough to mumble something that sounds like thank you and take the cup. It really does seem to help him; some of the anxious lines on his face that you now realize are from pain fade a bit, he loses a little of the miserable hunch in his shoulders.

You are suddenly very tired.

-- twinArmageddons (TA) began pestering carcinoGeneticist (CG) ! --

TA: hey kk
TA: ju2t wanted you two know ampora2 back, no need two go fiind hiim
TA: he2 a fuckiing me22
CG: WHY AM I NOT SURPRISED.
CG: SO WHAT, HE MADE HIS OWN WAY BACK AND DIDN’T END UP NEEDING TO BE CARTED HOME IN A WHEELBARROW?
TA: actually he2 pretty 2iick
TA: iill tell you about iit iin the morniing
TA: dude ha2 apparently had the wor2t fuckiing niight ever.
CG: ...YOU NEED ANYTHING?
CG: UGH, WHAT AM I EVEN SAYING.
TA: nah iim ok
TA: think he2 done throwiing up for the night, thank2 though
TA: gotta take hii2 a22 over two the health center tomorrow, ii cant go to breakfa2t wiith you guy2, but iill catch up wiith you after that.
CG: FUCK. HE REALLY IS MESSED UP, HUH.
CG: YOU WON THE ROOMMATE LOTTERY ALL RIGHT, CAPTOR. YOU HAVE ALL
THE GODDAMN LUCK.

CG: I WANT TO HEAR ALL ABOUT THIS HORRIBLE MESS BECAUSE I HAVE A TERMINAL CASE OF TRAINWRECK SYNDROME, BUT I GUESS IT CAN WAIT UNTIL MORNING. MAYBE I'LL EVEN TRY THE NOVEL EXPERIMENT OF GOING THE FUCK TO BED FOR A WHILE, WHAT DO YOU THINK.

TA: whoa kk dont do anything too dra2tiic over there

CG: GOOD NIGHT, FUCKASS.

TA: ehehehe you 2ay the tweeete2t things

TA: niight

-- twinArmageddons (TA) ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist (CG) ! --

In the morning you are almost convined, waking up and staring at the ceiling tiles, that everything you remember was a crazy fucked-up dream and your weird roommate is still out slutting it up with upperclassmen and generally being a reprehensible human being. Almost.

Then he shifts a little in the other bed and you sit up to look over. Behind the curtains he’s still propped up on his huge heap of pillows, and you guess that has something to do with his stomach as well, maybe it hurts to lay down flat or something. The purple-black gauze obscures detail; you slither out of bed to go have a proper look.

...Jesus. He looks terrible. In daylight you can really see how pale he is, his hair dark-damp and straggling across his forehead with a total lack of artifice, deep violet shadows under his eyes. His lips have no color in them at all.

"...Eridan, dude, you look like shit."

He opens his eyes and scowls up at you. God but his eyes really are that color. It looks funny with the dull purple shadows of illness underneath them, like somebody’s color-coordinated his face with a paint-by-numbers kit. "Good mornin to you too, asshole. I feel like shit."

"Well, at least you’re rocking the thematic consistency," you say and run your hands through your hair. "Goddamn. We gotta get you to the health center. It’s...like the other side of campus." You check your watch: yeah, they’ll be open soon if they aren’t already.

He closes his eyes again, and shivers, and your chest hurts sharply. "Nnngh," he says. "Do I have to? Kinda don’t feel like movin right now."

"Yeah you have to, man. Either we are walking or you let me drive your car."

Eridan’s eyes flick open again and for a moment there’s that fuck you go die look of rage again before something seems to break and he just sighs.

"I cannot put into words," he says, "how much I do not want to fuckin ever be seen again on this goddamned campus. I would rather jump in a goddamn industrial blast furnace than show my face to Anningley fuckin College."

"Yeah, I know, dude, but...c’mon. This is like...the majority of the students aren’t even here yet, and how many people even saw you last night? Brass it the fuck out. You’re a pro at that whole I’m better than you schtick, just...do that real hard."

Wrong thing to say. His face does that weird crumpling thing again and he covers it with his hands.

"What--?"

"Captor," he says, muffled. "I’m gonna say this once, okay? I am not totally without self-awareness.
You don’t gotta rub it in."

"Rub what in?" you ask, honestly confused.

"The fact," and now he sounds as if he’s clenching his teeth, "that my as you so aptly fuckin put it I’m better than you schtick is just that. Okay? Yeah. Eridan Ampora is a stuck-up pretentious douchebag who thinks he’s all that an a bag a chips. Eridan Ampora is a snob. Eridan Ampora is a pathetic piece a shit who should never have tried this in the first goddamn place, this was all such a fuckin mistake."

You are so lost. And the pure acid self-loathing dripping from each syllable is not something you can wrap your head around.

"...tried what?"

"Ugh, do I gotta diagram my sentences for you, Sol? This. College. Pretendin to be someone who actually one day is gonna be a big fuckin deal."

"Wow," you say. "You are almost as fucked in the head as I am, Eridan. That’s a hell of an achievement."

You think he’s about to snap and start slinging invective at you again—ho-hum, back to normal—but he just stares at you with that unsettling Welch’s gaze and, implausibly, snickers. "You’re weird, Sol," he says. "You know that?"

"I thought we’d covered that pretty extensively already. Jesus Christ, existential angst aside and also crippling embarrassment aside, we have got to get you some medical attention. You kinda look like a purple-themed version of the Corpse Bride right now."

"--Fuck you," he says, and throws a pillow at your head. Okay. Good. You feel more on top of things now.

~

Despite the fact that he’s ill and despite the fact that you are worried and also you are sleep-deprived and you haven’t had your goddamn coffee yet and a whole bunch of other shit, you cannot possibly help grinning like an idiot when he sighs and hands over his keys. Oh hell yes you are driving his car. You are driving the fuck out of his car. His car is now officially your bitch.

"Try not to run into anythin,” he says wearily, settling in the passenger seat with his eyes shut. Neither of you have a thermometer but you’re pretty sure his fever’s higher than it was last night. "Includin other vehicles and stationary objects such as buildins."

"Taken under advisement, sir," you tell him and you start up the Mercedes and yes, that is a good feeling. For his sake you don’t drive like an asshole, but even so it’s kind of a rush to pilot forty thousand dollars worth of car across campus. And you can feel him watching you, which is...also kind of a rush for no good reason.

You make a point of parking beautifully and coming around to open his door, and he tells you you’re a douchebag and you remind him that no you are an asshole, he’s the douchebag, and he leans on you as you walk into the health center.

While he gets looked at you sprawl inelegantly in the waiting room, trying to work out what the fuck that conversation had been about. Point one: he’s a complete poser, yes, taken as read; point two, he knows it and is pretending not to know it, point three, in fact he’s...what, doing it to cover up
desperate self-hating insecurity?

The fuck would Ampora have to be insecure about anyway, you think. He’s rich, he has a cool car, he’s pretty, he’s...

Well, he is pretty. Guy has big weird-ass purple eyes and a pretty good face when it’s not twisted in that fuck-you sneer.

Well, okay, even when it is.

Fuck.

Point being, dude kind of has a lot going for him in comparison to, say, yourself (crazy, heterochromia, migraines, used to have a killer lisp, social skills of a tapeworm, probably could stand to shower more often than you do). You are at a loss to explain what he thinks he’s got to prove, or pretend to prove.

KK was right, you totally lucked out in the roommate department. You have all the luck. All of it. Speaking of your eloquent friend, he’s texting you; you wriggle to pull your phone out of your hoodie pocket and see what’s up.

HEY CAPTOR, I THINK YOUR PET DOUCHEBAG MADE A LOVE CONNECTION OR SOMETHING LAST NIGHT. THERE’S A BOX OUTSIDE YOUR ROOM WITH HIS NAME ON IT IN CURLY FONT.

wtf. itti2 probably a bomb.
I DUNNO, MAN. BOMBS DON’T TEND TO SMELL LIKE CLOVE CIGARETTES AND THAT BLACK PHOENIX ALCHEMY LAB PERFUME SHIT.
jesus. that ii2 kind of a 2urprise giiven what he told me about hii2 appearance at that party. um.
WHAT DID HE DO, FALL OFF THE TABLE OR SOMETHING THAT MIGHT IN A THEATER PERSON’S CRACKED FUCKING EXCUSE FOR A BRAIN BE CONSIDERED AWKWARDLY ADORABLE?
puked all over some girl he wa2 tryiing two hiit on. or maybe ju2t in front of her, he wa2 kiinda vague and ii diidnt really want detaii2.
OKAY, FIRST OF ALL EW. SECOND, EW, AND THIRD, FUCK, WHO KNOWS, THOSE FREAKS ARE PROBABLY KINKY AS HELL.
fuck you kk ii diid not need that mental image. al2o can you not tell anyone about the pukiing thing, he2 kind of under2tandably fuckiing mortiifiied. ii diid not tell you about iiit.
HAH. YEAH, I GUESS HE WOULD BE. FINE, I WILL KEEP THAT DISGUSTING NUGGET OF INFORMATION TO MYSELF. WHERE ARE YOU?
2tiill at the health center. ii drove hiim over. iin hii2 2weet-a22 car.
MAN, YOU ARE JUST RACKING UP THE BROWNIE POINTS FOR BEST ROOMMATE EVER OVER THERE. WHAT THE FUCK. ANYWAY TELL AMPORA SOMEBODY IS ~*THINKING OF HIM*~ WITH LIKE CURLICUES AND SHIT AROUND THE LETTERS. MAKE HIS SORRY LITTLE DAY.

You are not at all sure why the idea of someone sending Ampora little inexplicable presents bothers you, but it does. It bothers you. Maybe it’s just that the theater people are so fucking out-there. Maybe you’re just sleep-deprived and in a weird state of mind.

You try to forget about it and just go to join Eridan at the reception desk. "How’re you feeling?"

"Shitty," he says. "I’m supposed to stay in bed until this stupid fever’s gone. They gave me a
prescription, too, I need to go into town and hit up the CVS or somethin."

"I'll drive you," you offer quickly. He glowers at you.

"You're enjoyin takin advantage a my perilous state a health, Sol. Don’t even try to deny it."

"No I’m not, I’m being the best roommate ever. Sheesh. You are terrible at observation. Come on, the sooner we get going the sooner you can retire to your bed of pain and comfort yourself with the fact that someone has apparently sent you a present. KK says there’s a box with your name on it outside the room."

Eridan stares at you. "What?"

"Apparently it smells like cloves and perfume. I don’t really want to know how KK can identify a particular kind of perfume, but hey. Guy’s talented."

You are really not sure why the great big smile that breaks over his face also bothers you. What the fuck, Captor. You are probably headed for one of your downswings or something, that’s just great.

"Sol?" He’s looking at you.

"What?"

"What’s the matter?"

"Nothing," you say, and elaborately open the car door for him. "Your chariot, madame."

He flips you off, and you return the favor. The radio goes on as soon as you get behind the wheel, because you are suddenly not at all in the mood for talking.
Her name is Rose Lalonde and you already detest her.

You haven’t seen her in the flesh but you don’t think you need to, honestly. From Eridan’s description you can pretty much picture the lady herself: bleached-white hair in a twenties bob, black lipstick, ironic fucking knitting. She’s a junior. She’s a theater major.

She is going to chew Ampora up and spit him out like....like ironic old-fashioned clove-flavored chewing gum. It’s disgusting. He’s disgusting. He’s a disgrace. Why did you have to get saddled with the stupidest fuck of a roommate the universe could visit on your skinny cracked ass?

Oh, right, cause the universe hates you. You almost forgot that for a couple days, what the fuck were you even thinking?

You try to explain some of this to Karkat. It’s Saturday. Ampora has been in bed since you got back from town yesterday morning with his new shiny super crazy motherfucking awesome prescription antacids (which he says don’t do much of anything) and he has actually had you walk a letter over to the arts building and jam it in Lalonde’s mail box in the division office.

“You just said--”

“I just said jam it in her box,” you override him. “Deal with it. Fuck, KK, you should’ve seen it, he writes in purple and it was only because I was like dude you will fucking spill that shit all over your idiotic black sheets that he did not actually write the letter with an actual honest to god quill fucking pen and a bottle of ink. Because he has one. I have seen it. I thought it was just like a derpy feather thing that he had in his pen jar on the desk but no it has an actual nib on it and he can be all like Byronic or something, I don’t even know.”

You groan and let yourself slump back against the sun-warmed wall. The pair of you are on the front steps of Gresley, sharing one of the awesome clove cigarettes Lalonde had sent Ampora with her sweet goddamn little notelet. You still haven’t asked Karkat how he knows what brand of perfume she put on that note.

“There, there,” he says. “You’re living with a walking talking living breathing cliche, that has got to be tough, but be strong, Captor. Be strong.”

“Fuck you,” you tell him and reclaim the cigarette. Goddamn these things are incredible, they burn so sweetly going down and then you can’t feel the back of your throat at all, and they put sugar or something on the filter, they did not actually write the letter with an actual honest to god quill fucking pen and a bottle of ink. Because he has one. I have seen it. I thought it was just like a derpy feather thing that he had in his pen jar on the desk but no it has an actual nib on it and he can be all like Byronic or something, I don’t even know.”

Possibly because he doesn’t want to vomit on his new crush a second time.

“You didn’t have to put up with that fucking awful look of hope on his face. I mean you can just
taste the inevitable downfall. It’s so obvious to everyone except him. When we got back to the room he was just worn to shreds, poor guy, he just wanted to crawl into bed and go to sleep and I don’t fucking blame him but then this girl had to send over her creepy little love token and the second he opened it it was like it was his fucking birthday. He lit up, KK. It was like he was a different goddamn person.”

Ampora had been awfully pale when you’d finally got him back to Gresley, hands pressed against his stomach, and you’d straight-up told him to get his ass in bed and rest or you would do something terrible as soon as you worked out what, and he’d demanded that you hand over the package you’d picked up off the doorstep when you let the two of you in. Fucking demanded. All imperious and shit.

You’d given it to him against your best instincts and he’d pressed the thing to his face and inhaled, looking uncharacteristically blissful; and when he took the wrapping paper off to reveal the pack of Djarum Specials and the piece of folded lavender stationery you honestly thought he was going to cry in happiness.

“Listen to this,” he’d said shakily. “Fuck, Sol, listen to this I can’t fuckin believe this oh my god.”

“Kind of rather not,” you told him and settled behind your computer, not entirely sure why you were so annoyed. He ignored you.

“‘Dear Eridan,’ he began. ‘I was sorry to see you leave our gathering so early. I trust your indisposition was a passing inconvenience and attach the enclosed as a token of my esteem. I remain yours etc, Rose Lalonde.’ Sol. Sol. She fuckin doesn’t hate me!”

“This would be the chick you hurled on?” you inquired, and kind of wished you hadn’t when the joy on his stupid goddamn face flickered.

“–Yeah although you know what I’d appreciate you not referrin to that shameful episode in future, as a personal fuckin favor, if you don’t mind too much. She...look at this handwritin, Sol, this is downright gorgeous.”

“Rather not,” you said again. He finally tore his eyes away from the purple paper (fuck, these kids might be made for one another after all) and glanced at you.

“You okay? You kinda don’t look so hot, Sol.”

“Got a headache,” you told him shortly. “Couple of plague rats we are. Gonna put a quarantine notice on our whiteboard.”

“Oh. Um. I hope you feel better? --Oh my fuckin God she actually wrote the etcetera the right way with the ampersand and the c, jesus christ, I don’t even believe this...”

He’d asked for his ridiculous quill pen and his block of heavy beautiful writing-paper and you’d given him the latter and one of his stupid goddamn purple gel pens and let him get the fuck on with it, and when he’d finished and folded up the letter you had said nothing at all to his request that you go deliver that shit. You had just taken it from his hand and left the room.

Now, as the Lalonde has yet to respond to his heartfelt purple epistle, you’ve escaped the chamber of sighs and stupid goddamn questions and you’re chilling with Karkat on the steps and waiting for it to be time to go to dinner.

“You know what I think,” he says.
“No, what do you fucking think.”

“I think he’s under the impression life is a movie and therefore he’s playing the part he thinks he’s supposed to play. Cool chick takes pity on dumbass fucking dork because she sees through his facade of dorkiness to the true heart that beats within, blah fucking blah. In this scenario there is literally no way shit can go wrong for him. Even if they don’t end up together at once, they are Fated To Be Together.”

“...KK, you seriously gave this way too much thought.”

“Shut up, I’m not done. Whereas she, being an upperclassman and not necessarily aware of the depths of his pathetic bullshit, thinks she’s playing with a cute little freshman toy almost certainly in order to fuck with another dude she’s trying to make jealous. Ampora’s obviously stupid for her because he’d be stupid for any girl who gave him the time of day. She can capitalize on that shit.”

You turn your head to stare at him. He’s got that patient look he gets when he’s explaining shit. “He thinks they’re fated to be, she thinks he’s a cute distraction. You see where this shit is going.”

“Yeah, exactly where I said it was going in the first fucking place, KK.” You groan and take the cigarette back from him: one more good drag left. You’re gonna miss this one tiny perk. “And when she inevitably dumps his ass he’s going to flip his shit completely and probably throw an aneurysm or something. I have never met anyone so utterly fucking nervous as this douche. No wonder he’s got ulcers.”

“Seriously.”

You sigh. “Fuck. Well, I can’t talk sense into him, he just shuts down when I say anything about it, it’s completely pathetic to observe.”

“Classes start on Monday, though. He’ll have shit to think about other than his one true fated love. And the rest of the students move in tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah. But I dunno if he’s even gonna be able to get to class on Monday, he’s still running a fever and the health center people were like ‘no doing anything until that shit is cleared up.’” His temperature seems to spike in the evenings; last night you’d watched him shifting uncomfortably against his pillows, those two spots high on his cheekbones flushed bright, sweating and shivering, and after a while you’d said fuck a bunch of times, absconded from the shitty-ass raid you were kind of half-heartedly playing, and gone to fetch a Tupperware thing of cool water from the kitchen and a washcloth from his shower caddy.

You’d meant to just hand him the washcloth and go back to the internet, but the sheer unalloyed gratitude in his stupid purple eyes made you stay where you were, sitting on the edge of his bed. You had in fact ended up sitting with him for like over a fucking hour, keeping the cold cloth on his forehead, soaking it in the water over and over as the heat of his skin drank up the chill. For the most part you’d sent your mind away as you did this; you’ve partitioned your consciousness reasonably well so that you can do one thing while thinking about something completely different, and the idea of the auto-responder application is still squiggling at the back of your head, so while you mopped your goddamn pathetic excuse for a roommate’s fevered brow you flicked over possibilities with your actual brain.

Nevertheless you couldn’t quite block out the little sigh he gave each time you settled the cold washcloth against his face. It was a weird small noise you don’t think you’ve ever heard anybody make before and it had done stupid things to your chest.
You are super glad when Gamzee comes loping over from the arts building, wearing what appears to be a Teletubbies shirt and some pants that should probably have been honorably retired years ago but which are not improved by the addition of a shitload of painty handprints. “Hey, my brothers,” he drawls. “What are the motherfucking haps?”

“The haps are we’ve been waiting for you for like half an hour, fuckass,” Karkat says and hauls himself to his feet. “C’mon, I need food. Captor, we’re gonna thief some extra shit like bread and cheese and stuff so we can go hide in the woods from the onslaught of college kids tomorrow, you want in?”

The thought is really appealing, actually. “…man. that kind of sounds awesome.”

“Fuck yes it is awesome, Solbro,” Gamzee informs you. “One righteous motherfucking plan we all up and made. Get us some foods, pack that shit up with a bottle of wicked elixir, get our herb on, we are fucking serene, brother. Ain’t no worldly bullshit gonna harsh on our bro-time.”

