The fort at Angel-Fall

by orphan_account

Summary

When John answers the cries for help in a forest, he finds a strange bird left beaten and bleeding, all alone. That bird turns out to be a boy like him—literally, turns out to be, John only has his back on him for one second, and suddenly there's a winged, bleeding boy on his couch calling himself Dave. He has no home and no memories he will admit to that might explain why he was left the way he was, or where his glossy red wings have come from. So of course, the Egberts take him in. It's all going to work out. Ok, so John didn't count on falling in love. And Dave didn't count on becoming the target of multiple stalkings and harassment that smack of government conspiracies. And neither one of them could have predicted the forces that have been set in motion simply by Dave being there. But it's all going to work out.
The bird by the stream

Your name is John Egbert. You’re all of nine years old, although you feel a lot older most of the time, and you supposedly haven’t had that much in the way of life experience. Your interests include movies that everyone else thinks are terrible and piano and avoiding your father’s many attempts to fatten you up on cake. By now, you’re pretty sure he’s fattening you up to be a sacrifice for the pagan god that he gets his fatherly powers from. You think it’s unfortunate that you don’t have a brother or a sister to take your place on the pagan altar when you’re half-convinced you’ll end up dying. Actually, sometimes it feels like you do have a sister. Sometimes, a name crawls out of the tight knot of sadness that sits permanently in your tummy, crawls up your throat and balances on the tip of your tongue. The name hovers there for a while. Seconds or minutes, or hours or days. No matter how long it sits there for, it can never quite manage to jump off. The name always slides back down your throat and re-joins the heavy feeling in your tummy. Sometimes you can just about forget that there’s anything heavy in your tummy at all, but it doesn’t happen often. As people go, you’re not a very interesting person. You haven’t got enough darkness in you to make you scary or complex. You’re just kind and sweet enough to be dismissed as a ‘nice guy’, the kind of guy that people are aware of liking and not much else. You guess you could be interesting, if you knew what to do with all that weight and that sadness. You could be like Batman. You could be like Van Gogh, all those other artists who take their pain and put them into paint or paper. But you don’t know what to do, and you’re not like an artist. You’re just a kid that knows a little bit too much about himself already. You’re just John Egbert; a nice guy.

The sky is a heavy grey today. The kind of grey that makes the sky look like it is bowing inwards and about to collapse on top of everything. Faint rumbles overhead promise thunder, and the black colouring of the bellies of the cloud make you very glad you have an umbrella sticking out of the top of your bag. You hum to yourself as you walk along the streets, excited in anticipation of the puddles that will soon be everywhere. Nothing more satisfying than the splash and splatter of rain-puddles underneath your gumboots. Also, you like to pretend, when you’re dressed in your yellow slicker, that you’re in a Stephen King movie. You wander up and down your street and peer into the storm drains, muttering under your breath: “Everything floats down here.” Technically, you’re not supposed to have seen that movie. But your dad left in it in the DVD player one night. Unable to resist your curiosity, you sneaked downstairs and watched the first half hour in headphones. The next night you did the same thing until you had managed to finish the movie. There were no nightmares, as your father warned you could and would come with the consumption of horror movies at your early age. The only negative effect so far has been a slight distrust (and it’s logical anyway, you think) of clowns and a love for Tim Curry that almost rivals your love for Nicholas Cage. Almost. No one can really beat Nicholas Cage. Knowing how many movies you could be watching right now, you grow frustrated by the thought of how far you’ll have to walk before you get home. Two more streets at least! Breaking into a run, you grab your backpack and pull it tight against your back so it doesn’t flop stupidly all over the place. It occurs to you that you might not be so eager to get home and in front of the TV if you had somebody to play with. Most of the kids play with their friends after school. Then again, most kids have to be picked up from school, or walked home by their parents even if they live on the same block as the school. You live two and a half blocks away and your dad lets you walk home by yourself.
You don’t mind being different. But it wouldn’t be so bad to have someone to play soccer with, to help you build forts on the river and to maybe play dragons and knights.

With these thoughts rattling around in your head, you dash up your gravel drive and retrieve the key from underneath the plant pot. The rumble of thunder competes with the crashes as you toss your bag off and throw your damp shoes in the general direction of the shoe-rack, pulling on a pair of waterproof boots. Zooming into the kitchen, you wrinkle your nose at the sight of half a plate of cookies that have your name on them and reach for an apple instead.

Your dad will be home before five, which gives you about an hour and a half to play. Technically you’re not supposed to go outside on your own, and especially not into the woods. He’s filled your head with stranger danger since you were old enough to stand up on your own. He says there’s no better place for monsters and bad men to hide than in the woods that your yard backs onto, but you don’t believe him.

In your opinion, monsters belong in the vacuum of space. Monsters whizz past the astronauts in giant meteors and call each other strange names, or they live in pipe-organs covered in oil. While other kids checked underneath their bed for the monsters, you lifted up the lid of the piano (despite the warnings that you could crush your fingers doing that) and searched for little, stunted figures lurking underneath the strings.

Bad men? Well they’re all over the place. It’s only a matter of time until you run into a bad man, so you might as well live it up until you do and you’re scared too badly to go outside.

To make sure it looks like you were hanging around, you stick a DVD in the TV and fast-forward it to the very end, leaving it paused. This way, when you get home stained with berry-juice and a little muddy, you can make it look like you went straight from the TV to the bath.

It has occurred to you more than once that you’re kind of like a spy. An undercover agent that’s only pretending to be a kid.

You slip the key to the back-door into your pocket and make sure to shut it tightly behind you. In the afternoon, the forest is brightly green and welcoming. The lowest branches are bare and tan and just demand that you scale them and get a good look at the rooftops of your neighbourhood. Even with the thunderclouds hanging over your head and the tree-tops being tossed from side-to-side in the wind, the forest isn’t scary at all.

You rush to it without sparing a backwards glance at your house. There’s a loose board in the fence that you have dug a shallow hole underneath, allowing you to squeeze your little body underneath it and to freedom. When you straighten up, you have a lot of dirt to brush off the front of your slicker, but you don’t mind.

Like a foraging animal, you have made your own path into the forest. Since it has so far only been pounded out by little feet, the track is so faint most would miss it if they didn’t already know it was there. The grass is waist-high on you and full of long-stalked daises and crickets that leap out of your way at the last possible moment. Once or twice, you have to throw up a hand in front of your face to stop one from getting into your mouth or hair.

At night when your father washes the dishes, he sometimes beckons you over and puts you on the counter so you can see the fireflies. The forest is lousy with them. When darkness falls, the bugs ripple in great swathes between the trees, like a procession of ghosts or fairies. He’ll ruffle your hair with a soapy hand and tell you about his visits to the reservation when he was your age. Back then, he says, they had so many fireflies that you had to take a paper fan with you to push them away if you were going to walk through them. Even then, you’d step out of the fields looking like a disco ball.

You’ve already decided that when you get older, you’ll tell your kids all about this forest. About the little trail you made, and how it circles the oak trees where owls slept and mice were afraid to go. How it loops around a boulder twice because you look for a badger’s set as you go by, and have to pass twice every time just to make sure you didn’t see its little black eyes glittering from the hole under the rock. How it takes you through a little clearing full of bluebells that looks like a scene right out of a fairy tale, where swallows crowd the tree-tops and squirrels march up to you to demand nuts if you happen to have found some.
Finally, you’ll tell them about your stream and the fort beside it. The fort isn’t much. You had to build it by yourself and you’re not very strong. That kind of heavy-ish labour is hard to do with only one pair of hands. The fort is built onto the back of a rock so if your front or side walls ever fall away, at least you’ll always have a back wall to prop up the corrugated roof on. You brought some of the spare curtain material and carpet from the stash in the garage to keep out the drafts and to sit on. You learned the hard way not to keep a food stash here—that attracts squirrels, badgers and foxes.