“Wicked elixir?” you ask, joining them. The three of you begin the trudge over to the giant plastic tent.

“That’s what our special friend here calls Faygo,” Karkat explains, rolling his eyes. “I do not even know. I do not even want to know. The ways of the juggalo are fucking inscrutable, Captor, and you look long enough into that shitty abyss, the juggalo will look back into you.”

“Karbro just likes to up and pretend he ain’t down with the Faygo,” Gamzee says. “But I know better, me. I got my understanding on.”

“Understand this,” Karkat says and flips him off, and you are…not actually all that surprised when Gamzee curls a long arm around his shoulders and gives him a lanky, absent, but somehow rather sweet hug. You figured there was something going on there, all right.

Karkat’s gone a sort of brick color. His skin’s this weird nifty shade of brown that makes you think of cinnamon as much as coffee, and when he blushes it’s all cinnabar up in this shit. You are aware that you are noticing this. Why are you noticing this. “--Gamz, jesus,” he’s saying, but he puts his arm around the guy and gives him a fierce quick hug right back, his scowl fucking daring you to say anything.

You don’t say anything. Your shades are helpful, but you think you’ve covered the aww pretty well.

~

They have the fucking muffins at dinner. You’d filled your pockets and also wrapped up a bunch of lunch-like things for tomorrow, and the three of you hurry back to Gresley to get that shit in Karkat and Gamzee’s little fridgelet. For some reason you can’t help feeling like a derpy little kid about to go on some kind of adventure, and you only go gleep really briefly when Gamzee hugs you goodbye. You can see KK rolling his eyes, but…fuck, actually it feels kind of really awesome to have someone give you a big goddamn hug, and you cling real briefly to this dude before extricating yourself from his arms. “See you guys tomorrow, yeah? Bright and early before the throng of assholes descends.”

You are in a good mood all the way down the hall to your own door when movement catches your peripheral vision and suddenly that weird kid with the super pale hair and the aviators is right fucking there what the christ.

“Jesus,” you say.
“Nope. Dave Strider. But here, my sister asked me to give you this. It’s to your roommate.”

A crisp envelope is pressed into your hand. It reeks of cloves and perfume. “What--” you start, but he’s already gone, scuttling down the hall like a cockroach in stupid fucking sunglasses argh there go your happy feels.

You examine the envelope for a moment before you let yourself in. Heavy-laid pale lavender paper, jesus christ she’s even sealed it with actual wax jesus christ. The coefficient of pretension in this here hall is now at prompt fucking critical levels.

You kind of want to just drop the thing in the trash closet but...ngh, goddamnit, you just punch the combination and let yourself in.

It’s dim; he hasn’t got his bedside lamp on and your various telltale LEDs don’t shed light so much as emphasize the gloom. You don’t flick on the overhead because that would be a shitty thing to do, you just shrug out of your jacket and go to turn your bedside lamp on, a kinder sort of illumination. The draped bed stirs.

“Mmh,” he says. “Sol?”

“Yup. Got something for you, man.” You really wish you didn’t. He comes awake completely of a sudden, and you can tell he’s still very definitely febrile, his eyes glitter, his face is white except for those hectic spots on his cheekbones. Fuck. Maybe you should take him back to the health center, but...no, they said it was a virus, not a shitload that can be done about that other than waiting for it to go away...

“Well?” he demands, pushing himself upright on his mountain of pillows. You swallow a nasty retort and just hand over the envelope and oh god those bright eyes go huge, vast. You fling yourself down on your bed and stare at the half-seen ceiling.

“Oh my God Sol this is amazin jesus fuck she sealed it with silver fuckin wax I cannot even begin to say how perfect this woman is--” he breaks off as he unfolds the letter itself. You don’t want to hear it. You hope he doesn’t read it aloud.

He doesn’t read it aloud.

You wonder what it says.

He reads it a second time and then a third, and then he folds the paper back up and clutches it fervently to his skinny-ass bosom. You think fiercely about code.
Fuck. “Eridan, did you even get any dinner?” You are the worst roommate, it is totally you.

He shakes himself, he actually shakes himself out of his reverie. That is totally a reverie, not just zoning out. Reverie all up in this shit. “Huh? Oh, no. It’s okay.”

“It is not okay,” you say, and you sound tired to hell and back. “Sorry, I’m a total idiot, I didn’t even get you your disgusting oatmeal crap before I left to meet the guys. What flavor of disgusting oatmeal crap would sir prefer this fine evening?”

“I’m fine, Sol, I don’t need anything,” he says and you can tell he’s just flying on whatever that letter told him. You remember what you’d read on the internet about peptic ulcers.

“You are not fine, you have a fucking ulcer and you are also running a fever of I don’t even know what, so shut up and tell me what you want for Hilarious Pretend Dinnertimes.” Your voice is not so much sharp around the edges as just worn and unhappy.

Eridan looks over at you. Searchingly. You scowl at the ceiling and slither off your bed. “You got your choice of Instant Disgusting Grits and Instant Disgusting Various Kinds of Soup or Instant Disgusting Oatmeal.”

“Sol, I’m really not hungry, it’s okay,” he says.

“Yeah, I get that, but you have to at least get something in you or your fucked-up innards will just go
on digesting themselves.”

“Mmh. Maple cinnamon disgusting oatmeal.”

“There, was that so fucking hard?” You flip through the packets and find the right one. “I’ll be back. Don’t go anywhere.”

He blinks.

“Joke,” you say, and you get out of there.

*What the hell even is your deal,* you have to wonder. Also what was in that letter?

When you get back he looks less starry-eyed and more intent, which you guess is good, and he takes the bowl of maple cinnamon disgusting oatmeal with a nod of thanks. “Can you get me my writing paper and a pen?”

You get him his writing paper and a pen, and you go back to your computer and fire up one of your alt accounts and you go slay the fuck out of a bunch of pixels. Time dilates: you’re not sure how long it’s been when a little “Sol?” breaks into your consciousness.

You look up. Oh, shit. He’s written like four sheets of paper on both sides and he looks *exhausted.* You quit the session without bothering to save anything and go over to collect his bowl--he managed like half the oatmeal, that’s good, right? He folds up the pages, tucks them into an envelope, licks it with the tip of a pale tongue, seals it.

“How’d you mind takin that to the arts buildin tomorrow?”

You aren’t sure why it takes you a moment to respond. “Uh. No, man, I can do better, apparently Lalonde’s brother is on this hall. He gave me that letter for you earlier.”

Ampora brightens visibly and you feel weird about that, like you’ve felt weird about everything tonight. “Thanks, Sol. Seriously.”

“What are roommates for,” you say, not a question, and you take the envelope and the bowl and abscond.

Dave Strider is a creepy little fucklet but he lives with somebody called Jake English and you have got to wonder whether those are both pseudonyms because what the fuck. You slip the letter under their door, assuming Strider will a) recognize it for what it is and b) deign to deliver it, but you honestly would not lose sleep over the tragedy if he were to just drop it in the recycling.

Yes you would.

Fuck.

You wash out Ampora’s gross oatmeal bowl and you have a cigarette on the balcony and you are definitely having a downswing because everything, everything seems to be conspiring to make you want to do something terminally lame such as have a massive fucking crying jag. You are not about to do something like that. You have shit that needs taking care of.

When you get back to the room he’s asleep. You move as quietly as you can, putting things away, and you settle at your desk to get back to the pixel slaying.
Hours later, hours after you should by sense and rights be asleep yourself, a lull in your music through your earbuds coincides with a little noise of distress from his side of the room and you pause everything and look up, taking the buds out.

He’s shifting uncomfortably in the bed, rolling his head from side to side. “S-sol?”

_Fuck._ You catch your knee on the edge of the desk as you get up and hurry over to him: that’s gonna bruise by tomorrow. “Dude, what is it, what the fuck?”

Shit, he looks terrible. You reach over to flick on his bedside lamp. He’s _running_ with sweat, his eyes brilliant, lashes clumped into damp black points. “Sol, I, I really don’t feel good,” he says.

Understatement of the _year_. You wonder what the fuck to do. You should get St. G. You should...fuck, you really don’t know _what_ to do because mostly you just want to hug him, all gross and sweaty as he is, and tell him shit will be okay.

He _whimpers_ and that’s enough to quit the stalled process in your brain and you go fetch the digital thermometer you’d picked up at CVS when you got his meds. “Under the tongue, man. No, don’t argue.”

He subsides, those crazy eyelashes trembling a little bit. Fuck, they look fake. They look like those goddamn ads on TV.

The thing beeps and you take it out of his mouth and look at the readout. 102.5. _Fuck_. Okay, fuck, you actually looked this up earlier because you weren’t sure what the serious you-need-an-ambulance cutoff was and this isn’t it. Still too high, way too high, but you think probably calling in the cavalry is not necessary right now and also he would die of embarrassment and you know it and you also think that is a valid variable in this stupid fucking equation, what is even wrong with you.

“It’s okay,” you tell him. “Gonna go get you cooled down, dude. Everything’s gonna be fine.”

He doesn’t look as if he believes you. The purple lock of his hair, darkened to something like indigo with sweat, droops over his forehead, across one eye: you reach out and nudge it back and..._he_ pushes his hot face against your hand, and Christ you would give a lot to be anybody else in the universe right now. You stroke back his hair and then you go to fetch the bigger tupperware and fill it with cool water, because you think this is going to be a long fucking night.

~

You were not wrong.

It’s dawn, just about, and he’s finally sleeping peacefully. You don’t want to wake him to take his temperature but he feels much closer to normal when you put the back of your hand to his cheek. Hopefully that’s the end of this bullshit and he can get on with...just being Ampora; you honest to god just want to see him stalking around like he owns the place again instead of lying here like a broken doll in this bed.

You are so tired.

At first you’d thought you were overreacting with the cold cloth but pretty soon he started wriggling around fretfully and trying to escape from the bedclothes and then he started talking to people who were not actually there and that’s when you went _fuck no_, and fetched fresh cool water to bathe his forehead and his chest. You may never forget the awful little noises he made while he was trying to get away from the coldness, but fuck, it worked, little by little he calmed down and you kept the cold on and when one of his hands drifted up to trace hot fingertips over your face, your lips, your
shoulder, you let it, and a little later when he was really unhappy you took his hand in yours and that was you pretty much stuck there because he would not let go of your hand. You wrung out the cloth as best you could with just the one hand and you kept on with it until around like half past four you could tell something was happening, he was shaking all over and sweat was standing out on his face like little clear cabochons and then he seemed to exhale, relax, go serene, and when you felt his forehead again it was noticeably cooler.

You’d read about people’s fevers breaking but you’ve never actually seen it happen. Fucking trippy, man.

Now--cleaned up as best you can manage without disturbing him--you’re kind of waiting for him to wake up, because you need to know if you fucking up really badly and he’s not Eridan anymore. You don’t know why this would be the case but in your exhausted stress-addled brain it seems like a potential outcome, and you are not okay with it, to quote your best friend.

God you are so tired.

When somebody knocks on the door it’s barely six in the morning and you are still sitting on the horrible dorm chair beside his bed and you jerk out of a half-doze to go answer it before they can knock again and wake Ampora up.

Oh.

Yeah, you do hate her.

She’s taller than you, for one thing, and everything about her screams porcelain perfection, this woman probably pees Earl Grey. Short but perfectly styled white hair in that Clara Bow bob, a black coat over a deep violet dress, black lipstick in the wee hours of the morning. “You must be Sollux,” she says, and her voice is way deeper than you expected from somebody who looks like that.

“Well.” You are all out of witty repartee. Witty repartee is on fucking backorder.

“How is he?”

“Fever broke a couple hours ago. Don’t wake him.” Why are you talking to this spooky broad.

“I won’t. My brother brought me his letter and I wondered if I could be of any help.”

You are so tired and you want to cry again and you just rub at your face. Fuck. Fine. You know what, fuck.

“Be my guest,” you say. “He’s retarded for you but I bet you know that shit already.”

“Yes,” says Rose Lalonde. “I knew that shit already.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

now with art by the wonderful givenclarity!

You stand aside to let her sweep in. She makes the whole goddamn room look shabbier. When she bends over Ampora you think briefly of bits of Castlevania, and swallow hard. “Look,” you say. “I’ll be....uh. Out. I got shit to do today.”

Lalonde flicks a glance at you and no her eyes are not purple too, that is ridiculous; you squint. They’re just a weird shade of blue, like, whatserface. Liz Taylor. Everyone said she had violet eyes but they were just a weird shade of blue.

You wonder about Strider’s hair. Do they bleach it together, perhaps? Brother-sister hairstyling sessions? Or is that weird offwhite actually natural? Fuck. She and Ampora really might be made for one another. And you are so tired you are yawning hard enough to make your eyes water and you just...cannot deal with this shit right now.

“You have your phone with you?” she asks, and you have to blink those yawn-tears hastily away.

“What?”

“Your phone. I can’t stay with him all day, I need to run some errands for the program. He’ll need to be able to contact you.”

“Why the fuck would he need to contact me?” you ask, and there’s more emphasis on me than you’d have preferred. “You, uh. You guys. I don’t want to be like in the way, okay? Just make sure he eats something along with all those gross pills. He’s gotta take like three of them with something when he wakes up and there’s this tea he drinks, he’ll tell you about it.”

You grab your phone from the charger and your jacket from the back of your chair. “Nice meeting you,” you tell her, and you abscond.

You’re halfway down the hall before you say a bunch of bad words under your breath with an intensity to rival Karkat’s and turn to go back and scribble a) your number and b) your chumhandle in tiny upside-down letters down one side of the whiteboard. Lalonde can figure it out if she feels the need to. Otherwise she and the Theater People can deal with Ampora. It was their damn party that got him so fucked up in the first place.

Out the window of the bathroom you can see the shadow of the volleyball net on the dew-glittering grass and you wish, you wish to fuck, that you had any idea what is going on in your own head. You’re pretty sure today will be bad and tomorrow will be beyond imagining, and after that there’s going to be a sort of dull blank few days before your stupid goddamn brain gets its brain shit together and hauls itself back up to normal functioning level, and really it could’ve picked a better time to pull this crap than right when classes are about to start.

You splash cold water on your face, like in the movies, to wake yourself up. All it does is sting your eyes and get up your nose, and your hair sticks to your face as you stare at yourself in the mirror.
Heh. Yeah, you look like ass.

The left eye is the normal blue one, the right one is the weird shade of brown. It’s a sort of blue-over-brown effect, though, so under light at the right angle it looks almost burgundy-ish. You hate having to get your eyes examined because when they dilate your pupils the left one dilates fast and then goes back to normal in like a couple of hours whereas the right one takes for fucking ever to open and then even longer to relax. Your eye doctor said it had something to do with the pigment in the iris muscle, lighter-colored eyes expand and contract more quickly. Whatever it is it means after an exam you’re stuck unable to focus them equally for hours and that means looking at a computer screen is guaranteed to give you a puking headache and yeah, the more you think about it the more you realize it’s another example of The Universe Fucking Hates Sollux Captor.

Cold water had felt nice on your skin, though, and you soak some paper towels and press those against your closed eyes, and yeah, that helps a bit with the general shitty feeling.

You aren’t sure how long you’ve been there when the door creaks open and you jerk upright, dropping the towels and reaching for your glasses where they sit on the edge of the sink.

“Youp,” says a voice so drily laid-back that you think you know who it is before you turn to look. “Oh, it’s you,” you say. “Not Jesus Christ.”

“A common mistake to make.” Strider ambles over to peer at himself in one of the mirrors over the sinks, rearranges a tiny lock of white-blonde hair. Now that you think about it neither he nor Lalonde had shown any of the either yellow or dark discoloration at the hairline that tends to mean somebody’s been rocking the 40-volume developer and powder bleach, and when he bends closer you can see the curve of one eyebrow and it’s exactly the same color as his hair. “JC couldn’t hope to reach this level of swag, yo. That beard and long hair shit is just not conducive to the sicknasty levels of awesome that characterize Striders.”

“You always talk about yourself in the third person?”

“No, but when Dave Strider does, Dave Strider creates interwoven fractal patterns of fucking irony that are beyond the comprehension of all but the most enlightened, Captor. My sister’s concerned about your hot mess of a roomie.”

“No,” you say, and lean against the wall with your arms folded. “Really?”

“Boggles my mind too.” He tilts his face this way and that, makes another tiny adjustment to his hair. You kind of want to punch him.

“Well,” you say. “She’s welcome to play Florence Gothingale all over him. I got shit to do of my own today. That does not involve either of them. Or you.”

“Whoa,” he says, and raises his hands in measured astonishment. “We got a badass over here.”

Maybe it’s just the fact that you are so tired your eyes are watering and you feel a little tiny bit unsteady on your feet, but the badass meme thing is still fucking hilarious. You can’t help an incredibly uncool snort, and curl over, leaning on the sink, snickering.

Just for a moment you catch Strider’s deadpan expression crack a tiny little bit, one corner of his mouth twitching up before he realizes it and slams that expression firmly back into place, and just for that you hate him a little bit less. “Fuck you, Strider.”

“Aw, man. Sorry to say but my dance card, it is like filled up for the next three months, but if you
wanna shoot me an email we can put you on the waiting list. Just don’t hold your breath.”

You rub at your eyes under the glasses. “What do you want?”

“Want? Why, Captor, how forward. Just letting you know she’s not playing.”

Your look of “right” obviously even pierces his aviators. “Not playing much,” he amends. “Lalonde can come off pretty strong, I know.”

“How come you’re Strider and she’s Lalonde?”

“Brother from another mother, yo,” he says, and fluffs up his bangs a little. “Check you later, Captor.”

You flip him off, and he gives you the faintest edges of a smirk before he’s gone.

What the fuck is up with that family, you wonder; but you can’t really deny that you feel a tiny bit better now.

“Wow,” Karkat says when you knock on his door a little later. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks, man. Really appreciate that.”

“Did you get any sleep at all?”

“Not to speak of,” you say, and when he stands aside to let you in you flop on one of the shitty beanbag chairs and shut your eyes. He’s moving around the room and there’s a hum and shortly a beeping and he picks up your hand and wraps it around something hot that smells promisingly of Colombian dark roast.

“Long night of violet prancing, huh.”

You open your eyes and find yourself holding a mug of instant coffee. Hey, that’s right. They have a microwave. These dudes are prepared for the actual zombie apocalypse. You take a sip and the piercing sweetness is almost as good as the heat, Karkat put like a ton of sugar in this, and you look up at him and you could almost cry for the tiredness and how awesome it is to have someone make you shitty instant coffee without even asking. “....the longest.”

He flops in the other chair. “Gamz’s still out, he’s likely to wake up soon and we can get our shit together and go scuttle off to the woods ahead of the hordes of fellow students. Wanna share the horror story?”
“You just like horror stories, KK,” you say, and take another gulp. Fuck, this is like ambrosia. Or nectar. Ambrosia was supposed to be what gods ate, not drank, right? “Yeah so when I went back to my room after we got back last night, guess who ambushed me, Ampora’s girlfriend’s creepy-as-fuck little brother.”

“...Wait,” says Karkat. “He’s not the douche with the sunglasses who lives with that League of Extraordinary Gentlemen fanboy on the corner?”

“The very same. His name’s Dave Strider. I think it’s probably really something dorky like Eugene Fitzherbert but he wants so hard to be a cool kid that he went with Dave Strider.” Mmm, oh god, coffee. You’re feeling much more human by the minute. “--ehhehehe. I kind of want to make a list of Aragorn’s names now and use them on him one by one and see if he gets it.”

Karkat grins a snagle-sharp grin. “Fuck if it ain’t the Heir of Elendil, man.”

“You read all that shit too?”

“Who doesn’t? Difference between us and sorry goddamn twerps like Violet Prince is that we get where capes do and do not belong.”