The fort leans on the rock by the side of a wide stream that’s so shallow your ankles are barely submerged when you step into it. During the big rains, the stream turns into a smaller river that carries a lot of dirt so you can’t see the bottom anymore. Today, the stream is clear and cold, and a shoal of fish no bigger than your pinkie dart between the moss covered rocks. You plunge your hands into the water and throw a handful of it into your face. The temperature makes you feel like a layer of your face is being peeled back, but it always looks really cool in the movies. You’re wiping the water from your eyes when you hear the first cry.

More of a tiny, pathetic peep actually, the noise a lost kitten will make. Or maybe a baby bird that has fallen from its nest. Freezing in place, you strain your ears. The was only one cry, so weal and quiet you’re not sure you heard it at all. You’re about to pass it off as a trick played by your ears when the tiny sound comes again. This time, you’re sure you’ve heard it because the sound sends a stab of pity straight to your heart.

Determined to find the suffering thing, you straighten up and creep forward carefully. Your eyes wander across the ground, searching. You’re very careful of where you put your feet as you step into the grass.

Another peep comes from behind you. You turn around and spy something brightly coloured and very small lying in the grass. You kneel a safe distance from it. You part the curtains of grass with hands that tremble from a sudden rush of adrenalin.

It is a bird. Almost.

When its big, red eyes find you, the noise that comes out of its beak is certainly a bird’s chirp. But it’s only a bird from the waist up. After the swell of its downy chest and back, where its tail should be, there is a torso the size of your little forearm that tapers off into a smooth, scaly tail. Kind of like the body of a snake, but a little thicker, a little more fluid. It has something like feet, in the place where arms would be. Small limbs that end in the curl of tiny claws, like a chicken’s feet or a T-rex’s arms.

“Wow.” you breathe.

The bird’s feathers are a bright orange shot through with pale yellowish-whites and reds that match its eyes. It’s wings are a lot bigger than they should be for a bird its size- obviously not that much older than a baby. They’re kind of like a crow’s in shape, though you’re not sure if you’ve ever seen wings so well-defined and glossy.

Then again, you’ve never seen a bird that has little arms like a T-rex and a snake’s tail too.

The bird lies on its stomach with its wings tightly folded over its back. The tail is drawn up close, but not tucked underneath it. You see a large, red scrape running the length of the tail and your heart melts.

You start to talk softly to it “I’ve never seen anything like you before.”

The bird lowers its head and tucks it into its breast, shivering.

“Oh, hey, I’m not gonna hurt you. You’re just a little kid, right? Don’t worry. I am too. I wouldn’t hurt you. I’m not mean like that.”

You’ve seen cornered cats attack people before. Their fur sticks straight up and they arch their backs and hiss, then swipe with their sharp claws. This bird looks more scared than aggressive, but you know fear can quickly turn to violence.

You’re not sure how you know….only that the lesson wasn’t taught to you by any movie.

“You’re hurt,” your eyes are drawn to the long, deep cut in the tail “Let me help you.”

How will you help it? You’re sure you couldn’t take it to the vet. One of the lessons that a movie did teach you; as soon as the government gets wind of something weird, they send in scientists with all
kinds of nasty experiments to do. ET has traumatised you towards any kind of government contact, and that’s probably not a bad thing. They probably would take the bird-snake-thing away to cut it up and see how it got made. Steven Spielberg wouldn’t lie, would he? So the vet is out of the question.

“My dad can help,” you offer “He was raised on magic and stuff by his grandma. We’re Chinookan. We kinda...we kinda believe in not-normal stuff, I guess, like magics and animal spirits. Wow that sounds racist.”

It suddenly occurs to you that your dad might be right to hold a cautious belief in animal spirits. After all, what else could this be, but an spirit?

“Are you...are you my spirit guardian?”

You feel silly the moment the question is out of your mouth, but the bird stops shivering at last. It lifts its head and peers at you with heavily-lidded eyes (do birds have eyelids?), clicking its beak slowly. It looks so tired.

“So, not my spirit guardian then,” you say with a sheepish smile “Sorry. You’re just a bit weird...listen, it’s gonna start raining.”

The bird stares back at you. You almost get the feeling it understands you. There is a definite gleam of intelligence in those big, dark eyes. Reaching forward carefully, you open your palm and put the back of your hand on the floor, a few inches from the bird’s beak. Like offering your hand to a dog. And the bird does lean forward ever so slightly. It doesn’t sniff at your hand like you hope it will, but it does graze the tips of your fingers ever so lightly with its beak.

You smile “See? I won’t hurt you.”

Thunder booms overhead.

The bird lurches upright at once and begins to scoot forward on its tail. It presses its head into your out-stretched hand and nuzzles you like a cat would. You stroke the top of its glossy head and are surprised to feel a slight warmth under its feathers, the kind of vestigial warmth you would feel if you touched a surface where a candle had been lit a moment before.

Its wings are tucked tightly into its back. You resist the urge to reach down and pet those too- you get the feeling it’s a fragile, sensitive area and you don’t want to scare the bird off.

With your free hand, you unzip the front of your rain slicker “Here.”

The bird pauses for a second, seeming to consider what it is about to do.

You wonder if they taught it stranger danger back at its nest. What kind of nest would this thing come from anyway, a snake’s, or a birds? Are there more like it?

The bird presses into your shirt and shudders again, making you shudder in turn with it. A soft chirrup buzzes in its throat as it pulls itself into your shirt. The same, strained cry that first summoned you comes again as it tucks its injured tail in after it. Beads of blood trickle down its tail. Afraid for it, you gently cup its back and help it to straighten out so the tail can hang. A little of the blood smears onto your hand, and it’s like touching cooling wax.

“All good?”

The bird looks up at you and chirps. Taking that as a yes, you zip the bird into your jacket, careful not to catch any of its feathers. Now, the bird is carefully situated inside your slicker and has made a sort of hammock of your shirt. The tail hangs out to the side so it looks like you’re the one with the tail. You’re painfully aware of how slim and light this warm, shivering body pressed into your chest is. You absolutely cannot fall over and land on it, no matter what.

“Are you hungry?”

You reach into your pocket and retrieve a single blackberry from the small cache you picked on your way over. The bird twists its head to the side and pinches the flesh of the berry with the side of its beak, then snaps it back in one swift movement. The way it moved, it was almost like the bird went out of its way not to peck your hand.

“You are smart, aren’t you?”

It closes its eyes. Suddenly, its downy feathers inflate and make it swell to twice its size. You can’t help but giggle and run your finger over the top of the fluff.

“Like a penguin.”
The bird lets out a weak peep, reminding you it is in pain. You set off, looking all around for another blotch of orange in the forest.

“Do you have a mom? A dad?” you ask “How about a nest? Tell you what, I’ll take you home right now and then tomorrow, when I haven’t got school, I’ll look all over the place for your nest. If I find your parent, then I’ll take them to you…I’m not sure how that will work, but we can figure that out.” The trip home seems to be an eternity. You’re painfully aware that every step you take sends a jolt through the bird’s entire body. How much more blood can it lose before it dies? What the heck are you going to tell your dad, and how is he going to help such an alien creature?

As the wind roars in the tree-tops, your mind buzzes with worries.

So far it’s been sweet enough, but that could change. That could change fast and violently. What if it’s some kind of horrible monster and wants to feast on your bones? What if it finishes you off and waits, glutted and satisfied in the armchair, until your father comes home and pounces on him?

What the heck is he?

And when did it become a ‘he’ in your head?

And why do you get the sneaking suspicion that you’ve seen something like this- an animal that was bird and snake- outside of your day-dreams?

For the briefest second you consider dropping him and running, forgetting you ever saw him, but he picks this exact second to turn his face to your chest and nuzzle your chest, letting out the tiniest peep yet. The guilt that washes over you actually makes you dizzy. Yeah, you’re going to be feeling terrible about that for a long, long time.

“We’re almost there.” you promise, even though you’ve still got to get past the boulder and the crickets’ field.

The path finally seems to start moving around you. Something shifts in your mind- a switch from an urge to get him safe to a choice that he is yours to keep safe. You think. You’re not exactly sure what it is. The back of your throat itches like one of the names is about to climb out of your tummy.

In no time at all, you have passed the boulder. You don’t bother to circle it twice, although you’re sure you catch a glimpse of black fur retreating into the set.

The bird perks up a little bit as you pass through the crickets. You shield your face with one hand and his with the other, but he tries to get around your hand. He must be hungry. You file away his reaction to the crickets, planning to come later back to gather some for him.

Just as you’re ready to dash across the field and hop the fence to your back yard, the heavens open up. Rain comes down suddenly in a sheet and brings thunder and lightning with it. The winds grow fierce and cold, like razors cutting into your skin. You tug your jacket up over the bird’s face to protect him as best you can. With your heart thudding in your chest, you run into the rain.

Thankfully, your slicker does a good job of keeping the rain out. Squinting, you can just about keep the rain from blinding you, but it’s coming down so thick it’s hard to tell where you’re going. If you hadn’t made this trip over a hundred times, you’d have no idea where you were going. Even saying that you almost bump right into the fence. Suddenly, you’re presented with the conundrum of how to get over the fence. You can’t very well scoot under it on your belly like you would normally do, crushing the bird. In a moment the hole under the loose board will become a mud puddle anyway and you know from harsh experience it’s not a good idea to squeeze under that when the ground is soft and spongy.

“Hang on, I’m just gonna stick you over the fence in case I fall over.”

The bird makes a small peep of distress as you take him out of your slicker. Unable to bear it, you strip your slicker off as quick as you can with one hand and wrap the bird up into it. Then you pry the loose board up and hold it up with your foot, putting the bird under it. Once he is safely on the other side, you grab the top of the boards and hoist yourself up and over laboriously. Your hands slip more than twice and get a few splinters every time. The inside of your legs are scratched and pricked through your jeans. When you finally manage to get your feet planted on your own lawn, you look like you fought a vicious log with your bare hands and lost.

You scoop the bird up, still huddled into your slicker, and get the back door open as fast as you can. Once inside, you have to push against the door to get it shut. The wind wants to blow it back open
and squish you against the wall. Finally, you stumble sopping and stinging into the living room, kicking off your boots as you pass through the hall.

“Well, we’re safe now.” you say to the bird.

You ease him out of the slicker and put him on the couch, nestled between two cushions.

“I’m gonna go upstairs to change. Stay right where you are.”

The bird blinks at you.

You feel a sudden, inexplicable urge to offer your name. It’s like when your throat itches with the names you’re supposed to know, except this time the word comes away with no trouble.

“My name is John.”

Then you run upstairs, dripping all the way. Shivering, you select a pair of long-sleeved pants and a long-sleeved shirt, then two sweaters. You figure you’ll wrap the bird up in one after you’ve towelled him off. You head downstairs, the towel and the sweater in your hand, formulating an excuse and an explanation for your father in your head.

The bird is gone when you get back.

The tail has become a pair of battered, bruised legs that are cut open at the knees. The plumage has retreated, leaving skin as pale as a corpse’s in its wake, which is nearly bruised black and cut to ribbons too. You can almost count his ribs through his skin. His hair is light and blonde, almost white, like the streaks that ran through his red feathers. He has folded his arms tightly across his bare chest and hunches over, covering himself as best he can. The wings have stayed in place, shiny with water and blood.

He looks sheepishly up at you through a curtain of hair.

“My name is Dave.”
Well that was kind of easy

Your name is Dave and you’re working on the rest. That’s all that’s in your head right now, your name. Ok, so you know about the kinds of stuff that you should know about. You know what a car is and how to write and read and that the earth is a big ball of dirt and fungus spinning through the vacuum of space. You know what parents are - the man that wrapped you up in a blanket and cleaned the worst of your cuts is John’s dad. John and his dad look like each other, like most parents and their children. It makes you wonder, watching them, if there’s a dad out there for you, with white-blond hair and big red wings that sometimes make his back hurt if he doesn’t stand straight and proper. He could tell you what your last name is and where you came from.

At the moment, you’re trying not to think about that. You will only succeed in freaking yourself out, winding yourself up to the point of tears. Right now, the last thing you need to think about is just how much there is to freak out about.

You’ve gotta get a lid on this. You’ve gotta be cool, to stay cool and to become cool. These people that have you right now, the Egberts, who knows how long they’re gonna be able to hang onto you? When the time comes that they either throw you away like the trash you apparently are or have to give you up, you can’t afford to have your heart ripped out because you’re scared and they are nice people.

Nope. Not gonna happen.

Your name is Dave, and that’s all they need to know about you.

It’s kind of amazing how this all went down.

Early this afternoon, when the sun hung high over the green canopy and had bathed the forest in a jade light, you became aware of being.

You wish you hadn’t now, sitting at the Egbert’s kitchen table. Policemen are buzzing around in their blue vests with the chequered stripes, talking with John’s dad and looking furtively over their shoulders at you. The wings are scaring them.

John, however, has yet to let himself be weirded out by the wings. He is sitting right across the table from you and has voiced his intentions many times not to move until he knows what’s going to happen to you.

If only he hadn’t picked you up. When you first woke up, that was all that you could think of. Somebody had to come by. Somebody had to come and find you.

A parent, searching frantically for the baby they had lost in the winds of the storm that had begun to roll in as you lay there. A sibling, maybe all you had in the world, who was desperate and scared and feeling the weight of your young, innocent life as their responsibility. A friend, whom you’d been playing with until you were somehow lost and injured, and whom would carry you back home at the cost of even your own health because they loved you that much.

These people- these dreams- they drifted through your head without evidence to anchor them. Even if you had these people, you couldn’t have told them from any face in the crowd.

You didn’t know who you were. Where you were, why you were here. What was going on, why you were bleeding. Whether or not you would survive the storm whose belly seemed to scrape the treetops as the wind roared all around you.

It was an eternity that you spent, huddled in that patch of grass, waiting for an improbable rescue. In reality, the time would have been closer to a few hours. The storm had only just engulfed the sun when John’s footsteps padded into the clearing.

Without hesitating, you howled for help.

He answered. From the moment he spoke to you, it was clear he was just as in the dark about you as you are about yourself. That would have broken your tiny heart if you weren’t so breathlessly happy to see another living being that wanted to help.
By that time, you had changed into your smaller form. When you woke up, you were that little emaciated boy with the shiny wings that John’s dad was introduced to when he got home. The other form hurt so much more because there was so much more to hurt. The cuts and bruises that crossed and dotted your legs (buried under layers of gauze, first from John’s dad, then from the paramedics he called shortly after meeting you) hurt marginally less when they bit into the flesh of your tail. Movement was entirely out of the question to begin with, so it didn’t matter which form you took. There was no getting up on your own.