“Oh, right, the cape,” you say, leaning back in the beanbag. “His cape’s probably a totally lost cause. He will weep for that.”
“Quite right. About time he learned the ways of this world. So what happened last night?”

“Oh, yeah. So Strider ambushed me and gave me a letter from Lalonde for VP. Dude looked really bad when I got in, all feverish, but he insisted on writing a response, which I being a super nice person shoved under Strider’s door. I ended up playing Minecraft for, uh. A long time. I guess it was like four a.m. when I noticed he was really...not okay.”

You stare into the mug, trying to find the right words, worn out and not even sure what you want Karkat to get out of this whole story, and you end up just telling him the truth. How Ampora had been glowing, brilliant with his fever, struggling against the covers, talking to people who weren’t there--someone called Dualscar, what the fuck, that had to be someone in a shitty fantasy novel, and then worse than that, much worse, Dad, and that was when you couldn’t just sit there and listen and you started with the cold water and how he’d tried to wriggle away from the coldness and how after a while it had seemed to help, and he’d settled down, and eventually he’d slid into what you thought was natural sleep. You leave out the bits where he’d run his burning fingertips over your face, your shoulder, and the bit where he’d clung to your hand really goddamn hard and you couldn’t get him to let go.

KK is a good listener. You figure he’d have to be, being Gamzee’s roommate and probably more than his roommate, but it’s still kind of awesome to tell dumb shit like this to somebody who actually listens. When you’re done--you end with Lalonde’s arrival, you don’t think Strider’s conversation with you in the bathroom is germane--you just wrap your hands around your half-empty mug and let yourself enjoy the warmth.

“Fuck,” he says, thoughtfully, after you’re done.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“No, shut up, I’m going somewhere with this.” You look up and he’s steepled his fingers, looking over them into the middle distance. “First off, jesus christ, you do straight-up win the best roommate award ever, it is you, no question, judges are unanimous. Second of all, what the hell is Lalonde’s angle?”

“I got no idea. She showed up all like...enigmatic and shit. I have no idea what she’s doing right now. I told her not to wake him. She might be sucking out all his blood.”

Karkat snickers. “What, on the first date?”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right, that’s pretty loose. She was all like “do you have your phone so he can contact you” and I was like “the fuck would he want to contact me for.”

He looks at you, and you can’t quite read his expression. “What?” you demand.

Just then, possibly fortunately, Gamzee stirs underneath his enormous pile of comforters, and Karkat gets up to stop him rolling out of bed: apparently this is a regular occurrence. You’re somewhat relieved not to have to follow that train of thought any further, and just swirl your mug to get the sugar at the bottom to dissolve. You’re definitely feeling better, but you kind of wish you hadn’t had to spend hours hunched over at a particular angle because Ampora would not let go of your hand: your neck and back are hurting like they do after a multi-night coding bender.

Gamzee first thing in the morning reminds you of one of those ancient Raggedy Ann dolls, all floppy long limbs and bird’s nest hair, but Karkat fusses briskly at him and before you know it he’s sloped off to the bathroom and you’re helping KK pack up the shit you’d stolen from the tent the night before. They have one of those insulated picnic bags and a coldpack; the leftover rotisserie chicken
and the bits of cheese and stuff go in there with several bottles of Faygo, which you haven’t actually ever had before because, ew, Faygo, but it has all these weird flavor names you are kind of curious about. What’s a Moon Mist supposed to taste like?

You almost forgot but you’ve brought the little Reese’s cup things in the pocket of your jacket and when you hand those over KK’s face lights up like it’s his birthday and you can’t help smiling.

When Gamzee gets back he grins sleepily at you and greets you as his Solbro and asks what are the motherfucking haps and you tell him not a fucking lot are the haps right now, and when you’re all three dressed and ready you make your way out the back door of Gresley and into the woods. It’s already hot; it’s going to be unbearable in the sun, and you’re glad you have the shade of the trees overhead. The sun is beginning to burn off the dew on the grass, but under the tree canopy it’s still moist and dim, and you can’t help feeling like you’re on An Adventure.

You didn’t get to do this kind of shit a lot as a kid. You never lived anywhere with nifty woods to explore, and you certainly didn’t have friends who lived close enough to you to make wandering off on foot together a viable proposition. AA was always into exploring shit, but she lived on the other side of town and you only got to see her at school or when you could borrow your dads’ car and go visit her—which was vanishingly rarely. You sometimes took the bus over to the mall closer to where she lived and you would hang out there together, hit up the GameStop, go see a movie, but you never got to do the kind of shit kids do in books with climbing trees and building forts and all that kind of happy bullshit.

Some of this maybe shows on your face because when you get to the hippie hut--Gamz wasn’t wrong, that shit is kind of miraculous, it makes you think of Stonehenge or some shit--he leans down and tips up your chin with a long finger. It’s the kind of touch you’d normally twitch away from, but this is, well, Gamzee.

“You digging the motherfucking adventure, bro?” he says, but gently.

“Digging the fuck out of it.” What the hell, these guys are the closest you’ve come to friends in a long time other than AA and some people you talk to online. They’ve done shit like let you smoke with them and been nice when they didn’t have to; you don’t think you really need to bullshit them.

And Gamzee’s face breaks into a smile like dawn, it’s something beautiful. “That is righteous, my brother. Wicked motherfucking righteous. Karbro, look at this motherfucker all enjoying the shit out of this right here.”

Karkat smiles that weird little there-and-gone smile. “Thing of beauty, man.”

“Shut up, dude,” you say happily and you flop down on one of the log benches whoever built this thing put around the fire-pit. You’re surrounded by tall branches--logs, really, you suppose, or saplings--laced together with bark, set into the ground in a tight spiral around this central space; it’s like being somewhere safe and quiet in the middle of the woodlands, the air still moving past you, the distant sound of cars on the access road nothing more than background noise.

You aren’t sure how long it’s been before Karkat’s hand on your shoulder wakes you a little from a doze, and he hands over a thing you are amazed to behold. It’s a glass pipe, blown and twisted and lampworked to look like the wriggling body of a Chinese dragon. Little air bubbles in the yellow-green glass gleam like gems. You blink up at him and grin, and he grins back--kid has a pretty awesome grin when he lets that out--and you take a long drag, the smoke sharp and green and somehow salty-sweet in the back of your throat. Where the fuck does Gamz even get this shit, it’s amazing, even as you pass the pipe back you’re already finding the world a much nicer place.
(You’re kinda proud of the fact that you don’t cough at all, exhaling as smoothly as if you’d just dragged on a cigarette.)

Gamzee is saying something, and then Karkat gets up and makes room for him to settle beside you on the log bench thing, and you are paying really close attention to the way the saplings that make up the spiraling wall of your shelter are set next to one another, because it is pretty awesome. Then there are hands on your shoulders, what the fuck.

You do not actually flip out the way you would under normal circumstances. In fact it...hey, that’s...hey, that’s kind of awesome, because the hands are doing funny things. Instinctively you turn sideways and feel Gamzee settle astride the bench behind you, his long fingers rubbing deep circles into the muscles of your neck and back, those very muscles you’d frozen into stiff unhappiness bending over Ampora in the small hours.

Somewhere you’re aware that you are making really stupid noises because oh God that feels nice, that’s, wow, nobody’s, nobody ever did that before and you seriously can feel the tension leaching out of you like...something liquid, draining away, leaving just straight-up stupid smiles and wow, maybe your brain can take a rain check on that fucking hating you just for a while, you feel as if you’re almost back up on the upswing.

Time passes, you’re not sure how much, but you’re dimly aware that you’re leaning back against Gamzee’s chest and he has a long arm curled around you, and that’s just fine. That’s awesome.


“Hnngh?”

“Man, you really did a number on yourself watching over that asshole. C’mon, wake up, it’s time for a picnic and your phone has been blowing up like crazy.”

You’re still lying against...wait, no, you’re lying against one of the handy logs, but that’s KK’s sweatshirt and Gamzee’s jacket rolled up under your head as pillows and when you sit up your neck and back don’t hardly hurt at all. Fuck. That’s awesome.

You blink up at KK. He’s doing that weird brief awesome grin-and-gone smile thing. “...time is it?”

“Little after one. You needed the sleep, man, you were worn out. Here.”

Gamzee is draped over one of the log benches across the firepit and raises a lazy hand to wave hi. You smile stupidly at him and then back at KK, who is handing you a sandwich. “Man. You guys. You guys are the fucking best. I just. You guys.”

He laughs. “You’re still high as a kite, Captor. Eat up and have some nice horrible juggalo juice and deal with your goddamn phone, that shit is annoying.”

Fuck you are hungry, and KK’s creation tastes like the best food you ever had in your entire life (cold chicken on slightly stale rye with plasticky mass-produced cheese holy fuck) and when Gamzee reaches out to hand you a bottle of something called Faygo Peach you find yourself making stupid faces and trying to explain to the pair of them why this is definitely the best substance anybody has ever created ever in the universe.

After you finish eating, though, your brain seems to decide it’s time to come back down to where normal people exist, and you can think a little more clearly--enough to flick through the text messages on your phone.
Wow.

There’s a bunch of them.

From AA, that’s cool, you want to see what’s up with her. From...the fuck is this? Oh. Oh. You recognize that weird deep purple color and the fact that he can’t apparently just type one W or V in a row. And someone else in a lighter purple.

Purple, jesus fuck. These kids are so just fated to be. You can tell.

Man, you could have done without this shit, you were really enjoying life for a little while there, but with a sigh you start paging back through the messages to read them in order. After a moment or two you fish in your hoodie pocket for a cigarette, and a hand appears holding a lit match: Gamzee.

“You guys are the best,” you tell them, and now you sound a little less spacy and more conscious. “Like. I mean it. Owe you a bunch.”

“Nah, don’t even be going there, motherfucker,” Gamzee says. “You’re our Solbro. It’s all cool.”

“I think what he means to say is shut the hell up and deal with your phone, man, because we’re kind of having a good time here, okay?”

Okay. You can’t quite help smiling, though, as you shut the hell up and you deal with your phone. You have no idea what you would have been doing if it weren’t for these two, but you bet anything it wouldn’t have been anything like as nice as chilling out in the miraculous hippie hut and taking a very well-deserved nap.

AA’s messages are pretty much what you’d expect, hey, how are things going, text me when you have a moment. Then there’s...well. Wow. Eridan texts like he talks, way the fuck too much. You can skim a lot of it.

A paler purple message breaks the violet WW VV monotony:

TT: Mr. Captor, I have to leave your roommate to his own devices in order to run the theater dry cleaning into town. I should be back within two hours but I would suggest you check in on him to see if he needs anything. -RL

Then a couple minutes later: CA: sol
CA: sol please c’mon wwhere are you
CA: sol seriously

Fuck. You check the time. Not too long ago. You finish your magical fucking peach soda and make your fingers work:

TA: calm your tit2 ed. iim on my way. anything you 2pecifiically want or what?

Nothing.

You realize your cigarette is almost half cylindrical ash, tap it off, take a long drag and crush out the butt. What the fuck, Eridan.

CA: just can you get back here

TA: je2u2. fiine. be there 2oon.

You look up. “Violet Prince demands my presence, guess I better head out, but, jeez. Guys. You are
the best, okay? Thanks. For this. Thanks a lot.”

Gamzee uncurls himself from his slouch on the bench opposite and wraps you up in one of his hugs. “Nah, motherfucker. ‘s just the right thing to up and do, get a motherfucker’s head serene, chill him the fuck out when he needs his chill on. You’re okay, Solbro.”

“I think that translates to ‘‘s all good,’” Karkat adds. “Seriously. You okay? Need anything?”

“Nah.” You shrug your jacket on. “See you guys at dinner unless Ragnarok is going down in my dorm room or some shit. I owe you some serenity, though. Gonna have to think about that one.”

Both of them laugh. You can’t help a weirdly strong feeling of _fondness_ in your chest, even as you turn and wave before you begin the walk back to your dorm and whatever awaits you.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

This chapter includes mention of mental illness and suicide attempts, just a heads-up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gresley is full of people. People and things. Plastic bins of belongings are being hauled up and down the stairs like larvae during an anthill renovation; the din of talking and doors slamming and the echo in the stairwell combine to form an unpleasant sort of irregular techno that makes your head swim. Nobody gives you a second glance, though, as you shoulder past the other kids and make your way down to your room.

Eridan’s lying back against his pillows and looking pallid and exhausted. The unwelcome thought flickers across your mind that he would make one fuck of a cover model for the type of novel that relies heavily on misperceptions of tuberculosis. "Wow, Sol," he says. "You look like shit."

"Fuck you too." You flip him off. "What was it you wanted?"

"You have pine needles in your hair."

"A fine place for them. Seriously, I came all the way back here cause you were texting me nonfuckingstop, what do you want?"

A weird expression flickers across his face: you can’t quite identify it. "What happened last night?"

You flop into your desk chair and pick bits of woodland out of your hair and clothes—you have bark in your hoodie, what the hell. "Nothing happened. You wrote Lalonde the longest love letter I have ever fucking seen, I stuck it under Strider’s door, he presumably found it and ran it over to wherever she dwelleth under the sigil of Cthulhu or whatever, then this morning she came over to fuss over you in person. Shit was touching, man."

"No, I mean." He rubs at his face: there’s some color to him, now, some animation, not the ghastly glassy-eyed whiteness of last night. "I don’t remember a lot a the night itself but I know you were there. Rose said you’d been takin care a me."


"Did you get any sleep at all?" he asks, and you wish to God he’d just let it drop. You can feel him looking at you and you wish your shades were great big half-mirrored aviators like Strider’s, that must be the best goddamn feeling in the universe, not letting anybody see where your eyes are pointing ever.

"I don’t sleep much, ED. Might want to work on getting used to that, it’s kind of a theme with me. Like, you know, computer shit and blue-red duality, Sollux Captor Doesn’t Sleep. You got the messed-up purple thing going on and you don’t pronounce the Gs on the end of your progressive verbs. We all have our little quirks, because it would sure be a funny old world if we were all the same."

What the fuck are you even talking about. Your head hurts.
"Did you just call me ED?"

"Looks that way."

"Sol..."

"All right, fine, you were burning up and talking crazy shit, I didn’t know what else to do so I just sponged the fuck out of you with cold water for a while, eventually you quit wriggling around and went to sleep and I figured you were doing better, can we just drop it?"

He’s still looking at you, damn it. You wish really hard you were back in the peace of the woods.

"What....did I say?"

"Fuck if I know. Lot of mumbling, I couldn’t make shit out." This is a lie but the look you can see out of the corner of your eye is definitely, definitely a pleading one. He doesn’t need to know he was talking about his father. Or some douche called "Dualscar," which you kind of want to look up because what the fuck kind of name even is that.

He’s quiet, and you finally look over at him; he’s fitfully twisting one of his rings round and round his finger. "Thanks," he says, after a while.

"Welcome. Just...don’t do that shit again, okay? Fucking unsettling."

Twist, twist, twist.

"...was that why you were blowing my phone up with reams of purple text? Seriously?"

"Um. Actually. I kinda feel gross as shit and I’d appreciate a shoulder to lean pathetically on for hobblin to the shower purposes."

You have to chuckle. The tiny flickers of self-awareness he sometimes comes out with are undeniably amusing. And they do dumb shit to you that you figure is probably just cause you’re still a little high, because there’s no reason they should make your chest hurt. "I guess I can handle that. Did Lalonde take your temperature before she left?"

"Nah." You haul yourself out of the chair and go to find the thermometer; he glowers up at you. "I’m fine, Sol, I just need a goddamn wash."

You glower right back at him and after a moment he gives in. It is extremely reassuring to see that he’s down to 99; that 102.5 had scared the fuck out of you. "Yeah, you do need a goddamn wash. Okay, c’mon, we’re doing this."

You kind of wish you’d warned him about the ongoing anthill effect in the hall, because he seems to shrink in on himself, huddling against your shoulder; but none of the kids seem to be all that interested in a pair of weirdo freshmen except to want you to get the hell out the way as they move couches. You turn your glower up to 11 on his behalf nonetheless and when he sways a little you tighten your arm around him and think maybe you might want to cool it on the smoking for a while, your chest really is feeling funny.

The shower seems to do him good. When you get him back to the room you’re even okay with the prospect of changing all those goddamn pillowcases and his sheets, which got pretty gross themselves with all the sweating and the water; you put on some music and you make him sit down out of the way and you don’t even notice you’re doing hospital corners until he points this out.

"I mean it’s just you don’t even make your own bed, Sol, the hell do you even know how to do that?"

"I got hidden depths," you tell him.

He’s looking at you funny. "What?"

"You said somethin the other day. Checks."

Oh, fuck, no, you are not doing this, this is not a conversation which is going to happen. "So you and Lalonde, you’re a thing or what?"

"What are checks, Sol?"

"Nothing. Here, you can do the rest of your goddamn pillows."

"Sol."

"Not something I am gonna discuss."

"Sol."

"Jesus fuck can you take a hint when one is dumped over your goddamn head?"

"Where was it?"

You turn and look at him.

"I mean, was it like an actual hospital or some kinda halfway house or what?"

You’re kind of glad the chair is still beside his bed because your knees have gone abruptly wobbly and you need to sit down. "What."

"Give over, Sol, I just wanna know." He looks so tired and you can’t help thinking that you’ve seen him probably at his most completely pathetic, all his guards gone, no defenses left. All at once it kind of sounds like a relief to admit this shit.

"...Hospital," you say, after a while, not looking at him.

He just watches you; you can feel the purple eyes.

"I was sixteen."

You were sixteen and you wanted not to be sixteen, you wanted not to be anything at all, you hated everything, you hated yourself most of all, you wanted all the horrible shit in your head to just stop and you didn’t want to jump off the roof or slit your wrists or hang yourself because ew and also ow, so you went for the pills one of your dads kept in their bathroom that they thought you didn’t know about, the ones for when his knee got really bad, and you thought you would never ever forgive anybody for the fact that you woke up in the fucking hospital sick as a dog with the foul gritty taste of activated charcoal coating your throat. It had been your friend’s fault. All his fucking fault.

(It had partly been your own stupid fault because you’d been talking to him on pesterchum before you actually started. That was a tactical error. He’d apparently figured out what you were doing and he’d called your dad who came home and found you and yeah, you didn’t talk to that guy again. He
moved away not so long after the whole fucking mess of this.)

"What happened?" Eridan asks, quietly.

"Your standard textbook attempt," you say and you can hear the bitterness, like aloe, like the taste of pills dissolving on your tongue. "I don’t want to talk about this, ED."

"How long were you in for?"

"I don’t want to fucking talk about this," you say and your head is really hurting and you wish you were back in the woods with KK and GZ and maybe a little bit you wish that GZ had those long drapey arms around you because shit had seemed to be nicer when that was the case.

"I was fourteen," he says, a total non-sequitur but what? You look up from your lap. He looks just for a moment...a lot older than you know he has to be. "Did they make you do the Talkin about your Feelins bullshit too, all sittin around on those dumb kiddie chairs and hatin every minute a it?"

"Oh hell yes they did," you say, without really hearing yourself. "Wait, ED, you--"

"That was my least favorite part a the whole thing. No, wait. Visitin day was my least favorite part. ‘Hey there, son, are you not crazy anymore or what?’"

"‘We keep paying for this so when are you going to start not being crazy?’ you agree. What the fuck. What the fuck there is no way ED could have gone through this shit as well, he’s so...he’s...fuck, you will never understand anything. Anything at all.

"I liked it when they’d try to pretend they weren’t thinkin ‘snap outta it already and quit bein a little drama queen attention whore, kid.’ You know, you could totally see it?"

"Mine didn’t do that so much as just give me this ‘we wish we could do something but we don’t know what and you don’t either so we’re just kind of going to be really awkward and make you feel guilty for being fucked in the head because we don’t deserve to have to deal with it,’" you say.

"Oh, right, that one. Didn’t see a bunch a that one but I know what you mean."