When John picked you up, all you could do was thank him again and again in a language he didn’t understand. You weren’t brave enough to show the form that you wear right now to him, for fear that he would be scared away before he took you to safety. Ok, so the whole bird-snake combo didn’t scare him. But humans? Humans, even humans with wings, they’re different.

Bird-snake-things are animals. Animals that can be put in boxes, taken out irregularly to be fed and watered and exercised. Humans are animals too, but they are animals that ask questions, demand answers, that need more food and places to sleep and that will cry if they are lonely or mistreated. Humans with wings bring the same problems and an entirely new set of problems to the table.

“Dave?”

John’s dad, whom you have christened Dadbert at this very moment inside your own head, appears at your side with a mug of tea. “Do you think you can drink this?”

So far, you have refused all food on the grounds that you feel so queasy you’d probably bring it right back up again. Instead, Dadbert has supplied you with beverages galore. First, there was sugary apple-juice to stop your hands from shaking. After that he pressed some warm milk into your hands (he even thought to ask if you were lactose intolerant before he did), and made tea while you waited for the police or the paramedics to arrive (the paramedics got there first and one of them had to be shown to the bathroom to throw up upon seeing you).

Now, after a few hours of heated discussions between the adults and a few questions thrown your way, you’re presented with yet another mug of something clear that throws off a spicy scent. You take the cup from him, careful not to burn your fingers. You recognise the smell.

“Peppermint tea?”

He nods “Let me know the moment you think you can eat.” “He’ll stuff you with cookies.” says John solemnly.

Dadbert hovers for a moment. You watch his eyes scrunch up, his mouth tighten, and marvel at how much he looks like his son when he’s worried.

“Dave, these people would like to talk to you, more seriously than before. They’re going to see if they can help you.”

You should have hidden your wings. Your eyes flick towards the kitchen counter, where there are two police officers hanging around by the sink. There were more to begin with, but they have tricked away over the course of the afternoon. Each one left ashen or sickly-looking. One man retrieved some kind of necklace from underneath his shirt and squeezed the pendant, muttering what you thought was a prayer. As the afternoon has ground on into evening, only two have remained. A woman and a man, one short, the other tall. Like a comedy duo.

“Are they gonna take me away?”

Dadbert furrows his brow “Not tonight. This is...this is an unusual case. Normally, they would take you to a shelter, but it’s not so easy.” “Because of my wings?”

He nods again, biting his bottom lip “As long as you’re ok with it, you’ll spend the night here.”

You shrug, gripping the warm mug a little tighter “I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

Dadbert smiles at you. Straining your ears, you swear you can just about make out the noise of the fragments of his broken heart landing at the bottom of his ribcage.

One of the officers, the taller one, comes over at that point. The two of you size each other up for a moment.

He’s really tall. Built kind of like one of those killer movie robots. His eyes are just about as blue as
John and Dadbert’s, but they’re more icy and much lighter, and much, much more tired. His features
are that of a Middle-Easterner, maybe Iranian or Turkish, and a lot of long, black hair that inspires a
fervent desire to braid.
“Isn’t that dangerous?”
Somehow, he knows you’re talking about his ponytail “I tuck it up in my hat when I’m on patrol.”
You were kind of expecting a thick Austrian accent, or for him to slap you at the end of his sentence
and shout ‘FOOL’.
“Am I under arrest?”
The officer’s mouth twitches like he’s going to smile “No. We can’t arrest people for having wings.”
“Are you gonna turn me over to…to Area 51 or something?”
The other officer comes over at this point. She puts an arm on her partner’s shoulder and smiles at
you in an open, sisterly way that almost makes you want to collapse and cry on her.
“My name is Leijon, and this is Zahhak,” she takes her hat off and shakes out her short brown hair
“Sorry, that was cutting off the circulation to my brain. So, we’ve got a lot to talk about. Are you
comfortable here?”
“My painkillers are working.” you say bluntly, enjoying it when Dadbert flinches “This isn’t gonna
take too long, is it? I mean, you guys sounded like you were planning my future for the next ten
years over there. Just tell me where you’re shipping me off to so we can wrap this up. Somebody
needs to put John to bed too, or he’s gonna take a nap in his milk.”
John snaps to attention. A second ago, his nose was almost in his milk as his head bobbed up and
down in the fight to keep awake.
“I’m fine!” his eyes are dark and tired “I wanna hear!”
Dadbert musses up his hair “You can stay for now.”
“What do you mean for now?”
Dadbert cuts off the rest of John’s protest with a single, sharp look. A ‘we’ll talk about this later
young man’ look. You wonder if anyone’s ever managed to silence you with a single glance like
that. Your memories start early this afternoon, but you know what you’re like. Kind of an asshole.
Whatever person that could shut you up with a simple stern look would have to be some kind of saint
of patience.
Eager to get through with this so you can figure out where you’re really sleeping tonight, you look
expectantly at the officer called Zahhak. His face remains blank for a spell of awkward silence in
which all of the eyes in the room turn on him, except for John, whose eyes are so heavily lidded he
can probably only see his own eyelashes.
Eventually, he clears his throat “Considering the unusual circumstances, we’re not going to attempt
to remove you from this household. Mr Egbert is perfectly willing to accommodate you for the time
being.”
“And as much of the foreseeable future.” puts in Dadbert, turning slightly pink, as if embarrassed by
his own kindness. He turns to you, his face earnest “We have the space.”
You’re not quite sure how to respond to that. It would seem that Dadbert is offering to put you up
until whoever’s supposed to be responsible for you turns up. In the unlikely event that they do, and
even if they do, in the even more unlikely circumstances that they’re not crazed scientists retrieving a
genetic experiment.
In the short few hours that you have known him, so far, all you have done is cried a little on his
shoulder, bled a whole lot more on his nice starched shirt and told him with a slight gleam of sarcasm
that you liked his hat. How can he have decided he’s going to put up with you and all the problems
you’re going to bring down on his head in such a short amount of time?
Is he even offering what you think he is- a home?
This has to be a mistake on your part. People are not that good without some kind of secret agenda.
“Ok,” your hands shake around the mug “I’m fine with that.”
Zahhak reclaims the spotlight with another rumble from his throat “There is a lot to discuss…now,
you don’t have to answer this question right now, Dave, if it upsets you. You don’t even have to
hear it.”
You roll your eyes “Just ask me.”
Officer Leijon jumps in here. She must think a female voice is less threatening or something “Well, Dave, from the extent and the shapes of your injuries, we’ve judged that you were attacked.”
Glancing at your blackened legs, you let a wry, hollow smile come to your cracked lips “You don’t say. I thought something was stinging.”
Unsurprisingly, no one laughs.
“Do you remember who attacked you, Dave?” she asks, adding somewhat more hesitantly “Did you run away from home?”
You shrug “Sounds like something that could be a thing. I don’t know. I honestly do not know a single thing about myself except that I have weird wings and a normal name. Anything else?”
The two Officers exchange a glance. If you were a little bit older and more experienced in the ways of the world, you’d know what they were thinking. Dadbert has been made suspicious. He draws a little closer to you and puts a hand on the back of your chair.
“No. Nothing else to ask.” says Zahhak “However, we are going to offer you a psychologist. And when I say offer, I mean assign you a psychologist.”
You snort “Don’t expect to get much with that tactic.”
For the first time, his face does something that resembles an actual smile “It’s protocol, I’m afraid. Every child that has experienced trauma of some kind has to get one.”
“This is too easy,” you retort, suddenly angry and scared all at once “This is way too fucking easy. Aren’t you gonna drag me off to a lab? Do some tests on me? At least interrogate me. Or are you coming back later? Fuck that. I want to know what’s happening to me right now! I’m not gonna just sit around and wait for you people to…to…do whatever to me.”
A shadow flickers across Zahhak’s face. If you had blinked at that moment, you would have missed it. But you saw it and it’s going to keep you up at night.
“It is this easy,” he says softly.
“What about all those other people that saw me? Are they happy to stay shut up? I counted like, two officers and two paramedics, and you’re sure they’re not gonna smear me all over their status updates?”
“They’ve been sworn into secrecy.” beams Leijon, like this should just make your day “Your butt is covered kiddo. All you need to do right now is concentrate on getting better.”
John’s head finally slips from his chin and collides with the desk, producing a satisfying smack. It sounds to you like the bang of a judge’s gavel.
That’s it. You’re in. You’re safe. It’s all good and nobody’s going to hurt you because you’ve got Dadbert to give you hot leaf juice and Asian Terminator to back him up.
The walkie-talkie strapped to Leijon’s vest spits to life with a fizz of static. Swearing under her breath, she seizes the device and brings it to her ear.
“We’ve gotta go, Eq. Fire in the warehouse district.”
He nods, first to you, then to Dadbert “Don’t hesitate to call us if you need us. We’re going to be checking in tomorrow morning.”
You look up at him, wanting to offer some thanks in a cleverly disguised snarky comment.
To your absolute horror, all that comes out is a hoarse croak as your cheeks grow wet with tears and you bury your face in your knees to cry.
A montage of a childhood