"Fuck."

"Yep."

"Jesus fuck."

"Pretty much," he says. "You are one eloquent fucker, you know that, Sol?"

"Shut up," you tell him.

Something’s changed in the air and you aren’t sure what it is, or whether you want to examine it too closely; but it feels a little like the way you feel after a big thunderstorm, trembly and excited but somehow washed clean. You just sit there for a while, breathing, feeling your blood thrum in your ears, your gums, your temples, aware that your headache isn’t going away but not really minding all that much, and then you push yourself to your feet and grab another pillowcase.

"Guess what?" he asks after a while.

"What?"

"No, guess, asshole."
"You got it right, douchebag! I’m so proud of you."

Double-bird salute. You can’t help smiling. He doesn’t look like he can help it either, his pale lips quirking up on one side. "Rose took my clothes to the dry-cleaner with her theater stuff. She says my cape’s gonna be just like new."

"...Welp, there go my happy feels," you say, but you’re laughing. "Jesus christ, your fucking cape."

"My cape is the height a sartorial elegance, Sol, and you know it."

"You are a total embarrassment," you inform him, and finish up with the sheets. "There. All done."

"You are also a total fuckin embarrassment and you may possibly be kinda not the shittiest possible roommate a guy could have."

"Aw, shit, ED, I’m gonna cry." You watch as he hauls himself upright and makes his shaky way over to the bed. He looks...yeah, a lot better now than when you’d got back. His hair is drying without the benefit of gel, and it’s sort of wavy and untidy and you remember what it was like to stroke that purple lock back from his forehead. How he’d pushed his burning face against your hand, like your touch was welcome. Dammit. Why are you thinking about that.

"You okay?" he asks, looking up at you from his heap of black pillows.

"Hmm?"

"You look kinda off."

"Nah. Just tired, I guess." Your back remembers how wonderful Gamzee’s long mobile fingers had felt, working out the knots, and you stretch a little. "Might take a nap. Unless of course sir has orders for me to go fetch and carry and similar bullshit."

You can’t quite read the look in his eyes, it’s not one you’ve seen before.

"Think I’m done orderin for now."

~

You wake when Lalonde knocks on the door, not sure what time it is; the room has that weird late-afternoon light in it that always feels wrong to wake up to. Eridan’s dozing with a shitty fantasy novel propped on his chest. The chick on the cover is wearing the kind of armor that is not designed to protect anything at all.

Your head clangs when you slide off the bed to let her in. Goddamnit you are not going to have a migraine you are not going to have a migraine that is not a thing that is about to happen. You don’t have time for that shit.

Lalonde has a couple of dry-cleaning bags draped over one arm and a thermos in her other hand: you take the bags without comment and hang them over his closet door. There is the cape in all its violent violet glory; there is the weird military outfit he’d worn that had made you think of anime characters. She’s looking at you funny.

"What?" you ask.

"Nothing. How is he?"

Eridan stirs, making a small adorable noise, and what the fuck, Captor, what the actual fuck did you
just think. You shrug, standing aside for her to approach the bedside of her devoted swain. "Seems to be feeling better. I'm, uh. I'll be on the balcony or something."

She settles beside him with another unreadable look in your direction, and his eyes flutter open and he smiles the stupidest damn smile you have ever seen on anybody ever. You turn away and rootle through your desk drawer for your headache pills, hoping that the lack of brilliant twinkly stars around the edges of everything means you're not in for a special, and you take yourself and your cigarettes and your phone off to the balcony and try like fuck not to think about that smile.

-- twinArmageddons (TA) began pestering apocalypseArisen (AA) ! --

TA: hey aa gue22 what
TA: ampora ha2 gotten hiim2elf a giirlfriiend
TA: fucker ii2 2mooth ii gue22
AA: already?
AA: what ended up happening with that wh0le party thing?
TA: you are not going two fuckiing believe thii2
TA: 2o he apparently went two the party and ended up being 2ick right in front of the giirl he2 been trying two get with. talk about fuckiing 2mooth.
TA: he wa2 iin bad 2hape when he got back. he2 been running a fever and apparently he2 got an ulcer a2 well whiich explaini2 2ome of the weirdne22. anyway ii found him iin the bathroom and got hiit 2orry a22 back two our room and he proceeded two have a breakdown all over me.
TA: long 2tory 2hort he2 le22 of an a22hole than ii thought. but not much. 2o next day when we get back from the health center there2 thii2 package out2iide the door. from the giirl.
AA: wh0a
AA: seri0usly?
TA: seri0usly.
TA: thii2 letter two her and make2 me take iit two her maiilbox. later her brother who ii2 the creepie2t little fuck ever, ii2 wear he move2 liike a niiinor or 2ome 2hiit, hand2 me her reply.
TA: ed proceed2 two write a fuckiing novel back. ii take ii2 the brother.
TA: ed then proceed2 two 2piike hiit2 temperature and go deliiiriou2 a2 fuck and ii am liike tryiing two calm hiit2 2hiit down with cold water and aa ii2 wa2 2eriou2ly fuckiing 2cary.
AA: jesus christ. that s0unds like a terrible night.
AA: saillux are y0u 0k?
TA: me? iim fiine. iim not the one wiith a 102 degree fever. anyway he eventually 2eemed to chiill out and went two 2leep. but get thiit2.
TA: at liike 2iix iin the morniing 2he 2how2 up. the giirl.
TA: her name2 ro2e lalonde and 2he 2pend2 liike the entiire morniing takiing care of him.
AA: w0w.
AA: what the hell, s0llux, y0u havent even started classes yet and already y0u are in the middle 0f a s0ap 0pera 0f epic pr0p0rti0ns.
AA: are y0u really 0k th0ugh
AA: y0u s0und kind 0f 0ff, als0 d0 y0u kn0w h0w awes0me y0u are f0r taking care 0f y0ur d0uchebag r00mmate like that?
TA: ii dont know
TA: ii feel weirid aa. ju2t weirid. what wa2 ii 2uppo2ed two do, he wa2 fuckiing burniing up and thra2hiing around all helple22 and 2hiit and talking two people who werent there.
TA: today ii went and chilled out iin the wood2 wiith gz and kk. iiit wa2 niice. ii ended up falliing a2leep for a while. and gz gave me a backrub.
AA: well go0d. y0u s0und like y0u needed 0ne.
AA: man i wish i was there s0 i c0uld hug y0u pr0perly. jeez. is he at least better n0w? n0 m0re terrifying midnight vigils?
TA: ii wii2h you were here two aa. ii wii2h that a lot.
TA: ii thiink he2 okay now. hii2 fever2 gone down.
TA: ii might be haviing a down2wiing, maybe. right iin tiime for cla22e2 two 2tart.
AA: 0h, s0llux. g0ddamnit that is n0t fair.
AA: pr0mise me y0ull g0 t0 the health center 0r the c0unsel0r 0r whatever psych supp0rt they have there if y0u need t0. they can talk t0 y0ur d0ct0rs if y0u need y0ur meds adjusted.
AA: just d0nt...let it get w0rse 0k?
AA: get help if y0u need it.
TA: ii wiill.
TA: ii gue22 ii 2hould go two diinner. iim not hungry though.
TA: my head hurt2.
AA: can y0u g0 lie d0wn f0r a while?
TA: not really
TA: lalonde and ampora are iin the room
TA: probably haviing gro22 2loppy makeout2 all wrapped up iin hii2 cape. not 2omethiing ii want two 2ee.
TA: it2 ok aa. iim fiine.
AA: y0u better be, mister.
AA: l00k, call me if y0u want t0 talk? i mean it. im g0ing t0 be up late t0night anyway.
TA: ok. thank2 aa. ii mii22 you.
AA: i miss y0u right back. i h0pe y0u feel better.

-- twinArmageddons (TA) ceased pestering apocalypseArisen (AA) ! --

Chapter End Notes

I promise this is actually going somewhere, folks. Next chapter we'll have classes starting, the excitement is palpable. Thanks to all who've read, commented, and left kudos thus far, I appreciate you guys very deeply.

(Yeah, I know 102.5 is not all that scary a temperature, nor is it one that would technically cause delirium, but Sollux is not the world's foremost expert on pyrexia.)
As it turns out you don’t have a migraine. You just have a headache. Which is really handy, since it means you can actually get your ass out of bed on time and make it to classes, which...

...for the most part look like they’re going to be more of a pain in the ass via boredom than difficulty. Your core requirement shit--bio, a hard science, English, some form of art--should be dealt with by the end of the year and you can focus on actually learning something worthwhile. It’s a little less surprising to find you tested out of gen req math when you realize that a lot of the kids in your classes are legitimately straight-up ignorant as fuck.

You spend most of your first physics class doodling on the margins of your syllabus. The prof actually keeps you for most of the period, to the displeasure of everybody else; you realize you’re drawing fractals, and wonder if you can get away with that shit in your Tuesday-Thursday art class.

You have a headache throughout physics; you have a headache throughout Bullshit English, which you can already tell is going to be a pain in the ass; you have a headache while everybody else goes to lunch and you chain-smoke in the courtyard of the science building and text AA. Food is particularly unappealing right now.

(Eridan had actually risen from his bed of pain and put on some clothes, apparently planning to make it to class. You’d been surprised and somewhat skeptical and now you can’t help wondering if he’s going to fall over and subsequently die of acute embarrassment. Would they notify you? Would you get automatic all As for the semester?)

“May I speak with you?”

You look up from your phone and hey, if it ain’t your roommate’s vision of loveliness. You wonder if she’s doing the super fucking formal diction in order to annoy or if she’s really that pretentious, and you don’t know which option you dislike more.

“Sure, I guess,” you say, inching over on the bench to give her all the room you can. “What’s on your mind, Lalonde?”

Her eyes are blue, you’re pretty sure. It’s hard to tell in bright sunlight with your shades on and all that black eye makeup caking the lids. Because two people with purple eyes on one campus is two too many.

“You can call me Rose,” she says.

“Noted,” you say. “Lalonde.”

Your head is fucking killing you.

“As you wish. I simply wanted to invite you to a gathering at my townhouse on Friday evening. It’s Alleyn-Andrewes number five, on the north side.”

You blink at her.

“I’ve invited Eridan; I thought it would be only polite to extend the invitation to you. It won’t be a
large party, just our theater circle.”

“Will there be naked time?” you ask, and wish you hadn’t; Lalonde’s porcelain face cracks slightly in a smile.

“Naked time is always entirely optional, Mr. Captor,” she says. “But I don’t envision this being a complete bacchanal for several reasons, among which is that we all have things to do on the weekend that do not necessarily involve apocalyptic hangovers. No, this will be dinner.”

“You guys cook?” Fuck, you are just rocking the Dumb Questions today.

“The townhouses have what the college fondly believes to be full kitchens, yes.”

“Was he really sick on you? Because what the hell. Seriously.”

Your head is really killing you.

Lalonde chuckles; it’s not a really reassuring noise. “Not on me, no. Poor Eridan, he was utterly mortified. We didn’t know he was ill, of course—well, he didn’t look tremendously well, but then a great many of us don’t—and we all felt dreadful about making him worse when we realized. He left before we could reassure him it’s not the first time the carpet has required attention from a steam-cleaner.”

“You guys are so fucked up,” you tell her. “Seriously. What do you even do at these parties? Besides hurl on the floor. And get naked.”

“We dance,” says Lalonde. “And we perform. You should come to one, Mr. Captor. I think you might be pleasantly surprised.”

“Yyyeah, um. No offense, but no thanks. I don’t really feel like your crowd and me are a good match.”

“As you like. But do know the invitation is open and standing, whenever you decide to take me up on it.”

“Right,” you say, and you watch as she gets up and drifts away—she seriously drifts, as if walking is too jerky a motion for someone that fucking spooktastic. Goddamn. You have a headache for the rest of the week.

Eridan’s back on his feet, a little thinner, a little paler, but not alarmingly so. You’re kind of glad you both have class to keep you from sitting around awkwardly in that weird silence that’s taken to filling up the room when you’re in there together. He’s apparently not being stupid about stuff like taking his meds properly and eating right. Lalonde is obviously good for him. This should make you happy, right? Cause it’s awesome that your weird roommate has found a Good Girlfriend who’s Sensible and Smart and weirds you the livid fuck out, jesus christ she is so odd, you would not put it past her to be plotting some complicated bullshit stunt to pull on Ampora after all.

You wish you didn’t feel so lousy.

Comp sci with Karkat is at least a little interesting and you find that you can easily carry on your email convos with him while getting the work done. He’s...maybe less able to do that, though, so you think you’ll try and be less of a distracting jerk while he’s doing useful school stuff. You and KK and GZ have lunch together some days, dinner together almost every night, despite the fact that you just don’t feel hungry at all; hanging out with them is pretty much the best part of your College Experience so far. Except maybe driving ED’s car, that had been sweet as fuck.
On Friday night you’re banging away at a shitty essay for your shitty English class (seriously, you are never going to need to know anything about Ethan fucking Frome, this is bullshit) while he gets ready. There’s a little deja vu involved: he’s wearing his black suit, but this time with a grey shirt and a deep violet tie; an amethyst twinkles from the middle of this last, matched by a pair of little amethyst earstuds. He’s doing his makeup in the mirror and humming to himself and you really wish he wouldn’t.

“You should totally come, Sol. Seriously, you’ll have a great time, Rose’s friends are fuckin awesome. Her housemate Kanaya is all into that weird math shit you like with the donuts and so on.”

“Topology,” you correct, staring glumly at your monitors. “No. Have a nice time, ED.”

“You know what your problem is, you just don’t know how to have fun.”

“Wow, thanks for clearing that up for me, man. I am enlightened now. All is made lucent and cognizable.” There’s an edge to your voice that you didn’t strictly mean to put in there: your head feels like all the hollows in your skull are full of hot sauce and you would fucking travel back in time to murder Edith Wharton if you just had the right car and a flux capacitor.

Eridan looks over his shoulder at you. “You don’t gotta snap, jeez, Sol.”

“And you don’t have to keep asking me to go to your dumb party, okay? Because I am not going to it. Right. Thanks. Have a nice time.”

His eyes widen briefly (in hurt?) and narrow again, and he doesn’t say anything at all. Goddamn it, you think. Goddamn everything.

“Don’t drink too much this time,” you hear yourself say, and wow, yeah, there’s the Eridan face you remember from last week, the one he wore while telling you to fuck off and leave him the hell alone. Heh. You weren’t sure when that one would show up again.

“Thanks for your fuckin concern,” he says. “Does you credit, man. So many goddamn feels over here it ain’t even funny.”

“You’re gonna be late if you don’t get a move on,” you say and what the fuck are you even doing, Captor, are you trying to be an extra super asshole or what? Yeah, you think that’s pretty much the size of it. Fuck everything in the universe to death.

“Don’t wait up,” Eridan snaps, throws a coat around his shoulders, and slams the door behind him. The noise bangs like blood in your head.

You stare at your monitors as a heavy sick weight drops into the pit of your stomach. What the hell was that even all about.

Why is it so hot in here? You need air. You need a cigarette. You need not to be staring at this computer screen because it is making your head hurt worse than ever, bad enough to make you feel a bit dizzy, and you can bullshit your way through class and pretend your flash drive is broken or something and you couldn’t bring your essay to hand in.

Maybe you should go to his stupid party after all. Tell them all to fuck off in person. Initiate the process of switching roommates. That’d be the sensible thing to do, you don’t need this kind of aggravation in your life.

You swallow a couple more ibuprofen and shut your eyes for a long moment. Okay, no, going to the party would just be dumb, but you need a break from Ethan fucking Frome. Time for the balcony.
You hate the balcony. It’d be okay if you could just lock the door and refuse to let anybody else come and bother you while you were out there but no, upperclassmen all smoking their fucking hookah down the other end and laughing way too hard, goddamn troll-like *wur hur hur* laughter, do they even know how annoying that shit is to listen to? Ugh, and it’s coming on to rain, too, drifting clouds of mist blowing out of the night and getting all over your glasses, and it’s cold as fuck now, cold through your *bones*, when did that happen?

You give up on your cigarette, which tastes shitty anyway, and go back up to your room, and it’s only when you’re back at your desk that you realize your phone in your pocket has been vibrating for like the past ten minutes. What the hell.

It’s somebody you don’t know, either. Fuck that. You turn it off, stick it on the charger. You wake up the computer and somebody is *pestering* you. Do they not understand that homework is a thing that happens?

Who even is this douche.

-- cuttlefishCuller (CC) began pestering twinArmageddons (TA) ! --

CC: Hi!
CC: You don’t know me, but I’m a friend of Eridan Ampora.
CC: He talks about you a lot!!
TA: that2 nice. what do you want.
CC: Wow, rude!
CC: I just haven’t heard much from him the past couple of days and wanted to check if he was OK.
TA: wait are you fef
TA: he wa2 textiing you liike con2tantly the fiir2t couple day2 of orientatiion, 2hiit wa2 funny a2 hell. ii wondered iif you had 2ome kiind of auto-re2ponder app two an2wer hiim.
CC: That’s me! Feferi Peixes is my name. You’re Sollux, right?
TA: ye2.
TA: anyway. ed ii2 off at 2ome fucked-up party wiith hii2 2pooky fucking giirfriiend. he2 been 2iick but he 2eem2 two be fiine now. niice meetiing you, good niight.
CC: Wait!!
TA: lii2ten ff ii have a 2hiitload of homework two do and iim not feeliing all that great 2o iif you dont miind iim gonna go now.
CC: Sollux, there’s something you should know!

-- twinArmageddons (TA) ceased pestering cuttlefishCuller (CC) ! --

You get another couple of paragraphs into your essay. Maybe the Advil’s finally doing its job. It’d be nice if ED’s exclamation-point-happy other girlfriend hadn’t broken your concentration, but fuck, you’ll push through, this shit needs to be written.

Heh. Does Fef know about how he met Lalonde? Story for the ages right there. People would write ballads about it in the middle ages. Courtly goddamn love.

What time is it anyway, you wonder. Oh. Not bad. Only half past ten. You have some time left. This isn’t due tomorrow, is it?

Wait. Tomorrow’s Saturday. You’re pretty sure. Your computer says tomorrow’s Saturday.

Fuck.
In that case. You save the file and you shut down Word and blink at the dimness of your desktop background—right now it’s a shot inside the SuperKamiokande muon detector, shit is metal—and think okay maybe going to bed might not be such a dorky idea right now. Screw taking off your jeans or any of that unnecessary bullshit, you just kind of want to curl up on your bed and turn all the lights off.

A little later someone’s knocking at your door and you say muzzily something along the lines of *fuck off*, and you think it’s Gamzee out there, and you should really get up and tell him you’re not up for kicking the wicked bro times right now, but maybe if you don’t he’ll go away.

He goes away, or maybe you just stop listening.

The next thing you know there’s somebody right the fuck there leaning over you and somebody’s *touching your face* which is guaranteed freakout trigger number one in your book. The light’s on and somebody’s talking and everything is *terrible*, why can’t you focus, whoever’s touching you has...really nice cool hands, actually. You kind of don’t want them to stop.

“Sol?” someone says, and you groan. Oh, fuck. What is even going on? You wriggle away from whoever it is and find yourself curled around your pillows with your glasses folded on the sheet beside you. With those on you can actually try to focus.

“...the fuck, ED, you woke me up, what time is it?”

“I told you,” he’s saying to someone over his shoulder, “he was actin weird like almost all week, I should a said somethin earlier. Sol, you’re an idiot.”

You scowl up at him, still not sure what is even going on. “Aren’t you...supposed to be at a party?” He’s still all dressed up, his amethysts winking and glittering in the light which is *way too bright*, thank you very much, jesus christ. At this point you realize Rose Lalonde is in here with you, but you are just too tired and your head hurts too much and you can’t dredge up the brainpower required to say something suitably sarcastic.