Your name is John and you’re nine years old.
Today, your best friend is coming to school with you.
When the spring passed and took its sudden showers with it, summer rolled in and brought thunderstorms. You, your dad and Dave had an entire summer to perfect Dave’s manners and mannerisms, socialising him for school and life in general. A whole summer to get used to having the guest bedroom next to yours filled, but it still gives you goose-bumps to be woken up by the sound of his sobs, muted as they are by his pillow, and to remember just who you have sleeping next to you.
By the end of the summer, Dave has watched the entirety of Nicolas Cage’s film and TV career, including the few voice-acting jobs he has done for some animated kids’ flicks. He’s had ice cream and strawberries and some of your dad’s tooth-rotting confectionaries, which he took to like a fire takes to a house. Although he hasn’t actually left what he refers to as ‘Chez Egbert’ except for one cough-medicine emergency (your father wasn’t sure what his body could handle and Officer Zahhak wasn’t picking up, so he ended up plunking Dave on the counter of the pharmacy and relying on the bewildered attendant’s wisdom), to the park less times than you can count on one finger, and the one weekend trip that your dad sprang on the both of you.
All in all, he’s spent the majority of his time hiding in his room with the multitude of books he had pinched from shelves all around the house. He said he wanted to educate himself, but you suspect he just wants a good place to hide. The shape of a book is ideal for hiding the face from the world. Never once has he met your friends. You want to introduce him so, so badly, but he just won’t do it. Your father says he’s shy, that he’s been through a lot even if he doesn’t remember what he’s been through, that you just have to be patient with him.
Every time the doorbell rang or Karkat knocked his special, furious knock right above the letterbox, your heart sank. Dave had to get up from whatever board game you had spread in front of you or abandon whatever movie you had been watching to retreat upstairs. Your friends would mill around the kitchen, sampling the various sugary delights your father had taken to baking even more for Dave’s benefits. They asked why you hadn’t been around as much. You told them you had a headache, a cold, a bad scrape and even thought about faking a cast. You couldn’t get them out of the house fast enough. Once, you nearly threw Sollux out the window when he asked to use your bathroom, you were so afraid he’d hear Dave locked into his room and ask the wrong questions.
Today is the day of Dave’s official debut.
He’s got that same butterflies look in his stomach that he’s had every time he’s left the house. The bag on his back is slung over one shoulder, full of the notebooks and pens and other stationary that your father used your expertise to pick out. The main motif is of zombies, which horrified your dad and secretly delighted Dave. He doesn’t like showing too much of his face off, but the shades are changing that. He’s not so cautious about avoiding your eyes anymore.
Officer Zahhak, who you’ve started to call Eq, brought him a pair of his spare sunglasses one day. “You’re turning me into one of you.” accused Dave, holding the glasses up to his face experimentally.
“Pardon?”
You remember that Eq had his hair all down his back that day, and thinking that with that hair he could model for the first Disney transgender princess.
“Into a Terminator,” he slipped them on “You’re going to make me see the world in your own, warped and twisted way, so I’ll become hollow like you. It’s too late, isn’t it? The moment I touched these glasses, I signed a contract. You’ve drafted me into the life.”
Eq rolled his eyes “It is only a matter of time, son, until you too grow to be six foot four inches and two hundred pounds and get biceps like an ox.”
He said all this in a thick, tinny Austrian accent that had you and your dad rolling on the floor.

“Do I have to grow my hair out too?” asked Dave.

At this point you snorted apple juice up your nose and spent the next ten minutes dribbling a clear, golden liquid from both nostrils while giggling like a lunatic.

You wish right now that you could make him laugh.

It’s just you and him. Both Eq and Nepeta are on duty. They called before you left the house to wish Dave good luck, then had him pass them over to your dad to talk about a possible therapist. He had planned to walk to school with the two of you, but whatever they said on the phone was a problem that he couldn’t leave hanging.

He hugged Dave slightly tighter than he hugged you.

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He hugged Dave slightly tighter than he hugged you.

“Keep your wings flat,” he started.

“Keep my chin up,” continued Dave with only the slightest hint of contempt.

“And you’ll do fine.” finished your dad “Look out for each other today. And John, don’t let Karkat interrogate him.”

You mock saluted your dad “Yes sir! They can batter and boil me alive and I’ll never tell the truth.”

He smiled. Dave didn’t.

Dave’s being very quiet. On purpose, you have made the walk much slower than normal.

“You’ll like them,” you say, for about the fifth time since you left the house “They’re not as terrible as they sound.”

Dave nods mutely.

He’s dressed in a shirt that is intentionally baggy to keep the shape of his wings against his back swamped. Over the course of the summer, Dave has had a lot of practice at tucking his wings up into his back as tight as possible. Even when he wears a sleeveless T-shirt, you almost can’t see his wings now. He’s made an art and perfected it. When you look over at him now, he’s looks so much better. More weight to cushion his ribs, more colour in his pale skin. He catches a lot more sunlight these days too.

Today, he has dressed in plain black jeans and a simple red t-shirt with no pattern. He figures plain shirts are the safest way to go, considering the amount of flack he’ll get just for wearing his shades all the time.

“You didn’t tell them about me.”

You’re both surprised and disturbed when he speaks. Surprised, as you thought you wouldn’t get a word out of him until his hand was forced by being in front of his new class, where he’d slip back into his cool-kid suit smooth as oil on water. Disturbed because he sounds like he’s accusing you of something.

“No. You told me not to tell them.”

You want him to do something like biting his bottom lip. Frowning at you. Cussing at you. But he doesn’t do a thing. That’s the most unnerving thing about him. Not anything as pedestrian as his wings or the way he will casually pluck a worm out of the dirt, just the way he doesn’t use his face when he’s mad or sad or anything anymore. He keeps it carefully blank all the time.

“Why did you listen to me? I’m not that smart John, I don’t know what the hell is coming out of my mouth half of the time I’m talking.”

“What the hell does that mean? When am I supposed to know when to listen to you and when not to listen to you?”

“I don’t know. Use your intuition.”

“I’m ten and a half Dave. I don’t have any intuition. I don’t even know what that is.”

Behind the shades, you can’t tell what he’s thinking. His eyes are replaced by blank sheets of tinted glass, so much more effective at blocking the world right out than any of his books could be.

“It’s a thing,” he slips his hands half into his pockets “A thing where you know what people really mean when they’re saying stuff.”

“Every other word out of your mouth is devoted to telling me that I’m gonna grow up to be the most tactless idiot in the world,” you retort, wanting him to laugh along with you “Tell me what you want, Dave, in simple English or Chinook Jargon.”
I don’t know.” he says softly “I wish you’d just left me there.”
“To die?”
“To sleep. I just want to go back to bed.”
On an impulse, you take his hand out of his pocket and squeeze it in yours. You take him by the chin and make him look at you, pushing up the corners of his mouth into a poor imitation of a smile. “I’m not gonna leave you anywhere.”
“What does that mean?” he asks through squished-up cheeks.
You smile “It means that you’re stuck with me all the time. We’re in it together. We’re Batman and Robin from now on. I’ve got your creepy winged back, ok?”
He’s quiet for a moment.
Then he responds: “I’ve got yours. Let’s just get this first day of school shit out of the way.”

Your name is Dave. You’re eleven years old and you’re squeezed between Gamzee and Karkat at the table, which is a very dangerous place to be. More than once, you have considered oozing underneath the table like toothpaste the time John tried to chop it out of the tube onto his brush, but you’d probably just get ensnared in the forest of legs underneath the table before you could make a successful escape. Also, Kanaya’s wearing a skirt that’s just above her knees, and you really don’t want to take risks with your head being near a skirt of that length.
So then Cage does this awesome thing where he sorta flips over the wolf,” John is demonstrating a Cage-stunt with a carrot baton for Vriska’s benefit “And he lands perfectly in time to stab the thing.”
Vriska gives him a sceptical look “Y’know, eleven year old kids are supposed to be watching Disney.”
“Disney is for people who don’t have the courage to challenge themselves,” says Rose primly, gesturing with her sandwich “It is so formulaic I already know the dialogue before it happens.”
“What about ‘Mulan’? How-w is cross-dressin’ formulaic?” asks Eridan “W-way off the fuckin’ books if ya ask me, especially in China.”
“Here’s the thing, Eridan, nobody asked you.”
Sollux and Eridan each freeze for a moment to glare at each other with concentrated hate in their eyes and a little curl of a smile in the corner of their mouths that tell you they’re both wildly embarrassed by this display and are well aware that they will be dating in a few years.
These are your friends.
Eridan, Sollux, Karkat, Gamzee, Rose, Feferi, Kanaya and John, and Vriska sometimes. You’re not sure where Tavros is and you’re kind of glad he’s not around, because every time you look at him these days your stomach goes all watery like you’re about to puke. Or like you drank way too much on an empty stomach. Just looking at him makes you dizzy as hell.
Your friends are weird. Your friends are obnoxious and often voice eternal hate or contempt against each other. Each one of them struggles with an existential problem of a depth that an eleven year old should not be able to experience.
Some days, you can’t shake the feeling that you have known them all your life. As things go, you’ve actually known them for the majority of your life, which starts, for you, when John scooped you up off the cold grass and took you out of the storm. There was one horrible, lonely month that saw you confined to your room with no one but books for company. There was one, tense hour at the start of the first day of school when you introduced yourself as Dave and had a perceptive question from Karkat Vantas, who is the world’s greatest asshole.
“Are you too cool for a last name?”
So you made up some shit on the spot.
“Strider.”
The back of your head itched fiercely. You had to scratch it, searching for a spider or something, even though you knew the itch was inside your head.
Karkat pulled a face “That’s a dumb name.”
The teacher told him to button it and you took your seat behind John, who was already crunching up a sheet of paper to pelt Karkat with. A boy leaned up from behind you and whispered: “He ain’t got
no room ta talk. His name is Karkat.”
That was Gamzee. He’s since decided he doesn’t like you, hence the danger of sitting next to him. The danger in sitting next to Karkat comes from the fact that he’s an asshole who likes to try peeling the flesh of his peers’ bones off with his sharp tongue. They’re caught between being absolute best friends and being worst enemies at the moment, and you’re trying not to get caught in the cross-fire until they decide if they want to be buddy-buddy or put knives to each other’s throats.
So yeah, there was that hour when you were getting eaten up inside with your certainty that they were all gonna hate you and make you the butt of their jokes and John was either going to totally ignore it for fear of losing his non-feathered friends or be powerless to stop it.
Then you met them at recess and your fears flew away, leaving only the fear that they were going to make you laugh if you weren’t very, very careful.
Ever since then, your life has been a mix of moments where you’re desperate not to cry and desperate not to laugh.

Your name is John Egbert and you know Dave just kissed Tavros.
At twelve years old, you think this first kiss has come a little early. When you and Dave talked about it you thought he was just joking around. You could barely reconcile the idea of Dave being serious about or with anybody, ever, even in speculation. So you took the chat to be just that- an innocent little chat. A jam between good bros. The setting was right for a moment of bro-bonding.
Dave has made a habit of climbing onto the roof so he has the room and the coverage to flex his wings, which need more and more exercise as they grow. You have made a habit of joining him up there a bag of chips or some cookies from your dad’s freshest batch.
He asked you if you’d ever been kissed. That silly, muttering voice at the back of your head you strongly suspect is attached to the heavy weight in your stomach wondered if Dave was going to offer to kiss you. You’d strongly considered offering this to him at least four times in the recent past, your excuse being that it would be a convenient way to get it out of the way. The second you’re ready to open your mouth and pitch it to him, your courage and conviction wither. You pretend you were going to ask something else and can’t look at him for a few hours.
You don’t think you’ll be able to look at him for a few days now.
The flush in his cheeks is so bright it could be a sunburn. His hair’s messed up, which tells you he’s been pushing his hand through it a lot the way he does when he’s nervous. He’s smiling too. Most damningly of all is the way he strategically avoids making eye contact with Tavros. Tavros isn’t looking at him either. He’s smiling like he just got the last of his three wishes from a fairy godmother and the happily-ever-after has been pushed into his hands.
You actually like Tavros a lot. You admire the way he doesn’t give up, the way, while he lets Vriska push him around to her heart’s content, he never really lets her win. You like that there’s something tough and steely filling him up, like a layer beneath his skin in the place of muscle or fat.
But right now you would smash his head between two rocks if you thought you could get away with it.
The middle of a public park is really not a good place to realise you’re either a latent serial killer or deeply in love with your pseudo-brother.