“I was at the party, dumbass. And then I got a text from Fef sayin she’d talked to you and you didn’t seem like you were doin so good, like someone should maybe go check on you. --Thanks.” He takes something from Rose and then there’s wonderful coolness on your hot face, it feels so nice you could *fucking cry*. “So we came back. You asshole, you totally did end up catchin my virus.”

“Apparently it’s going around,” says Lalonde in the background. “You often see this sort of thing with the first weeks of school. The epidemiology is interesting.”

“God, shut up,” you groan. Both of them laugh, and you’d flip them off if you could muster the energy. You wish she’d go away. You wish ED would stay right where he is doing whatever he is with the cold thing that feels so remarkably pleasant.

He goes away.

Fuck.

Well, what did you expect, the universe hates Sollux Captor. That did not stop being a thing that was true. You wriggle your shoulderblades into the pillow and wish somebody would come along and knock you out with a handy baseball bat.

The lights go out. Or most of them do; the horrible overhead fluorescent cuts off and there’s just a much kinder light from his bedside lamp across the room. After a moment he comes back to sit on the edge of your bed. He’s taken off his suit jacket and his tie, rolled up his sleeves; you can see the
planes and angles of the muscles in his forearms, and wish absently that you could draw. Where’d Lalonde go? Is she lurking in the shadows waiting to say something particularly unsettling, or just make out with ED at you?

“Sol, jeez,” he’s saying. “Why didn’t you say you weren’t feelin good? I’d a stayed here.”

You run that sentence through the glitching mess that is your brain right now and you can’t figure it out even under high magnification. “What?”

“What?” he parrots. “You think I’m about to leave my roommate in terrible fuckin agony and go party with my cool-ass friends instead?”

“Yes,” you say, because this is obvious.

“Well, okay, I guess I’d have considered it real hard,” he admits. “But jeez. You’re a mess, Sol. How long you been feelin ill?”

You try to think. “Um. Monday?”

His hand stills on your forehead. “What?”

“Headache started on Monday, I think. Or wait, no, I had it Sunday night, but I thought that was a migraine, but it wasn’t,” you explain. You think you might have a bit of a fever, too, but probably that didn’t start until just now.

“Are you seriously tellin me you spent this entire week feelin like ass and didn’t say one fuckin word about it to me?”

“...yes?” What even is the big deal.

“Fuckdammit, Sol.” There’s...whoa, there’s actual anger in his voice. What the hell? “I cannot even believe you, you are such a stupid jackass. Why didn’t you say something?”

You are honestly puzzled and he’s making your headache worse because he sort of bounced a bit on the edge of the bed just then. “…why would I? Not...like you’d care.”

Shit, even you can tell that came out wrong. “I mean, why would you want to know whether I have a stupid headache, ED? What’s that got to do with...you going to parties and whatever?”

“Because, you utter thoughtless fuck, I’m your friend, or I thought I was, I wanna fuckin help.”

Fuck, he really is angry. You feel like shit. You are shit. Wow, you’re really just not doing so well at this being a good roommate thing right now, are you? You just ruined his night. He had to leave a party (and his girlfriend’s company, what the hell) to come and deal with your sorry ass.

You turn and look real hard at the wall because your eyes are stinging the way they sometimes do before you do something really dumb such as cry.

“You took care a me, Sol, when I’d been nothin but awful to you. You think just cause I’m spending time with Rose that I don’t give a shit about you?”

Yes, you want to say.

“Sol. Look at me. Christ.”

You’re not Christ. That’s Strider. Wait, he’s not Christ either, he said.
“...fuck, you really are messed up, aren’t you?” he says, and his voice is softer now. “You taken anythin for it?”

“Advil,” you say. “Round...nine-forty-five maybe?”

“How many?”

“Um. Two.”

He goes away and comes back with water--fuck, cold water, it’s the best thing ever, you want to gulp the whole glass down but he doesn’t let you, says to take it slow or you’ll be sick--and another couple of pills. And then you have to send your brain all the way away for a while because he is, ngh, he’s helping you out of your stupid clothes and getting you settled properly in bed and you wish to fuck he had never come back because then you wouldn’t have to go through this knowing perfectly well that he doesn’t feel any of the stupid useless goddamn things you’re feeling right now.

You want to push him away and you want to cling to him the way he’d clung to you not so long ago, and when he starts in with the cold cloth again you’re glad it’s wet because that means if there’s wetness tracing lines down your face it’s not the fault of your stupid goddamn mismatched eyes.

~

You are a little better in the morning. He leaves you with a full Nalgene water bottle and your meds--after you have assured him over and over that you are fine and he needn’t stay with you--and goes off to meet Lalonde and Maryam and explore the graveyard down at the edge of campus. Because that is a perfectly normal thing to want to do with one’s Saturday. You stay exactly where you are, stirring only to visit the bathroom and fill up your water bottle again at the hall fountain.

You are still there when he comes bouncing back around lunchtime with a brand new set of grave-rubbings and a chain of fucking daisies in his hair. You tell him you are feeling better, thanks, you just want to sleep some more. He feels your forehead and you wish he wouldn’t, you really wish he wouldn’t, but presumably whatever your temperature is doing doesn’t worry him unduly. He makes sure you have your phone and your netbook in reach; the former is still turned off and the latter is hibernating and has not been touched in a couple days.

That whole not-eating-food thing sounds like it might be a super awesome idea after all, you think. You should probably do homework when he leaves again (to go explore the theater, you think). You do not, in fact, do homework. You asked him to put a do not disturb sign on the whiteboard on your door.

You stay exactly where you are, lying against your pillow with your eyes shut, not really asleep and not really awake and not at all in the mood to do anything remotely energetic such as read.

Somebody bangs on your door sometime in the late afternoon and you come awake properly. Ugh. Your head is pounding and you feel sick and shivery and fucking weighed down as if the sheets over you are lead aprons. “Go away,” you say.

“Yo, Captor. Let me in or I’ma draw gigantic dicks all over your whiteboard.”

“...Strider?”

“The very same.”

“What do you want?” God, why can’t he go away. Why can’t everybody go away.
“You asked for it, here comes gigantic dick number one, aw, man, this shit is nasty, I’m puttin veins and shit all over it, fucking masterpiece of cock up in here.” You can hear the squeaking of the marker.

Do you care?

“Wait, hang on, I’m borrowing the color markers from next door’s board to do like shading and shit. This is the best gigantic hairy dick anybody ever drew, Captor. I am fucking proud of this achievement.”

He’s not going to go away, is he.

God you feel like shit. You push aside the sheets and slither out of bed and the floor tips abruptly under you so that you have to grab onto the bedpost to keep your balance. Ow. Oh, ow, your brain clangs against your skull, you can feel it go squish.

You think, you actually think, that when you open the door his eyes might have widened slightly behind those stupid goddamn shades. It’s in the muscles of the forehead if it’s anywhere.

“The fuck do you want?” you ask him wearily.

“Shit. Lalonde didn’t tell me you were a goddamn revenant,” he says, capping the pen and putting it back in its little clip. In fact what he has drawn on your whiteboard is a pretty awesome version of what looks like Starry Night. Fuck him, you think.

“Said the fuck do you want?”

“Go back to bed, Captor, you’re making me feel ill just looking at you. I wanna talk.”

You have officially lost control of your life. “Whatever,” you mumble and you do in fact climb back into bed and curl up under the covers. “Just go away and shut the door when you’re done.”

“I’m thinking of just chalking a big X on it instead. WATCH OUT FOR FUCKING ZOMBIES. Need to put some emergency chainsaws up in the hall in those break-glass-in-case-of-boxes.”

You groan. “Strider. What do you want.”

“I think,” he says, hooking a chair around and sitting on it backward, “that you may be laboring under somewhat of a misapprehension with regards to my big sis.”

“Oh?” you ask, muffled in the pillow you have mostly pulled over your aching head.

“Yeah. Like, she prefers the company of women. Muffs are dived. Carpets sampled. Sapphic as a motherfucker up in this bitch. And the only reason I am telling you this right now, Captor, pathetic as you are, is that I think I may have given you the wrong impression the other day.”

“What other day?” Your head is spinning.

“When I told you she wasn’t playing around with Ampora. What does Vantas call him, Violet Prince? Perfect.”

“Strider,” you say, “my brain hurts. It may be about to actually fucking dissolve, I dunno, but can
you either explain what the fuck you’re on about in real small words or just go away and leave me to my dissolution?’

“Sigh,” he says. He actually says ‘sigh.’ “I hate having to go all non-ironic about shit, but okay, since you ask so super nice and you are obviously deeply messed up over this. She is not dating your roommate.”

“Yes she is,” you point out.

“No, look, this is where you shut your face and do the listeny thing. She and your stupid goddamn roommate are like the bestest of faghag buddies. They do each other’s nails and play snark tennis while the rest of the house is trying to fucking watch *Sherlock*. Sure, there may have been some flushed feelings on his part to start with but it’s pretty clear that boning is not on their agenda.”

“But,” you say.

“Now you just think about what I’ve said, Captor. And jesus fuck, get better, you look like ass.”

He gets up and actually *looks over his shades at you* and you are definitely not right in the head because in this light it looks as if his eyes are red.

When the door shuts behind him you lie back against the pillows and let your eyes close. You are exhausted and you have no idea, no idea *at all*, what to make of his statement. It is palpably untrue. Eridan and Rose have been like...like...*together* pretty much since that first exchange of horrible purple letters.

Strider is a clever little sadist, you think, and you cover your face with your hands. You wonder what you’ve done to warrant this level of interfering bullshit from a kid you’ve talked to a total of twice. Why would he even bother going to this length to make you feel even shittier than you do already?

Afternoon light drains from the room and you lie there and stare at the ceiling and wish, wish to fuck, you were *anywhere* but where you are.

Chapter End Notes

So this revelation has been waiting pretty much since Lalonde was introduced.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Shorter than the past few, but hopefully sweeter.

You must have fallen asleep properly at some point because the next thing you’re consciously aware of is someone sitting on the edge of your bed and bending over you, and your world is full of that weird awesome stuff he uses on his hair, it’s like roses but sharper, you don’t even know how to describe it. You’d been thinking things. What had you been thinking? You remember it being miserable but you’re not at all sure of the details.


Oh.

Right.

Strider had come by and done his cute thing.

You are aware of the heaviness of your body, filling up your consciousness like water in a sack. Your skull hurts. You think you’re aware of every single bone in your head, each of them, where they stick together and rub against each other, and that vault of bone is way too tight for your bursting brain, jesus that feels terrible.

“Nng,” you say.

Eridan rests the back of his hand against your cheek and takes it away again and says some naughty words and you look up at him: he’s pink with sun, hair tousled, he looks alive in a way you don’t really associate with him.

“Fuck, Sol, you’re burnin up. You coulda called me.”

What the actual fuck, no of course you couldn’t. hey ED iim not feelin 2o great, why dont you throw over whatever awe2ome 2hiit youre doiing and come fu22 over my 2tupiid 2elf, you don’t think. You just let your eyes close: he’ll get bored with this and go away.

He doesn’t get bored with this and go away. Well, he goes away, but he’s back soon with...ngh, cold water, that’s too cold, it hurts, you make undignified little mewling noises and try to get away from it but he’s implacable and he undoes your shirt to get at your chest and fuck that is cold, that is terribly cold, you struggle, but your thoughts seem to be coming together with a little more ease.

“Sol,” he’s saying. “Sol, you’re fuckin scarin me, stop zonisit out and just talk okay?”

“M sorry.” Your voice seems to be coming from somebody else, and you’re almost too tired to care.

“Sorry about what?” He’s leaning over you, fuck, that sharp rose smell is closer. The coldness goes away, comes back, as he wrings out the cloth again.

“Everything,” you say. “Fuck.”
“Sol. Seriously. What the hell are you even talkin about.”

“You and Lalonde. Never meant to...to make things weird,” you say. “Must’ve pissed Strider off. He came and laid all this bullshit on me about...her liking girls.”

“Huh?” Eridan is stroking your gross hair out of your face. You wish he’d stop. You wish he’d just go.

“Yeah. I dunno, man. Fucked up.”

“She does.”

“Hmm?”

“Like girls, I mean. Sol, what the hell. You’re really freakin me out here, you’re not makin sense, I’m gonna get the RA--”

You manage to find his hand with one of yours. “What?”

“Oh,” he says, and there’s something in his voice you haven’t heard before. “Oh. Sol. You thought we were.....like...together?”

“Uh, yes. Like painfully obvious. Just...just....I want to sleep, ED. Let me sleep, okay?”

“You think we were together?”

“Two things,” he says, and takes the coldness away and damn that was nice, you’d liked that. Then he’s touching you and you just have no idea what to think. Cool fingers cup your face, slide over your gross stubbly jaw. “One. Rose and I are just friends. Completely awesome friends, like the best of possible awesomeness in terms of friendship quotient, shit is off the charts. Two, quit callin me Erectile Dysfunction or I will flip off the fuckin handle and not leave a forwardin address.”

You blink up at him, trying to focus without your glasses: lost cause. Presumably he reads in your expression whatever you think you’re trying to convey because he leans down and he

he

he kisses you

he kisses you

and you shake all over in a terrible helpless tremble and then he’s cursing and wriggling onto the bed beside you and wrapping you up in his arms, cradling your hot face against his shoulder, and you try to make your arms work and they sort of clumsily wrap around him and cling and oh god, oh god, oh god, you think your skull might really burst but this time you do not think you would actually mind.

“Sol,” he’s saying again. “Fuck. I didn’t...I thought...I thought you knew me and Rose weren’t like...a thing. Fuck. Did you...have you....”

You press your face against him, not caring how much your head hurts, not caring how dizzy you feel because this is Eridan holding you and you are pretty sure you’re totally fucking zoned out and having happy dreams. “Fell stupidly for you like...last week sometime,” you say against him. God he smells good. “Dumb of me. Sorry.”

“Fuck damn everything will you stop saying sorry.” He holds you like you’re worth something.
“You were like...you got me through that fuck-awful night, I, nobody ever, I just, Sol. You didn’t even know.”

Slowly you’re becoming aware that you’re not the only one who’s been a dipshit. Oh.

Oh.

Oh, God.

Wait, this is real?

You wriggle against him until you can look him in the face, your vision hazy and unfocused but good enough at close range, and that’s him, yeah, purple eyes and dumbass hair and those big eyebrows he sculpts with a little stiff brush before going out each night.

“Sol,” he says. “Listen to me, okay? I am fuckin stupid for you. I am so stupid it’s not even funny.”

“Oh,” you say aloud, and then you bury your face in his shoulder and you just shake as if you are coming apart.

Some little time later he’s got you a lot more comfortably settled, mostly because he’s sitting on your bed with you cradled against him, he makes the best pillow ever. He says you’re still too hot but your temperature is beginning to go down with the cold compresses and the ibuprofen, and you don’t really give a shit, you just want him not to go away. You can feel his heartbeat through your back, your skin hot and slightly moist against his, and he’s pulled the sheets up over you both, his hand pleasantly cool where it lies flat against your chest.

“Tell me about the theater parties,” you say, drowsily. Your head hurts a lot less now.

He’s stroking your hair. You’re pretty sure your hair is gross as fuck, but he doesn’t seem to care. “I will. All the bits of them. But I did bring you somethin, Sol. You gonna be okay while I go up to the kitchen for a minute?”

You twist but fail to look him in the eye, and he just kisses the top of your head he kisses the top of your head what the fuck when are you going to wake up. “Mmh,” you essay.

“Good enough for me.” He gives you a little squeeze and wriggles out from behind you, and you make a small undignified noise of loss and reach for his hand. “–Sol, hey, it’s okay. I’m not gonna be gone long.”

You’re aware that you are currently a truly pathetic piece of shit, but Eridan Ampora is smiling down at you with his crazy purple eyes and that makes the world a much nicer place. You snuggle back against the pillows and allow him to free himself from your grip.

As soon as he’s gone you hurt all over again and you can just hear that little voice in the back of your head start up as if it’s been on mute all the time he was there: this is bullshit, this is not happening, he’s just fucking with you, this is all a gigantic prank, you’re dreaming, none of this is real.

Fuck you, little voice, you think, and wrap your arms around yourself. You can still smell that sharp-rose scent of him; your shirt is still undone and damp with the cloths he’d pressed to your skin. You hug yourself tight and wriggle down under your covers and the next thing you know the light’s changed, it’s not that actinic glow you get from coily fluorescent fake lightbulbs like in your lamp, it’s...it’s warm and flickering and there’s a lovely familiar smell in the room and...

“Budge over,” he’s saying, and you obey, and he clambers into bed beside you and settles you
against him comfortably, just like before, and you realize that the wonderful flickery light and the warm smell are candles. Beeswax candles. And he reaches over to the dresser you use for a nightstand and brings over a big comfortably-handled mug of something.

“After we went churchyarding I made Rose and Kan drive me down the road to that pick your own farm thing,” he’s saying. Whatever’s in the mug smells amazing, sharp and sweet and heavy with the tang of honey. “They have beehives there. And honey and beeswax and stuff. I know you kind of have a thing for bees.”

You’d let him have some of your heather honey for his tea once or twice. You didn’t know he’d even noticed that it was a thing.

“So yeah, I picked up some candles. And this, they said it was the best honey for stuff like tea for people who were sick. It’s buckwheat honey, and Kan was a fuckin sweetheart and sprang for the brandy.”

You twist around to try to look up at him, but he rests his chin on the top of your head. “Just try it.”

You try it.

Oh God. It’s....okay, you can identify lemon somewhere in there and the fierce sweetness of the honey, and the spreading warmth of brandy--and there’s something else, too, something herbal you don’t recognize. It makes you feel properly warm from the inside out the way nothing has for a couple days now, and you make a dumb little noise and hug the cup against you, breathing in the steam. Eridan chuckles against your back and nuzzles you. “It’s okay?”

“’s wonderful,” you tell him. “Thank you. Oh, fuck. Thank you so much.”

“Shh. You just drink up and get better, Sol. We got stuff to do.”

Your chest hurts, but in a rather lovely way, and while you can’t quite catch your breath you don’t actually mind.

You finish the mug and you’re so sleepy you don’t even protest too volubly when he wriggles out of your bed and pulls the covers up around you properly. “Shh,” he says. “Only sleep now. I’m around, just sing out if you want something.”

You want everything but right now you’re okay with sleep, and you curl up in a ball and you drift almost immediately. Somewhere you can hear the door opening, him talking to people, stuff happening, but you just straight-up do not give a shit. The next thing you know it’s morning.

~

He’s back from the showers already, his hair towel-dried and sticking out all over the place as he settles on the edge of your bed and reaches down to run his fingertips down your cheek. You smile hazily up at him. “How’re you feelin’?”

“Better,” you say. You think it’s true. You’re very very hazy, but you hurt less.

“You mean that?” he asks.

You try and push yourself upright and find that you totally can and that your head only clangs a bit in protest. “Think so?”

“Awesome.” He leans in and kisses your forehead and your whole chest feels like it’s caved in, in
the best way. “You feel like you might be up to a car ride and a walk of like maybe a hundred yards?”

You smile stupidly up at him. “I can probably handle that shit.”

“Good. That’s what I like to hear. Okay, first you are hitting the showers, Sol, I love you dearly but you are not so fresh right at the moment.”

You have to laugh and then his words catch up with you and you swallow. Right, he’s using it as a cute phrase, he doesn’t really mean it.

He doesn’t notice your hesitation, and you slither out of bed and grab a towel, swaying only a little bit--jesus fuck you feel high, this is so weird--and apparently he’s confident enough in your ability to not fall over that he doesn’t shepherd you to the bathroom. That’s kind of awesome.