Your name is Dave Strider, officially, on all the documents, and you are thirteen years old. You picked yourself out a birthday, close to Christmas so Jamie would have to pull it double-time on your presents in the month of December.
And yeah, you’ve graduated from calling him ‘Dadbert’ to calling him by his full name, like an adult or something. You’re doing a lot of adult things lately. Like giving up on that crush on Tavros. That was fun while it lasted.
“Also kinda like having a saw blade on my heart strings, but whatever. It’s over. We’re done now.” Roxy strikes what she calls a ‘classic pose’, touching the tip of her pen to her lips and leaning back into her chair. If she were in her professional outfits, you would feel intimidated. But she’s given up on those black pencil skirts or pressed black trousers, and on the crisp white blouses. On the
professional setting entirely, in fact. The meetings happen once a fortnight in her living room now. Afterwards, she generally makes you come out to help her with her weekly shop. Not at all like she’s just coaxed you into spilling some of your darker secrets with her wizardly mind magic. Casual as fuck. Mother and son. Older-ass big sister, little brother.

She said she moved them here because she wanted to wear her sweaters and her baggy tracksuits on the comfort of her own saggy, second-hand couch. You know it’s just because here she can draw the blinds and lock the doors and let you push your wings out of the slits that you have in the backs of some of your shirts.

“Did you ever think about telling him about your wings?”

You snort before you can stop yourself “Nah. Never. Well, no more than I’ve ever thought about telling the others. Tavros was…I don’t know. He was way up there in my head whenever I thought about my friends, but after a while…it just kinda hurt too much to think about him.”

“Hurt like what?” she makes a claw over her chest, miming as if she is tugging her heart out “Like a hollow feeling?”

“No. More like full of glass.”

Roxy leans back even further with a grin “I can tell you that’s a perfectly normal feeling. Heart-break, honey, you’re heart-broken. You liked him a lot.”

“Nah. It was just fun.”

You’re lying and she can tell, but she doesn’t press the issue.

It was fun, for a while. But nothing ever stays fun for you for very long. John is normally the one who makes sure that the fun lasts as long as it possibly can, but this time? You’re not sure.

He wasn’t behind it. He couldn’t get used to it. He didn’t want to hear about it and you knew it had nothing to do with the fact that it was two boys together.

Because John didn’t like it, it started to go sour for you.

“So what did John think about that?”

Jesus, does Roxy have mind-reading goggles on or something?

“I don’t know. We don’t talk about shit like that very much.”

“Why do you think that is?”

You shrug “Just not that much to talk about.”

“Tavros and John have been having a hard time getting along recently,” she inspects her painted nails casually, as if she has some notes written on them “Any ideas?”

“They must be vying for the hallowed title of King Nerd. I don’t know.”

“Are you sure?”

Propping your elbows on your knees, you lean forward in the chair “Oh wait, something just occurred to me. Maybe John’ desperately in love with Tavros. It breaks his heart to see Tavros gallivanting around with his almost-brother, so the love has curdled. Like poison in his sweet little heart. The love was Wormtongue whispering foul thoughts into his mind until one day he could take it no more and turned bitchy.”

The front door thumps open and a breeze whistles through the hall.

You and Roxy snap to attention and say in unison “Welcome home Nepeta.”

Nepeta pads into the living room with one shoe on and an armful of brown-paper bag and groceries. She throws up her free hand in front of her face, her keys jangling “I am not here. Continue with your brain science.”

When you really think about it, the odds of the two officers who have taken it upon them to look after you finding that the suitable therapist just so happened to be Nepeta’s housemate-cum-girlfriend are just too stupid to even think about. It’s a conspiracy, definitely.

But at least it’s a conspiracy in your favour, for once.

Your name is John Egbert and you’re fourteen years old.