Strider’s in there when you drift in and he looks at you and you can tell he’s looking at you despite his shades, and then he does that weird thing you don’t think is real where he looks over them at you and his eyes are red, like evil vampire red. Then he pushes the shades back up on his nose and he gives you a single coolkid nod, and you feel absurdly vindicated.

It’s...yeah, okay, it’s nice to be clean and you lean against the shower wall and you let the hot water warm you all the way up before you make your drippy way back to your room. Eridan’s already dressed and he fusses at you as soon as you get in the door, you should dry your hair properly before you go walkin around, you’ll catch cold on top a whatever you got already, jeez, Sol, and you just let him fuss. He puts stuff in your hair, and you’re almost about to protest at that but you know what, what the fuck, it makes him happy, who cares.

You get dressed. You’re still feeling somewhat shaky and feverish but you definitely would rather be up and about than lying in bed waiting for him to come back and you just hope to fuck you don’t do anything truly stupid like fall over.

He seems to read your mind, and he wraps one of his own jackets around your shoulders and kisses your forehead. “We’re drivin’ Kan’s car.”

“Aw man,” you protest.

“No aw man. You can’t drive mine right now and I sure as hell can’t drive mine. You’re gonna have to teach me, you know.”

He looks earnestly at you and you can’t help wrapping your arms around his neck and kissing him inexpertly but desperately--and he squeaks and just after a moment holds you tight. Okay. That could’ve gone worse.

He lets you kiss him--hell, he kisses back--but you have other things to do than this nonsense, and you don’t protest when after a little wonderful interlude he withdraws to get his own coat on and his derpy-ass manpurse. You are aware that you are smiling the stupidest of smiles.
Chapter 14

You weren’t sure what to expect, but it turns out the mysterious Kanaya drives a very boring car indeed. It’s a dark green Camry. Practical. Sensible. What the hell does someone like that have to do with people like Rose Lalonde and Eridan Ampora?

Wait, no, you can actually picture this. That much theatrical swag needs someone level-headed to stop it imploding in a vast euphoric clusterfuck of stupid clothes and pretension. You kind of feel like Kanaya Maryam must put up with a lot.

Mostly you feel like Eridan’s coat is wonderfully comfortable and it smells like him, which is kind of like being wrapped up in his arms and that is fucking awesome. “--Where are we going?” you finally think to ask him when he’s done fucking with the mirrors and moving the seat back and actually gets the car started.

“It’s a surprise,” he tells you, and grins. “But I think you’re gonna like it.”

The car smells like cloves, which is kind of a thing you’re coming to associate with good stuff rather than awful purple letters you can’t read. Which reminds you. “What was all that stuff you wrote to Rose? With your not-quill-pen?”

The tips of his ears go pink. He’s still wearing those little amethyst studs; they catch and hold the light like tiny purple stars. “Aw, jeez, Sol. Fuckin embarrassin was what all that was. Kinda had to do with you.”

“Huh?”

“Well, after Rose turned out to be the best goddamn person ever and didn’t fuckin hate me after the spectacle I made a myself at her party, I was pretty sure I was in serious love. Like, epic love for the ages, we’d get married and have lots a purple eyed little babies--shut up, Sol, I told you this was embarrassin.”

You are snickering and you can’t help it and you huddle into his coat and just grin like an idiot. “Go on.”

“Fuck you. So she was real sweet in her letter about the whole uh-no-you’re-on-the-wrong-track-there bit, didn’t make me feel like an asshole about it, and then she kinda blew my mind cause she asked about you. Like, you know those dumb visual puzzle things where it’s a vase but actually that’s just the space between two faces, you don’t see it until bam suddenly there it is and you can’t unsee that shit.”

You look over at him. His ears are still pink. “I was...uh, I was pretty out a it at the time, I think that was about when I started rockin the triple digits, so maybe I wasn’t as magnificently succinct and clear in my writin as I normally am.” He signals and turns onto the main county road heading away from town. “Cue four fuckin pages a blitherin. In purple.”

“I wanna read that letter,” you tell him.

“Hell to the fuck no.”

“I’m gonna read that letter.”

“I refer you to my previous statement.” Where the hell are you going? You don’t recognize any
obvious signs that might suggest a logical destination. “The basic gist a it was pretty much ‘help i think i actually have all these feels for my weird-ass roomie what the fuck do i even do, please advise cause you are like this awesome queen a stylish womanity who knows everythin’.

You squeak. He glances over at you, then back at the road: you can tell he’s not super comfortable with driving even when he doesn’t have to fuck with gears and clutches. It’s kind of adorable.

“So yeah, then I pulled that terminally unsmooth shit with the talkin crazy in my sleep and you were all disgustingly awesome and took care a me and when I woke up Rose was there and you were gone. Kinda freaked out, actually. I figured you’d had enough a my shit, but she was all like ‘you’re jumpin to conclusions Eridan, stop jumpin to conclusions, it don’t suit you.’"

You think back. You’d been so tired and so fucking disheartened and he had scared you pretty badly with his disconnected rambling, and you’d gone off to chill with KK and GZ and you didn’t answer any of his texts until that afternoon.

And when you got back you’d had that seriously awkward conversation with him about the Facility, and that was fucked up, and then Lalonde had come back with his stupid dry-cleaning and you’d absconded out of there and talked to AA for a while, and then classes had started and you’d been just so completely at a loss as to how to deal with him.

“Anyway I was pretty sure you were totes Not Interested but I couldn’t really help bein all dumb about it and I didn’t know you were even sick, Sol, you are the most stoic asshole I ever met in all my life, jesus. Don’t do that shit again, by the way.” He looks over at you again, and then he’s turning off the main road on a little wiggly drive. “Fuckin unconscionable.”

“I promise I’ll keep you updated every time I feel so much as a sniffle. --Where are you taking me? Cause this is like the part of the movie with shallow graves in it.”

Eridan snort-laughs a totally inelegant giggle. “Fuck, you caught me, I’m gonna murder you and make off with all your sweet-ass computer shit, that’s what this whole thing is about. Shut up, dude, we’re almost there.”

You shut up, but the thought of Eridan being remotely insecure about his chances with you is enough to make your chest hurt in the most wonderful way. Jesus, the pair of you are such utter fuckwits it beggars belief.

He parks the car at the end of the gravel drive; there’s a path heading into the woods, all around you you can hear the little noises of the world getting on with the business of being alive. It’s almost as soothing as the miracle hippie hut, in a less constructed sort of way.

You get out and Eridan’s there with an arm around you, which you don’t strictly need for steadying purposes but which you’re very glad of nonetheless, and together you walk down the path and it’s not far at all before you reach a set of wooden steps that leads sharply down a hill and then you are looking at a god damn wonderland.

You’re at the rim of one of the gorges that wriggle all over this part of the state, nothing like as huge or majestic as the ones at Cornell or Watkins Glen, but beautiful nonetheless, all wet grey stone and clear deep blue-green water and bright splashes of vivid green where moss and ferns sprout from cracks and angles in the rock. The steps curve down the side to a little sort of grassy clearing overlooking the waterfalls and kettleholes, glowing in the sunlight. It’s lovely. It’s beyond lovely.

Eridan turns to you and there’s this uncertainty in his eyes you don’t think you’ve ever seen in them before. “Rose showed me this place. They come here sometimes to chill out and like rehearse shit or
whatever. I thought it was kinda neat, you might like to see it.”

You can actually tell he’s wondering if you like it, and hey, when did you actually get remotely okay at reading other people’s emotions, that shit is not something you’re widely known for. And you almost let the silence go on too long before you wrap your arms around his neck and you just up and goddamn kiss him.

“—whoa,” he says when you both stop to breathe. “I’m guessin that’s a ‘yes, Eridan, I approve of this as the destination for my first date with you.’”

“Actually it was more of a shut up and do that again,” you inform him, and he shuts up and he does that again.

Some little time later you’re sitting in his lap in the sunlit glade, his arms around you, his hands in yours, playing with his rings. They’re not all amethyst, a couple of them are a deeper redder purple, probably garnet. Or no, actually. No, with the Mercedes and everything you are betting this one right here is an actual ruby. His chin is resting on your shoulder, looking down at your fingers.

“What are you thinkin?” he asks. You can feel his voice as well as hear it, where his chest and your back touch.

“Not a hell of a lot,” you say, accurately. “Kind of vaguely wondering where you got all these.”

“I collect ‘em. Big surprise, I know. This one’s from Germany, this one’s like a legitimate antique, Fef gave me this one, half the others I just pick up at thrift stores.” You’re still playing with them, tilting his hands this way and that to let the light dance in the stones. You like sparkly shit, you’re kind of like a magpie in that regard. You want to give him jewels, which is the dumbest thing you’ve ever wanted.

He kisses your neck. “You don’t go in for the accessorized look, I noticed.”

“Never really thought about it, I guess. I got my ears pierced when I was like fourteen cause, well, fourteen, but I got tired of wearing safety pins in them after a couple weeks.”

“Fuck, Sol, you are hardcore,” he says, and hugs you against him. “Little adorable fuckin punk Sollux Captor. I can totally not picture this as a matter a fact. You should do that again, it’d rock.”

“Me.”

“Other than you. Besides, one douchetastic dye job is enough for this relationship.”

“You love my purple hair,” he says comfortably. “I like the sound a that. Relationship. All solid and shit.”

“I love your stupid goddamn purple hair.” You lace your fingers back with his and lean against his chest. “And if all this is just some fever dream and you’re not real, don’t tell me, okay? Just let me savor the moment.”

Eridan laughs, breath warm against your neck. “Jesus fuck I am so stupid for you, Sol. It is epic how
“retarded I am.”

“Nuh-uh,” you say. “I’m the one who’s been carrying a hopeless dumbass torch for like, um, how long have we even known one another?”

“Two weeks.” Fuck, it sounds crazy. “Feels like a lot longer, doesn’t it?”

“Feels like forever.”

He tightens his arms around you. “The good kind a forever, right?”

“Definitely the good kind.”

You don’t say anything further because there isn’t anything that needs to be said, right now, it’s pretty much perfect just sitting here in the warmth of the sun and feeling his heartbeat, his breathing, against your own. You don’t exactly know what to call this whole mess of feelings but you think that’s because it has something to do with **peace** or maybe **contentment** and those are both states of mind you are deeply unfamiliar with.

You’re almost asleep when his phone buzzes and he swears and fumbles in his pocket. “Sol, despite the profound depth a my feelins for you my ass has gone completely numb, do me a favor and move?”

Sleepy snicker. You uncurl from him and rearrange yourself to lie on your back on the grass and look up at the clouds drifting by. You wonder what time it is.

Eridan is texting. You think absently that you should maybe send Feferi Peixes a message saying that she is kind of awesome and you owe her a big fat debt of gratitude. This would require you to do something energetic like find your own phone and then type stuff, so you put it on the back burner for now.

He tucks the phone back in his pocket (you think maybe its purple case should have sparkly things on it too, just for the hell of it) and makes a face. “Sorry, Sol, we gotta get a move on. Kan wants her car back, the audacity, it’s blowin my mind.”

“How dare she,” you say, drowsily. “Goddamn unreasonable women.”

“Fuckin tell me about it.” You sit up and he gives you a hand to get to your feet: yeah, you’re still a little off, but you’re feeling a lot better for a number of reasons. He gives you a searching look. “You doing okay?”

You nod, and he kisses you, which is lovely and unexpected. You think this is one of those perfect moments that don’t actually happen in real life, and hope real life hasn’t noticed. And you have **got** to get him happier with that sweet-ass car of his, because independence is a fine goddamn thing and you would really rather just stay here for the rest of the day.

(How come he has a manual sports car when he isn’t even into driving?)

(What is that shit he uses on his hair? It comes in an orange bottle and it smells so good you don’t even know what the fuck.)

(Why was he in the mental hospital?)

(How are you ever going to be able to concentrate on classes when all the time you are thinking things like what is that shit he uses on his hair?)
-- twinArmageddons (TA) began pestering apocalypseArisen (AA) ! --

TA: hey aa 2orry for not liike returniing your me22age2
TA: ii2 been kiinda crazy round here recently
TA: iim doiing better though
AA: g00d! im glad t0 hear it. y0u seemed really d0wn last time i talked t0 y0u.
AA: had me w0rried.
TA: 2orry about that. ii wa2 kiinda out of iit, 2ome viiru2 or 2omethiing. ii feel much better now.
TA: ii kiind of have new2
TA: iit2 about me
TA: and ampora
AA: 0h my g0d are y0u guys t0gether?
AA: finally!
TA: ok what the fuck
TA: how diid you know.
AA: i really need a smiley em0tic0n right n0w s0llux its kind 0f amazing h0w much i need one. y0u have t0 send me pictures 0f him, btw.
TA: ii dont even believe thii2 aa. you 2aw thii2 comiing?
TA: hold on kk ii2 pe2tering me

-- twinArmageddons (TA) began pestering carcinoGeneticist (CG) ! --

TA: what ii2 iit?
CG: WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK. WHAT THE LIVID INTUSSUSCEPTED SQUITTERING FUCK IS THIS I AM HEARING, CAPTOR.
TA: ehehe gro22 kk.
CG: SHUT THE FUCK UP OH MY GOD. I DO NOT FUCKING BELIEVE THIS SHIT, THIS IS LIKE, WHERE IS THE GOD DAMN TAYLOR SWIFT SOUNDTRACK, THAT SHIT SHOULD BE KICKING IN ANY FUCKING SECOND NOW ARRRGH I AM LITERALLY REDUCED TO SAYING ARRRGH AT YOU, CAPTOR, THAT IS HOW HARD I AM FLIPPING MY SHIT.
TA: ii gue22 you heard about me and eriidan huh.
CG: WOW, AND YOU JUST WON YET ANOTHER NO-FUCKING-DUH MEDAL, YOU ARE GOING TO HAVE TO BUY A GODDAMN DISPLAY CASE FOR ALL THE CAPTAIN OBVIOUS AWARDS YOU’RE RACKING UP OVER THERE.
CG: I SHOULD HAVE SEEN THIS COMING. I REALLY SHOULD.
TA: then why are you fliplippiing your 2hiit. inquiiriing miind2 want two know.
CG: BECAUSE, YOU UTTER DWEEB, YOU ARE LITERALLY LIVING A ROMANTIC COMEDY PLOTLINE. DO YOU NOT SEE HOW CRAZY THIS SHIT IS. IT IS LIKE THE SINGLE MOST OVERDONE PLOT ANYONE HAS EVER MADE INTO A FUCKING TEARJERKER OF A MOVIE STARRING JULIA FUCKING ROBERTS. IT WAS HATE AT FIRST SIGHT FOR YOU AND DOUCHELORD, OBVIOUSLY YOU HAD TO END UP SNOGGING HIM. UGH. IT’S JUST. NARRATIVE FUCKING CAUSALITY.
TA: ii think you are overreactiing two thii2 revelatiion, kk. al2o that ii2 kiind of adorable.
CG: OH MY FUCK, I AM NOT ADORABLE. NOTHING ABOUT ME IS ADORABLE, YOU DELUSIONAL KING OF ALL NERDS.
TA: nope
TA: offiiciially adorable, riight there
TA: called iit
CG: FUCK YOU. A THOUSAND TIMES FUCK YOU.
CG: HOW ARE YOU FEELING ANYWAY, ASSHOLE?
TA: better. sorry if i wa2 liike 2narly or unre2pon2iive the pa2t couple of day2, ii wa2 not at my be2t.
CG: NO SHIT. STRIDER SAID YOU LOOKED LIKE ASS AND DEATH. WHAT IS WITH THAT KID ANYWAY, HE IS SO FUCKING ODD.
TA: ii have no iidea. he got me out of bed by threateniing two draw diick2 on our whiteboard. and he ha2 red eye2 liike dracula.
CG: I’D CALL BULLSHIT BUT BASED ON YOUR BOYFRIEND’S VIOLET FUCKING ORBS, WHAT THE HELL, GRESLEY IS NOW THE OFFICIAL FUCKED-UP-EYE-COLOR DORM, IT IS US. NOT TO MENTION YOUR DAVID BOWIE THING.
TA: ehehehe iim keepiing that one. daviid bowiie thiing. 2o youve been talkiing two 2triider have you.
CG: WHAT THE HELL IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN.
CG: I HAPPENED TO HAVE A CASUAL CONVERSATION WITH HIM.
CG: ANYWAY.
CG: I NEED TO PICK YOUR EXCUSE FOR A BRAIN ABOUT THE COMPSCI HOMEWORK. ARE YOU DECENT AND NOT CONTAGIOUS OR DO WE HAVE TO DO THIS ONLINE.
TA: actually iim over at lalonde2.
TA: 2he2 in the miiddle of makiing u2 lunch. there are actual napkiin2 and 2iilverware, kk. 2iilverware. ii thinsk iit2 even 2iilver.
CG: WELL FUCK.
CG: I GUESS I’LL GO EAT WORMS THEN, WITH MY FINGERS. AND TRY TO WORK OUT THIS SHIT ON MY OWN, SO IT IS YOUR FAULT THAT I AM GOING TO FAIL THIS CLASS, CAPTOR.
CG: YOUR FAULT.
TA: ii weep for you, kk. a 2iingle cry2talliine tear gleam2 on my cheek.
CG: FUCK. YOU.
CG: WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING ANYWAY, TEXTING PEOPLE WHEN YOU’RE BEING FED LUNCH THAT HAS ACTUAL SILVERWARE. RUDE MUCH, CAPTOR? PUT THE PHONE AWAY ALREADY.
TA: <3 you too. 2ee you later a22hole.

-- twinArmageddons (TA) ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist (CG) ! --

TA: --2orry aa. ii got two go. talk to you later about your 2pooky fuckiing clairvoyance 2hiit.

-- twinArmageddons (TA) ceased pestering apocalypseArisen (AA) ! --

~

Lalonde’s and Maryam’s townhouse is pretty fucking awesome, you have to admit. They obviously do shit like vacuum and dust, for one thing, and for another they have actual furniture and an actual dining-room with an actual table in it. You have a feeling they spend as much time entwined on the couch watching shitty movies as they do drinking tea with their respective pinkies extended, however: now that you’re not seeing Lalonde through a haze of jealous unhappiness you can tell that some of her affected mannerisms are wry rather than conceited, and oh jesus fuck if you’d seen her with Maryam before you would have probably had a much less emotionally fraught several days. They are very much into one another, and they don’t even have to be engaging in sloppy displays of affection for this to be a thing that is obvious.

Maryam is possibly even taller than Lalonde and her hair is green dyed over black, which looks oddly natural on her, and she’s apparently into design and tailoring as well as topology, and you honestly look forward to getting to talk to her again when she doesn’t have to reclaim her Camry and
hurry off to get shit done.

You swat Eridan’s hand away as he tries to steal the last of your quiche—he’d taken his meds before you ate without even having to be reminded, and you are stupidly glad that he seems to have a decent appetite—and you smile cloudlessly across the table at Rose Lalonde. Who looks enigmatic and china-doll perfect until that mask cracks in an astonishingly ribald grin. “I told you you’d enjoy taking me up on my invitation, Mr. Captor,” she says, and you swear to fuck she *waggles her eyebrows* at you.

Yeah, you think. Yeah, okay. I could get used to this.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

This chapter contains Explicit Sexual Content. It works better if you imagine that line in Alexei Sayle's voice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You get used to this.

Your life settles into a more even tenor than you think you can ever really recall it managing before. Your collaborative Ampora/Captor hellvirus made the rounds of Gresley--by the end of that week practically all of the guys on your floor were sick, with the exception of one Dave Strider, who was overheard to mention that germs were just not capable of piercing his indestructible shell of awesome; you thought you could hear the iron fist of Nemesis, or possibly narrative causality, creak gently in his direction.

(There is nothing more pathetic than a sick Gamzee, unless of course it is a feverish and irritable Karkat attempting to persuade him that he is not going to die but if he does for some unforeseen reason kick it he, Karkat, will ensure that Gamzee receives a full juggalo funeral with all the trappings.)

Eventually perhaps they will forgive you.

Once everyone’s got over it you’re aware that the whole stupid experience has formed some sort of ties between you. You, KK, GZ, even Aragorn down the hall, Eridan, you’re kind of all friends together. There had been a kind of awkward moment where you’d Officially Introduced him to KK, who stood in the doorway of his room like a small truculent bollard and refused to let either of you in “until you apologize for going off like a fucking IED at Gamzee during orientation.”

“Uh,” Eridan had said, “I flew off the handle at a lot a people durin orientation. Kinda wasn’t thinkin all that straight. You’re gonna need to be more specific here, Kar.”

“My roommate. Gamzee. Stupidly tall, couple of facial scars, fucked in the head to the point where he thinks being a juggalo is not a desperate and tragic disease. You unloaded a steaming heap of verbal rageshit all over him for zero reasons whatsoever while he was, I quote, up and getting his motherfucking wicked rhymes on. In addition the name is Karkat. Kar. Kat. Two syllables, neither of them requiring much fucking effort on the part of the speaker.”

“Aw, fuck.” He’d rubbed at his face. “Yeah, I vaguely remember. Was right before I had to run off and hurl a bunch a times, was kinda in a shitty mood, but that’s no reason to be downright fuckin cruel to some dipshit I never met before.”

Karkat looked slightly mollified. “Right. Well. So long as you apologize properly to him face to face I guess I’m okay with it. Gamzee was all ‘it’s all good, purple haired motherfucker got his own heavy shit to be dealing with,’ by the way. Kid is disgustingly generous. I’m trying to train him out of it.”
“You gonna let us in, Kar, or we gonna stand out here in the hallway like a pair a derpy Jehovah’s Witnesses?”

“It’s Karkat.” He’d stood aside to let you in.

“Whatever you say, Kar.”

(You’re gonna whip out Estel on Strider and see if he gets the reference. Shit will be awesome.)

You attend your very first honest-to-fuck Theater Party. They’re not quite pretentious enough to spell it with the RE, but it’s a damn near thing.

(You suffered yourself to be dressed in one of Eridan’s jackets and you let him put goop in your hair but you draw the line at makeup (“but Sooool, you have the best eyes, let me just do your mascara it’ll make the colors really stand out and everyone there is gonna be so fuckin jealous of me, pleeeease”) and eventually after you promised to let him fuck around with you and eye makeup in private he stopped whining and you actually got your shit together and went to the party. Rose and Kanaya had moved all the stuff out of their dining-room and hung drapes on the walls and put scarves over lampshades and it was all incredibly fucking bordello and undeniably also kind of awesome, especially after your first glass of absinthe (dude, you had no idea fire was involved with that shit, it is kind of mesmerizing to watch the sugar burn) and whoa, yeah, look, hey, Eridan was dancing with you, you thought you could go with the flow here.

At one point Kanaya was dancing on the table, tall and sinuous and graceful, an undulating pillar of dark green and bright silver, and someone was singing something plaintive and beautiful to the music of that could not possibly be a fucking lute no fucking way, and after that things went kind of fuzzy.)

You learn that absinthe hangovers are the worst hangovers. You think you can maybe dig where some of those whiny-ass romantic poet fuckers were coming from.

You show Eridan the hippie hut, now that he has restored amends with KK and GZ. He fucking loves it. He says it reminds him of fairy rings and at that point you think you will never stop bringing up this moment in mixed company.

You do not fail your Disney English quizzes because Eridan and surprisingly KK between them beat some semblance of understanding the coursework into your head.

You talk to AA a lot. She’s really digging the program she’s in and you actually didn’t mean to make the fucking archeology pun but it just kind of slipped out. She isn’t seeing anyone and she’s ok with that--AA was always chill as fuck about relationships, didn’t work herself up into a froth about shit like that, unlike you. You reflect that she’s the most adult kid you know.

When Eridan is cast in the fall production of Into the Woods you witness for the first time the phenomenon of somebody being physically sick from excitement, and you wonder how the fuck he’s going to survive stage fright on the opening night, and decide not to think about it and just pet his hair and go fetch him ginger tea instead. He’s Cinderella’s Prince and you hope they let him keep his purple hairstreak, simply because of the weeks of bitching you will have to endure if they do not.

They do not.

It’s the middle of September and you are sitting with KK on a sun-warmed gravestone slab in St. Simeon’s churchyard, ostensibly going over the stuff for an upcoming compsci test. The churchyard is actually kind of rad, you must admit: for one thing, it’s almost always quiet and deserted except for your people, and for another there’s this weird sense of peace that hangs around the place. Eridan
goes on about how awesome the spiritual aura of the churchyard is and how it inspires him, and you ignore this because if you actually listened to him you’d have to stuff a pillow in his mouth to get him to stop.

“...nnnnrrrrgh, fuck it,” KK says, and puts his pen down. “Fuck it sideways, horizontally, and orthogonally. Captor, your boyfriend’s girlfriend’s brother is getting on the taut shining strand that is my very last nerve.”

“Oooh, ten points for imagery,” you say and lean back against the stone. “What’s Thorongil up to now?”

He pulls up a dandelion and begins methodically destroying it. Fragments of leaf litter his lap. “He’s fucking stalking me is what he’s up to now. I can’t even go up to the vending machines or do laundry without encountering his melanin-deficient ass lounging in some corner. It’s like I have my very own personal goddamn Asshole FBI Tail or something. The fuck does he even want?”

“Two options,” you say. “One, he’s desperately in love with your rapierlike wit and acerbic tongue and wants to be lacerated by the former and carnally intimate with the latter--hey, fuck, don’t throw flower shit at me--or two, he’s on a mission to drive you officially bugshit insane.”

“Ugh. Don’t even fucking imply there’s any kind of romantic bullshit on Strider’s excuse for a mind, I don’t even think the asshole is capable of feelings for anybody except himself. But his mission is, like, succeeding is the thing.”

“Be strong, KK,” you say, and yeah, you deserve having a dandelion thrown at you for that. “--Okay, okay. I’ll ask Eridan to ask Rose if she has any clue what the fuck he’s doing or why he’s doing it. Maybe you can get a Lalonde restraining order.”

“This is stupid.” He glowers at the ruined dandelions in his lap. “No, don’t do that, if you do that it’ll look like one of those horrific middle-school games of do-you-like-me telephone. Which I do not. I want to make that absolutely fucking crystal clear, Captor. Pellucid. Visibility unlimited.”

“Okay, okay.” You wave your hands at him. “I get it, visual flight rules, no interference, you do not have even the tiniest iota of a thing for Strider. Message received and understood.”

“Good.” He turns the glower on you and adds a suspicion filter. You look as innocent as it is possible for someone with your bone structure to look. “Anyway me and Gamzee have a thing.”

You know that, you’ve known that since orientation week, but somehow you don’t think it’s the same sort of thing you have with Eridan. It’s similar on some levels but it’s not the same thing. You nod nonetheless. “Poor lovelorn creepy-little-fucklet Strider. Woe. Wweh.”

KK snort-giggles and throws more foliage your way. “Shut up, Captor. You are not as funny as you think you are.”

“Yes I am. I am a one-man fount of sheer motherfucking sick hilarious burns and you know it.”

“Fuck you.” He leans back against his ratty bookbag and laces his fingers over his chest. “Hey, I meant to ask, what was Klein talking about at the end of class when he said that malicious tampering with the campus network was grounds for expulsion and looked pointedly in your direction?”

“Eheheheh, he can prove nothing. Some complete genital warts on the lacrosse team were giving Eridan a hard time last week, you know, catcalling, harassment, that kind of bullshit. So I sent the bunch of them a virus.”
“...what did this one do?”

“First and foremost it asked if they wanted to fucking install it, you know, I left them a last chance before total annihilation commenced, and every last one of these assholes clicked yes. On an unknown app that popped up unprompted. I even misspelled one of the words, KK, I mean I was being kind and sweet with how obvious it was.”

“Jesus Christ.”

You don’t go “no, Sollux Captor” because you are not a dickprince like Dave Strider but you want so bad. “Anyway, it was a really simple little thing, elegant in its spareness, that just set up an unbreakable feedback loop and made their machines overheat like fuck. I kinda wanted to figure out some way to make computers explode remotely, but making the important parts of them pretty much melt is still kinda metal.”

KK whistles, looking impressed. (It’s still a scowl, but it’s an impressed scowl.) “Fuck,” he says. “Never piss off an engineer or a computer nerd, I guess.”

“You damn right.”

“...so you’re not gonna get expelled for this, are you? Because that would blow.”

“Nope. They can prove nothing.” You smirk at him. “I could teach our fucking class, KK. I’m just that goddamn awesome. --And I have practice, it’s not like this is the first time I’ve fucked around with remote computer destruction.”

“...Captor, you are the scariest asshole I know sometimes.”

You grin, a huge enormous happy shit-eating motherfucker of a grin you can feel all the way inside your bones. Day: made.

~

When you get back to Gresley Eridan is collapsed tragically against his heap of pillows, arm over his face, other hand dangling off the edge of the bed. You’re ninety percent sure he wasn’t doing that a moment ago before you started punching in the door combination.

You play along. “--Are you okay?”

Sepulchral groan. He moves the wrist covering his eyes and you can see--oh, tragedy--the purple forelock is no more. His hair is all slightly darker brown, and has an odd sheen to it.

“I’m fuckin miserable is what I am,” he moans, and you lean down to kiss him. “--hey, you’re harshin my hyacinth here, Sol.”

“Fuck your hyacinth,” you say succinctly and you kiss him again and then he’s laughing soundlessly against you, all the drama gone in an instant. You love that you can do that to him.

“That was maaaybe kinda the point I was goin for,” he says, and wow all of a sudden you think both of you might be wearing entirely too many clothes.

In the beginning, weeks ago, flushed with the madness of oh god this is actually happening he likes me back, you’d been a little frightened: you had to admit you were not the world’s foremost expert when it comes to sex, but it turns out that neither was he. While your first time was awkward as hell it was also wonderful and you never ever want to forget the little noises he’d made when you nudged
into him, the way he’d clung to you as you rolled your hips against him, moving in him, moving with
him, and the way he’d fucking whimpered and bitten your shoulder with surprisingly sharp teeth.
You absolutely don’t want to forget the bizarre wonderful pain-pleasure of him inside you, the
fullness, the astonishing soundless explosion of pure physical sensation when he moved against you
just like that, the way he’d held you after, as if you were something infinitely precious, infinitely
wanted.

That had been good. Now it’s better, because you know one another; you’ve memorized the
topology of Eridan Ampora, the planes and angles and slopes and curves that make up his body, and
what you can do to him if you lick just there or nip here or brush your lips over this. He knows all of
you, and he’s capable of reducing you to quivering jelly with a couple of brisk practiced nibbles at
the nape of your neck, every hair on your body standing up straight in a frisson of electric touch. He
knows what you like. By now you do not have to say a single word when you’re together like this:
you are speaking an entirely different language.

You are still not used to the way he can turn you on with no warning, with a single phrase, even a
single look. It’s painful, sometimes, the rush of blood to your groin like a physical blow. Striders and
dandelions and computers blowing up are completely and utterly forgotten, shucked off like your
clothes and left in a heap on the floor, and you are kissing him hungrily and he’s kissing you just as
hungrily and when he pulls away to yank his t-shirt over his head you make a small keening noise.
You’re rubbing your hips against his and you can feel he’s just as hard as you and goddamn Eridan
get your fucking pants off that’s better and his hand slides down you and wraps around your dick
and the coldness of his rings against your burning skin makes you gasp.

He’s in a kind mood, it appears; he’s not going to make you beg for it, hold you just far enough
away that you can’t tip over the edge and lose yourself completely. He wriggles so you’re sitting on
his lap and he’s stroking you in long rhythmic squeezes oh god you are so hard it hurts. You reach
for him but he pushes your hands away—dammit, you don’t want to just let him do all the work but
oh god the smooth hardness of his rings and the warm strength of his fingers are making it difficult
for you to do anything other than cling to him and suck angry bruises into his throat.

When his thumb glides over your tip, already wet with precome, you groan, and he says your name
and he catches your mouth with his and then he lets you go, he lets you go augh what no please and
he’s moving on the bed—you’re aware of being surrounded by black and violet, you secretly like that
more than a little—and then oh god his mouth is on you and the slick moving heat of his tongue
draws spirals over the tip of your dick and he only has to do that one more time before you are
flying, you’re lifted up, every muscle in your body straining as he takes you right over the edge and
you burst into a million brilliant shards.

You can’t breathe for a few moments and you think your eyes might have popped a little way out of
their sockets so you keep them firmly shut to settle them back in place, gasping, leaning with your

“Is that a good ngh or a bad ngh, Sol?” He sounds amused, and right, that’s enough to get you back
to more or less functioning and you sit up and look at him properly. “A guy needs some guidance
here, y’know.” He licks his lips. They are very good lips. They are a little swollen from your biting
them earlier and they are a wonderful flushed shade of rose.

“Shut up,” you instruct, and you push Eridan over backwards and you wriggle down to get your
own lips wrapped around his dick, and he gasps, and that’s better, that’s more like it, Eridan Ampora
can damn well stop looking that smug. He’s painfully hard, longer than you are, but narrower, you
can’t take all of him in your mouth so you go on stroking with your hand as you run your tongue up
and down his shaft, and the noises he’s making are absolutely wonderful. You love that you can do
this to him, that you can take the irritable smirking hipster douchelord and reduce him to a writhing mess going *hnneeeeg* with nothing more than your own lips and tongue and fingers.

He tastes salty, that flat taste of precome that always makes you think irrationally of tears, and you feel the faint catch in his already-ragged breathing that means he’s almost there, and you smile around him and that’s enough because his hips buck upward and he arches off the bed and you take him up and over that edge and he comes hot and fierce in your mouth, crying out.

Eridan Ampora is a screamer. You had been super pleased with yourself to have discovered that, even if it had been at a somewhat inopportune time and caused your neighbor to bang irritably on the wall.

He collapses, panting, and after a moment reaches feebly for you, his hands patting at the crumpled bedcovers. You wriggle up the bed until he can wrap his arms around you and pull you against him and kiss you, tasting of you as you taste of him; that had struck you as sort of surprising the first time he’d done it, but it’s grown on you. He’s still breathing hard and you can feel his heart thrumming in his chest.

“...fuckin hell, Sol,” he says at last. “If that’s what sayin you’re harshin my hyacinth ends up doin I’m usin it at every possible opportunity.”

“Oscar Wilde would be proud,” you tell him, and he giggle-snort-laughs that totally unsmooth laugh, and you are so in love with Eridan Ampora you think you might actually die of it.

~

Later, much later, you’re watching him knotting his tie in the mirror. Rose is taking the pair of you and Kanaya out to the horrible-and-therefore-awesome Chinese buffet place in town to celebrate you passing the English tests and cheer him up for the loss of his prized violet hair; you’ve put on a clean shirt and sniffed at yourself, but Eridan is primping as if it’s senior prom. “Should I wear the iolite earrings or the amethysts, Sol?” he asks you.

“Listen to your heart.”

“Fuck you. My heart is goin “they would both look good with this outfit.” I need more ear piercins.” He tilts his head, examining himself. “Maybe one a each.”

You tilt your head. It’s the first time Eridan’s shown any interest in emulating your whole binary thing--you know he thinks your mismatched shoes are totally dorky as shit and he’s pretty hung up on things matching as a rule, so this is an interesting development.

“You could wear a red one on your left ear and a green one on your right and passing ships would be able to navigate around you,” you point out. Eridan *sighs*.

“If you’re not gonna be serious about this just keep quiet, I gotta think, this shit is serious.”

“Upon your choice of earrings for a double-date at a shitty Chinese restaurant depends the fate of the free world,” you agree solemnly, and he throws an earring box at you.

“Shut up, asshole, or I’m not lettin you have any a my cloves.” Both of you have developed a taste for Djarums, more’s the pity. You raise your hands in surrender.

“I yield. Go with the wearing one of each set, cause then I can borrow the other ones and we can match.”
He stops what he’s doing and turns to look at you and for a moment you think he’s pissed off that you’d suggest he lend you his jewelry, but that isn’t irritation on his face. “Sol?”

“What?”

“You’d do that?”

“What, wear earrings? Fuck, why not, I got the holes in my ears and it’s not like I’m trying not to be perceived as incredibly fucking gay or anything.”

“No, I mean...it...it means a lot to me. You and me wearin the same shit. Matchin.”

You get off your bed, still holding the box with the iolite studs, and come over to wrap your arms around him. “Then I definitely want to borrow one of each. Fuck, that’s actually really neat, your matching kink and my binary thing at the same time.”

He hugs you tight and says into your shoulder “I do not have a matchin kink, you perv.”

It sounds a lot like what you rather want to say to him which is mark me, make me yours, make me visibly part of you. You kiss his ear because it’s close at hand. “Whatever. Here, gimme an amethyst already, we’re going to be late and Rose will disapprove at us.”

“Fuck, you’re right.” Rose’s Disapproval is a powerful motivational tool. He hands you the little stud and you take it and peer at your ear in the mirror, locate the old piercing.

It hurts pushing the post through, but you don’t mind that. The blue-violet iolite stud goes in a little easier, and you feel as though your ears are huge and sticking out and obvious, but in the mirror there’s just a faint sparkle as you turn your head.

You’re not quite sure why it feels as though something a lot more significant than borrowing your boyfriend’s stupid goddamn earrings has just occurred, but it does. And you’re okay with it.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, so this chapter took a left and veered wildly into sex-having territory. I was not actually expecting this to happen.

I’m also way out of practice at writing smut and I really hope this passes muster. Be kind, internet.
"I cannot fuckin believe this," he is saying and staring despondently into the shitty dorm kitchen's drawers. They contain a motley assortment of bent cutlery and the occasional plastic utensil that has very obviously been forgotten in a hot pan long enough to bubble and droop. "Sol, we gotta make a Super Basic Kitchen Shit run to Target."

"We don't have time," you remind him. "Improvise."

"Fuuuuuck," Eridan groans and runs his hands through his hair. The brown dye over the violet is a weird almost auburn shade, the fluorescents striking wine-colored sparks from it. "Okay. No non-serrated knives, check, not that they'd even be remotely fuckin sharp enough to do a goddamn thing. One shitty cuttin board that is probably harborin colonies of bacteria that have worked out the rudiments a space travel by now. Two saucepans, neither one with a lid. One hideous motherfuckin roasin pan that I do not even wanna look at--no, take that shit away, Sol, I'm feelin downright faint over here." He droops against the counter and you relent and quit waving the offending article in his face.

"So can we do this shit or is this a 'sorry our kitchen blows syphilitic goats no joy for you' situation?"

He straightens up. "Let it never be said that Eridan fuckin Ampora shucks a goddamn challenge. Go find us some bleach to start with, all that shit wants disinfectin, and oh turn on the oven, it'd be ideal if it would maybe agree to work."

You have undertaken to make Dinner for Rose and Kanaya. You are regretting it. You have been regretting it ever since you agreed to do this shit.

Sigh.

Eridan gives you that look, that big violet-eyed Sol please this means a lot to me won't you just help me out here look, the one that's gotten you in trouble on more than one occasion since you fell under the umbra of his influence. Aw, dammit.

"Okay, okay. Oven is...on to three-fifty. Let's hope it works or at least doesn't not-work catastrophically, yeah? I'm gonna go find your stupid bleach but honestly, Eridan, it might be better if it would maybe agree to work--"

"I said we'd make dinner and we fuckin well will make dinner," he informs you. You raise your hands in defeat.

"Jawohl. If I don't come back it's because whatever lives in the janitor's closet ate me, okay? You get my computer shit. It is yours."

You're about to trudge off in service of your fate when KK slips past you through the door and goes to rootle in the fridge. "--Jesus Christ in an iron lung, the fucking milk thief thieved my fucking milk
again. I even had my name on it and I HAVE TWO KINDS OF STREP in big old unmistakable letters, who even steals milk?"

"Hey, KK," you say. "Nice to see you too, I'm doing fine, thanks for asking."

"Shut the fuck up. Last time it was my goddamn frozen edamame and now it's my milk. I swear I should just suck it up and pay to get our fridge repaired but I should not have to fight to keep what's mine in a communal fridge."

"Fuckin unconscionable," Eridan agrees. "Shit with your name on it is sacred. Especially if you go to all a the trouble a puttin a contagion warnin on it."

"See? See?" KK gestures. "Ampora sympathizes with me."

"Sup, Vantas," somebody says from the doorway and you are utterly unsurprised to see Dave Strider leaning there in a red shirt that does wonderful things for his complexion. "Borrowed your dairy," he adds, and strolls off. You look from the door to KK and wonder if it's possible for somebody to have a stroke out of sheer fulminant rage.

"I'm going to kill him," KK seethes. "I'm going to dice him up into lots of little pieces and feed them to the carnivorous plants in the bio lab. And I'm going to fucking laugh while I do it."

"No you're not," you say and drape an arm over his shoulders. "You're gonna help me locate some bleach and stand up to Taskmaster here in our quest to make edible dinner for a couple of girls."

KK looks up at you, and belatedly twitches out from under your arm.

"...fuck," he says. "Not like I got anything better to do with my afternoon, God knows."

You think you've bought Strider another couple of hours of life to do whatever prankster's gambit he's got in mind. The things you fucking put up with for the sake of dorm hall peace, it is astonishing.

~

You are not surprised that Eridan manages to pull off a goddamn triumph using a stove with one functional burner, an oven with one and a half functional elements, two saucepans, one mixing bowl, a truly shitty collection of knives, and the somewhat unhelpful assistance of Karkat and yourself. You are not even surprised when Lalonde, after dinner (he'd fucking roasted a chicken like someone who knows what the hell they're doing and he'd made you stir this rice thing like crazy while he poured stuff into it and kept up a running commentary about shit you had no idea what he was talking about and magically somehow the rice seemed to sort of stop being rice and go all wonderfully gloopy and almost silky-looking and you even forgave him for not letting you have any of the wine until that was done because wow, it turned out to be really fucking good) wraps him up in her perfect arms and kisses the top of his head and tells him he has done well, he has proved himself worthy of the Theater People tribe. Kanaya drums a little ceremonial beat on the table and grins at you, a wonderfully undignified grin from somebody who looks like that, and you think maybe the approbation kind-of-sort-of maybe extends to you as well.

After they've gone, walking arm in arm back to the townhouses like two figures out of dream, you tug Eridan aside and you say “leave the dishes for later” and you kiss him before he can react. It never stops making you stupidly happy when you can stall his processes entirely just by doing that, by tracing the points of his teeth with your tongue, claiming his lips with yours.

“Sol,” he says, but you shake your head and take him by the hand. You have discovered a thing--
well, you and KK had discovered a thing--which you think he ought to see.

“Come with me.”

Gresley, like the other dorms on this side of campus, is a three-story building with a flattish roof surrounded by a parapet that’s supposed to look dignified but just looks vaguely tenemental. You aren’t supposed to know how to get up onto that roof, but then again you aren’t supposed to be as fiendishly clever as you are, and you and KK had been exploring the other night and found that if you slipped a school ID card in between the jamb and door of the locked entryway in the north stairwell you could wiggle it just like this and the tongue of the lock would slide free, opening to reveal a dusty narrow flight of additional steps leading upward into darkness. If you then followed these up and did your card trick again on the roof-access door you would find yourself standing on the roof overlooking this entire side of campus, a strange landscape of chimney vents and air-conditioners and drifts of faded leaves in all the corners.

The moon is up by the time you and Eridan get up there, and he makes a little soft sound staring out at the silvered world, so you have to kiss him again: it’s necessary.

“Sol,” he says again. “How did you...”

“I’m very clever.” You kiss him again and draw him over to the corner you’d found before where you could settle comfortably looking out over campus without being all that noticeable to any curious upwards-glancing public safety officers. “Eridan, listen.”

His face goes still and he stares at you and oh, fuck, you can tell he’s thinking you’re about to have The Talk, so you just pull him close and tuck his head under your chin so you don’t have to look at that face while you say what you have to say. “—Listen. I just. I.”

Fuck this is difficult.

“Kind of really suck at words, which you mighta guessed already but I just...need to say this okay, it’s fine if you don’t like feel the same way, it’s dumb of me and everything but...”

“Sol,” he says against you, and you are horrified to hear the threat of tears in his voice, and so you just abandon the speech you’d memorized the night before in front of your computer, lips moving soundlessly as you tried to get the words to stick in your stupid buzzing head.

“....I think I love you,” you jerk out in one unlovely spate of sound.

Now it’s your turn to swallow back the promise of tears because this is not something you can take back or ameliorate with a “just kidding” or a self-deprecating laugh. He says nothing for so long that you think you might just have to go take a running jump off the side of the fucking roof before he pulls back enough to be able to look you in the mismatched eyes.

He is crying and oh no what have you done what have you done Captor did you just fuck up the best thing that has ever happened to you in your stupid bipolar life what is going to happen now, and he... he takes your nerveless hands in his and he kisses your fingertips. A tear splashes hot-cold on one of your knuckles and just like that everything is no longer terrible.

“...well good,” he says, unsteadily. “That’s fuckin convenient, Sol, on account a I love you like...a thing I don’t got words for, is all. You’re the best thing ever happened to me.”

“Oh,” you say, and the next thing you know the two of you are twined up together in an ungainly wonderful knot of bones and angles and you’re holding him tight, so tight, because you kind of think
if you let him go even a little he’ll just disappear: this is not something that should be happening to you, you’re Sollux Captor, you’re the universe’s grand idiotic fuckup, somebody somewhere has failed to carry the three and good things are suddenly in your life. “Eridan, I...”

“Shh,” he says, face buried against your neck. You are breathing in the wonderful sharp-rose smell of his hair, the warm solidity of his body is steadying your racing heart. “Sol. Sollux. I suck at this, okay? I always sucked at this, at...at like bein a person someone could love, so this is kinda hard for me, but shut up an listen?”

You make a little helpless noise and hug him tighter, until he groans a little and you have to let him go so he can breathe.

“When I was fourteen or thereabouts, maybe a little older, I got switched from private tutorin at home to this snotty rich-kid private academy cause my dad’s kinda the universe’s most egregious fuckin snob and he wanted me to get in good with my social peers or whatever passes for a rationale in his mind. I thought this was a wonderful idea at the time.”

He’s beginning to relax a little, you can feel his pulse fluttering slightly less crazily, and after another moment he wriggles enough to be lying comfortably in your arms with his head against your shoulder. “A course the other kids at the snotty fuckin rich-kid private academy were, y’know, actually capable a basic social interaction with one another, whereas I never even fuckin hung out with other kids. So you can kinda see where this shit is going.”

“They tore you to bits,” you say.

“Pretty much. The cape didn’t help.”

“You wore the cape?”

“At first it was like I thought they expected me too, and then after the first couple a days I was doin it because I was fucked if a bunch a stupid stranger kids would make me change my method a dress an style. That’s where it went. I’d go in every day an it’d be all oh check out Lord Ampora in his regal fuckin regalia, walkin around with his nose in the air like his shit don’t stink, let’s knock his books outta his hands and throw shit at him in the lunchroom and put gross things in his locker and play that hilarious trick where we get someone to go over to him where he’s sittin alone an pretend to be all like they like him so the rest of us can laugh like drains.”

You hold him close. “Eridan...”

“Shh. I’m not done. Not close to done. So yeah, shit was sub fuckin optimal, but the thing was I learned that if I agreed with them they didn’t know what the hell to do next, and that was enough to get them to leave me alone for a couple hours at a stretch. Problem is with that that if you hear shit enough times and you agree with it out loud you start believin it.”

You know this for a fact.

“So about halfway through my first year at the academy I was like okay, so basically everyone an their grandma fuckin hates me, statistically speakin it must be true, also I kinda hate myself for a bunch a different and interestingly varied reasons, what the fuck am I even doin tryin to bother with this shit. By then it was painfully obvious that whatever my dad paid to have me in the first place was kinda a shitty investment.”

“What?”

“Test-tube baby. Or petri-dish, whatever. My mother couldn’t catch pregnant on her own an my dad
was like ‘no i must have a son an fuckin heir to carry on my lineage’ so I guess they spent a shitload a money on it. Musta been one massive disappointment, I can tell you.” He rubs his cheek against your shirt, damp with tears--yours and his, you don’t know which. “So I was like basically this shit is not even worth it, I suck on every level a kid can possibly suck, and, yeah, took a bunch a pills. Thinkin back on it I coulda chosen my method a little better, like, not only did it not work but it screwed up my stomach like fuck.”

You stroke his hair, not saying anything: you know he has to say these words, get it out, you know because you have these words to say as well. “Landed my stupid ass in the mental hospital for like two, three months after that. Only good thing about that place was the goddamn jello, I couldn’t even eat the institutional pizza cause my guts were so fucked up. But I started gettin letters from someone at the school out a the blue.”

“Letters?”

“Yeah, like this kid--Feferi Peixes, she was the daughter of some ambassador or somethin, super rich--she wrote to me while I was inside an said shit like, I hope you’re feelin better, the things the other kids said to you were bullshit, like that. I was so fuckin bored an miserable I wrote back to her an said no I am not feelin better I feel like fuckin shit an I hate everybody includin myself, what’s it to you, an to her credit she actually wrote me back after that, an...well, she ended up bein my only real friend till I got here.”

You suddenly feel very, very warm toward Feferi Peixes. You still need to write her a letter or something.

Eridan sniffles and sits up enough to rub at his face and make cross noises about his makeup, which is a mess. He fishes for his cigarette-case.

“When I got here I was...really fuckin messed up because I didn’t know how the hell to...like, you know, be, toward other kids, an I wanted to be awesome an way cooler than everyone an you saw how well that went, an you were just so...so cool, Sol, you had your shit together an you knew what you were doin an I just...I felt so miserably sick I couldn’t hardly think. But I was a dick to you an I know that perfectly well.”

“Yeah, you were,” you say, and reach to stroke a strand of hair away from his face. “Course, I was being about as dickish as it is possible to be right back, so I dunno which one of us is the bigger jerk in this situation.”

He lights two cloves and hands you one. “Anyway after my amazin one-night-only performance as Eridan the Disgustin Human Puke Volcano you fuckin rescued me an...yeah, I was kinda lost right there. You couldn’t know about it, a course. Couldn’t let you know about it.”

You make a little helpless noise and tug at him and he settles back against your shoulder. “An then you were all like...stoical an I couldn’t read you for shít but I figured you were like so not even interested in my goddamn bullshit an then Rose an I came back from the party after Fef texted me an found you all curled up on fuckin fire, Sol, I was scared, you weren’t makin any sense. You have any idea how hard it was not to just crawl on the bed an wrap you up an hold you tight right then? I just...fuck, I thought you seriously didn’t have any feelins for me at all.”

“You’re an idiot, Eridan Ampora,” you tell him, and you stroke his hair. “But...if you want to be, I mean. You’re my idiot.”

He nods against you, burrowing closer. The night air all around you is soft, sweet, you can hear a single bird’s voice in the woods singing on and on, like tears. “Your idiot,” he agrees. Clove smoke
rises around the pair of you like a veil. “Entirely yours.”

~

Opening night. Rose texts you when you’re already on your way over to the theater building; the
curtain doesn’t rise for another two hours but you figure you’re gonna be needed. You aren’t wrong.

TT: Sollux, could you be an angel and come round to the dressing rooms--and bring Eridan’s
medication?
TA: iim already on my way
TA: how ii2 he
TT: Bearing up as well as can be expected but he’s been rather sick and he’s in some discomfort.
TA: under2tood. btw you are gonna be a great 2hriink one day dr. ro2e
TA: you already know how to mi2u2e the word dii2comfort
TT: I try.

He looks fucking awful but he lights up like a follow-spot when he sees you, and wriggles away
from the people around him to fling himself at you in a hug. You hold him tight, aware of his
thrumming nervous energy, how tightly wound he is. “Hey,” you say. “Brought you stuff.”

“...you are the best,” he says into your shoulder and then pulls himself together. He’s very very pale
and slightly greenish around the mouth and you can tell by the way he moves that his stomach is
hurting him.

“Go sit down, jesus.” All around you the dressing-rooms are bustling, the smell of hot lightbulbs and
powder and sweat and makeup and wig-glue and sheer excitement blending together into a sensory
overload that makes you feel unsteady, and you don’t have to go out there on stage. You walk
Eridan back to his seat at the makeup table and unpack your medic’s satchel: his super fucking crazy
turbocharged prescription antacids, his promethazine, Tums, and a thermos of his gross herb tea stuff
with the good honey in. For a moment his lip wobbles and you’re afraid he’s going to mess up the
careful paint around his eyes but he gets hold of himself and just clutches your hands in gratitude.
You squeeze his fingers gently--they let him wear his rings at least, even if his poor beautiful stupid
purple hair had to go--and you lean down to kiss him very lightly on the lips.

“Break someone’s legs, Eridan,” you say. “I love you.”

He gurgles with laughter and the green tint is already fading from his face. “Are the others gonna be
there tonight?”

“The fuck do you take me for? Of course. We got a whole goddamn section in the second row. I
made sure KK and Strider were sitting together for maximum lulz.”

“You are an evil mastermind, Sol.” He’s counting pills out into his hand--a hand that’s shaking less--
and swallows them with a businesslike gulp of tea and only a small wince. “What about Gamzee?”

“Gamzee will be chill. Gamzee explained this to me with gestures of an almost ethereal grace while
dangling upside down off the edge of his bed. I’m pretty sure he’s gonna be too high to do much
other than clap a whole fuck of a lot.”

“Splendid.” Eridan turns his attention back to the mirror and you can see his concentration sliding
back into place and you have to stop yourself wanting to do something to get his attention back on
you goddamnit, but what the fuck, that’s the whole point of you being here is to get him to relax and
get back on track. You just watch as he traces the curves and angles of his eyebrows with a pencil,
outlines his eyes--he’s using a sort of pale-gold at the inner corners that makes the purple color seem
ridiculously vibrant—and lets one of the others do stuff to his hair.

You feel superfluous.

You are in fact about to just sort of turn and go when he meets your eyes in the mirror and something in the expression makes you come closer. You have to duck out of the way of the kid fucking with his hair and you just find yourself ending up kneeling beside his chair without thinking about it.

Eridan puts a slightly shaky hand on your shoulder, then strokes your hair. “Love you,” he says. “So much. I wanted you to have this, Sol, I meant to give this to you before but today has been such a goddamn clusterfuck you would not even believe it,” and he’s wriggling one of the rings off his fingers, it’s the one you really like and you always play with, the one with the amethyst like a lump of violet ice held between the curving arms of two hyperbolas of gold. You’d been really bored one afternoon while he was rehearsing and you’d asked to look at it properly and you’d realized it really is a decent representation of the function \( f(x) = 1/x \) and you’d tried to explain that to him and he had gone all glazed and you’d both ended up laughing and then more than laughing, and that day—to quote Kanaya quoting Dante—you read no further.

The ring is warm, heavy in your palm. You look up at him and it’s your turn for your lip to tremble, but Eridan just smiles at you and whatever it is that’s huddling darkly over your heart shatters and falls into dust. This is real, you think, this is real as the weight of gold and gemstone in your hand, as real as the little tiny dark freckle beside his right eye that constantly demands that you kiss it, as real as anything can ever be.

You slide Eridan’s ring onto your finger and it feels hot and strange and perfectly correct at the same time, and when he leans down to kiss your forehead, leaving a smudge of pale paint, you feel dismissed—but rightfully—and you say goodbye and you take your leave.

TT: I’m impressed.
TA: oh?
TT: Yes.
TT: Enjoy the show, Sollux.
TT: We’re all coming back to my house afterward for the standard Opening Night Party. You are of course invited.
TA: i would not mii22 ii for the world, ro2e.
TA: but ii 2teal hiim away before naked tiime wiill you look the other way?
TT: I should be jolly well disturbed if you did not.
TA: ro2e
TA: ro2e tell me thii2 ii2nt going two end
TA: plea2e
TT: I can’t.
TT: Everything ends.
TT: But I believe I can say with some certainty that now, at this time and in this place, for all intents and purposes, we are right where we belong.
~

Karkat is about to say something about your new jewelry when Strider interrupts him; Gamzee is staring happily at the beautifully painted set pieces; when the curtain goes up all four of you are quiet. It’s a good play, it’s a hilarious play, it’s a play that makes you tear up more than once, but your eyes are only for Cinderella’s Prince—who is haughty and beautiful and flawed and you would totally say that he and Rapunzel’s Prince should just get the fuck over it and kiss already if you weren’t so damn intent on listening to him sing. Even Strider doesn’t talk during the play, and you
know it’s difficult short of shooting Strider full of thorazine to get him to shut the fuck up for more than ten minutes at a time.

It’s beautiful. And you can tell how much work went into it, and you can also tell how much work is not being shown to the audience, the hours and hours and hours of rehearsal and angst and memorization and tantrums. You will probably never think of theatrical productions the same way again.

When the curtain falls KK has tears in his eyes—hell, one of them’s escaped to trail a glistening line down his cheek, it was *You are not alone* that got him, it gets everyone, it almost got you—and beside you Gamzee is snurfling with zero self-consciousness whatsoever. You hand him a kleenex.

You feel oddly dissociated, floaty, as if you’re not sure what should happen next. When the four of you sidle out of the seats and back into the lobby you don’t know if you should go excuse yourself and try to get back into the dressing rooms or wait for Eridan to come out or what and then you get sucked into a conversation with KK who is desperately trying to get his cool back and wiping furtively at his eyes and you take pity on him and argue about the morality of beanstalk invasions and the motivation of the giants until he has his breathing steadied and his face mostly under control. Then Gamzee’s there, wrapping a long arm around KK, and you can see the desire to burst into fresh tears controlled with difficulty—and Strider’s saying something—and then Strider’s tugging on your shoulder and you turn to tell him to fuck off and Eridan is there.

Eridan is there in what is not his purple cape but is the purple cape belonging to Cinderella’s Prince. He’s taken off his stage makeup with the exception of the beautiful work around his eyes and he’s wearing plain black underneath the violet drapery of the cape.

You don’t hear anybody else saying anything to you at all: you just find yourself twitching your shirt out of Strider’s nerveless grip and closing the distance to Eridan and then you are wrapped up in heavy violet satin and held close to a warm insistent body. Distantly there’s applause, and you sort of want to wriggle one hand free to flip off everybody in the world, but Eridan is holding you, Eridan is hugging you tight right in front of the entire fucking campus in a stupid borrowed purple cloak and you think you might explode into little flickery stars of utter, utter contentment.

He turns with you and murmurs in your ear, and you look up to find Rose and Kanaya, and the whole troupe of players, smiling at you both. Rose holds out her hands to you.

You slip your arm around Eridan’s waist and you reach for Rose’s hand and, surrounded, embraced, inexplicably wanted, you let them lead you home.

*From now on I know I'll be more careful where I tread*

*I'm alive, I'm smiling, I'm so tired of being dead*

*I see in full clarity what was so muddy before*

*You see I'm far from empty, I'm back to what I live for*

--*Temporal Shenanigans*, Rachel MacWhirter

Chapter End Notes
Thanks, everyone who's read and commented and left kudos. I've had a lot of fun writing this story and this is going to be a series; I have a lot more in mind for these crazy mixed-up kids.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!