You’re packed into the backseat of the car with all the snacks and Dave’s stack of books, half of which are borrowed from Rose. He’s reading two of them right now. He gets through one chapter then thumps the book against your leg, and you pass him the other. The two of you aren’t looking at
each other right now. After one of the bad nights, it’s hard to look at each other. 
You and Dave are close. You were a little bit closer than is conventionally appropriate last night. 
That obnoxious voice wanted you to run in there the second you heard Dave’s sobs starting up again. It was unnerving- you haven’t heard him crying like that since you were twelve. You figured he used up most of his tears in that first, horrible summer. 
The way you reacted to it was almost predatory. Dave was down, hurting. You could rush to his side and cuddle up to him all you wanted and call it comfort. Of course, it would have been mostly with the intention to comfort the living hell out of him. Dave’s still your friend, no matter what you feel for him. You don’t want him to ever have to be in pain. 
But you also really want to kiss him. 
Thankfully, you were responsible. You didn’t try anything funny. You didn’t reach for any dangerous zones or push any of the physical boundaries that have been established in plenty of hours of rough-housing. About two minutes after you heard him start, you slipped quietly across the landing and took your time shutting his door once you were inside so your father wouldn’t hear. Dave kept his back to you for the first few minutes. Eventually, he turned over and into your arms, planting his wet face into the curve of your neck. 
Experience has taught you that Dave doesn’t like to be made to talk during these bad, bad moments. You just lay there and held him and watched the shadows the moonlight cast climb over the walls and tried to imagine what kind of angel or demon could have made him. 
And now you’re in the car, with your dad, as a family again. Dave is not your boyfriend and he never will be, no matter how badly you want him to be. You’ll have to be content to watch him from the backseat. 
He’s somehow managing the impossible task of reading two books and talking to your dad at the same time. 
“I can never take a job that wants a medical exam. And I can never ever get stabbed on the streets. In fact, I can’t even get on an airplane. I figure I’m destined to be trapped in this town forever anyway.” Your dad grins impishly “Oh come on, we both know you could outstrip an airplane.” He’s done it before. You were afraid he’d never come back. It took him two days to get back home. Neither you or your father slept at all during that time. And neither of you said a word to reprimand him when he strolled back in at the crack of dawn on what was to be the third day. “Alright, so I can go wherever I want until the satellites pick me up. The world is not ready for a Superman, Jamie, they will shoot me dead and call me a Russia bogey.” “Believe me, if that happened, I’d tear down the institution with my bare hands. And I’d have a lot of help. What do you think Washington would look like after a visit from Karkat?” “Like the set of a zombie flick. Just death upon death, Jamie, no true justice.” “But vengeance is good.” “You shouldn’t be teaching me that! You’re an adult, man! Set the example! In fact, no, no I can’t deal with this sinister pressure on my young, impressionable mind. It’s probably your fault I’m gay in the first place y’know.” “Whoops. Well, the damage is done already, hey? Plenty of people live with this condition.” At this point they burst into slightly hysterical laughter and slap each other good-naturedly on the shoulder. “Pull over,” you say “I’m gonna puke.”
Your name is Dave Strider and you're fifteen years old.  
His name is Tavros Nitram and he's only a few months shy of his sixteenth birthday. He hasn't walked in about six years. Watching him lift himself out of his chair with the gargantuan effort he is making, pushing the hands aside that come to help him, you're actually watching somebody stand up and walk on their own for the first time since he was ten years old.  
Ok, that's kind of dramatic. Obviously, there were months of physiotherapy that he hasn't let you, his friends, watch or visit with him. Tavros isn't just springing out of his chair like he touched Jesus. This is the fruit of months of stress and sweat and hard on his part to make the prosthetic legs work. From the waist down, Tavros is metal. His new legs begin just beneath his hips, made of a light, dull chrome that he refused to have disguised under artificial tissue. When he walks, they make just the faintest sound of gears  
They're quite beautiful, actually, but you're trying to steer clear of that school of thought around Tavros. He is no longer yours to consider beautiful or attractive or appealing in anyway. That ship has sailed. Thirteen year old Dave staged a mutiny against himself, the crew of one, tossed himself off the plank into shark-infested waters and left the keys in the ignition for Gamzee.  
Still, you can't help but think there is really no other word for Tavros but that as he straightens up to his full, impressive height on his new legs and stretches his back out in the sun. Beautiful.  
His boyfriend thinks the same thing.  
Gamzee’s eyes are wet “Come here.”  
He opens his arms. Tavros makes the necessary five steps haltingly, glancing between his feet and his target with each step. The breath dries in your throat. If he falls, you're not going to be able to stop yourself from darting over to catch him. You and everybody else in the room. But he delivers himself to Gamzee’s arms without any difficulty.  
You never could have predicted that Tavros might be the same height as Gamzee. He isn’t in fact; he's actually a little bit taller. Your mind is officially blown. Out the back of your head, onto the floor, in a big, red smear to match your feathers.  
“Check y'all out,” Gamzee’s smile is so wide it must hurt “Ya look good.”  
Tavros smiles back at him “Better than in the wheelchair?”  
He shakes his head “Taller than in the wheelchair, babe.”  
Feferi bursts out into loud, honking tears. She attempts to muffle the noise in the front of Eridan’s shirt, but it only makes it more noticeable.  
You hear Karkat mutter “Oh fuck,” shortly before he buries his face in his elbow with a grimace of a smile. Rose has this look on her face that suggests she orchestrated the entire thing, to the point of sticking the legs on Tavros with her own damned hands. Kanaya’s arm is looped through hers and she has her head on Rose’s shoulder, like the moment is somehow romantic for anybody for Tavros and Gamzee. You guess it could be seen as romantic, if you didn’t know what it was like to be on the receiving ends of one of Tavros’s kisses, as Gamzee on the receiving end of a really good one right now. For you, it’s kinda like watching someone eat a sundae composed entirely of your
favourite flavour of ice cream.
Part of you is tempted to edge between them, to brush Gamzee off and say: “No, this is how you do it.”
You look away.
Sollux thinks you have turned to talk to him. He leans in with a dark expression, muttering “Of course her Royal Highness the Pirate Queen couldn’t be here for this.”
You shrug “I’m kinda glad she’s not. It’ll be shit tons more satisfying when Tav walks up to her for the first time and kicks her in the ovaries than her being here right now would be, right? What better way to say ‘fuck you and all your kin’ than to ruin her eggs so she can reproduce?”
Sollux laughs bitterly “Man, I am going to record that moment. Every time I feel like the world is too cruel to be a thing, I’ll play that video.”
He is then distracted by Eridan tugging on his sleeve. Eridan whispers something in his ear that makes Sol smile. He wipes a tear off Eridan’s cheek before it can make much progress, then licks it off his thumb. This enrages Eridan, who swears that he doesn’t like Tavros. He has spent most of the week leading up to this moment talking about how it’s kinda dramatic to make a big deal out of the whole ‘first steps’ thing when they have already happened behind your backs.
Obviously, he and Sollux have been talking about it in private. Of course they have been- they tell each other everything. Ever since they gave into the painfully obvious romantic tension that had been crackling between them since the first day of school, they have been all sweetness and light. They’re really working to fall out of the habit of fighting when something goes wrong between them, which is more than you can say for some couples.
Your hand creeps into your pocket, towards your phone. You draw it back. John can wait for the call. Right now, you want nothing more than for him to be here. Maybe, if things were different, you could be like Sollux and Eridan are. Or more likely, you’d be the Eridan to John’s Feferi, who sobbs on and on into Eridan’s shirt.
When Karkat materialises at your elbow, you are more than glad of the distraction.
“It’s weird.” he says.
Karkat hunches over with his hands in his pockets. Although no one has called him out on it, he is embarrassed to have tears in his eyes. Karkat has been one of the most vocal protesters every time Tavros confessed he felt like giving up- that his life was better lived from a wheelchair. Karkat and Tavros aren’t even best friends. It’s just that Karkat hates to watch other people fuck up as bad the way he watches himself fuck up all the time. Or so he says.
“ Weird to see him walk?”
“ Weird that he’s taller than Gamzee.”
That puts Tavros at about six foot two inches. You had no idea people get could so tall from wheelchairs. By now they have stopped kissing, so it is safe to look again. From this distance, you can only watch their lips move and guess at what they are saying. Gamzee smiles wider and harder with every second that goes by, planting little kisses on Tavros’s cheeks and forehead.
Again, your hand is drawn into your pocket. And again, you pull it away. Let John be the one to call. Or maybe you’ll ignore him today. You’ve got to punish him somehow for missing this.
Karkat is thinking along the same lines “I don’t get why John isn’t here. He’s not so pissy with Tav that he’d miss this…is he?”
“I don’t know. I live with the man, not in his head.”
“Yeah, but John talks to you more than he talks to me,” retorts Karkat “You’re seriously telling me that you didn’t ask John at all why he wasn’t gonna come before you came down here?”
You lie smoothly “Course. Ripped his head off, but he didn’t wanna say.”
Karkat grumbles under his breath.
Saying that wasn’t really a lie- you did grill John, but just not in a way that anyone else would recognise as asking a question. You and John have known each other for a long time. Every time you talk to him, you’re aware of what he has done for you. Call it insecure, but it’s hard to gather the courage to criticise the guy who saved you from certain death. By now, it’s your basic right to treat him like a brother or at least a super close friend.
He is one of them. You’re just not sure which.
You want to tell this to Karkat. You want to tell Karkat how weird and distant John is these days. He acts like he lives on a private island, like you and Jamie are just obnoxious visitors whose presence he must suffer for only a few days. If you were the kind of person who went around emoting all over his friends, you would tell Karkat things about John that would make his white hair curl.
“Karkat?”
“What.”
“Good job.”
He looks up at you in confusion “What, am I the one rediscovering the miracle of walking?”
You elbow him in the shoulder “Good job for nagging Tav. Who knows? Maybe your bullshit did him some good along the way. He might actually have stopped if it weren’t for the shrimp cheerleader in his corner.”
Scoffing, he swats you on the arm “Don’t try to pin this miracle on me, Dave. It’s your fault too. You were just as supportive as I was.”
You and Karkat spend a few minutes smacking each other until Gamzee and Tavros finally break apart.
“Dave.” says Tavros.
Immediately, you plunge both of your hands into your pockets and slump your shoulders, not caring that Karkat manages to land another blow. Leaning heavily on Gamzee, Tavros makes it over to you.
For a moment, the two of you stand in front of each other. He’s taller than you. Not by that much, mathematically speaking, but the few inches of difference are miles to you.
You remember the last time you stood this close. You remember when you had to stoop to kiss him. You swear to God, you’re about to roll up onto your heels to reach his lips before you remember he belongs to another man now. It’s a good thing your hands are fists in your pockets, otherwise it is completely likely you would have wound them around his neck and brought him in for a kiss.
Yeah, that would have been so bad it doesn’t even register on the ‘not ok’ spectrum.
“You’re pretty fucking tall.”
Tavros laughs. Gamzee and Karkat exchange a glance, as if to say ‘isn’t Dave pathetic?’
“I’m as surprised as you are,” admits Tavros “I mean I know I have long legs, but, um, I just didn’t exactly, um…expect this kind of result.”
“How do they feel?”
“They feel good.” his smile says it all “They feel really good.”
“Then of course, there is the important question.”
His face darkens “Yeah…uh, I figured I’d just kick Vriska when I next see her.”
“Good plan, man, but that’s not what I mean.”
You gesture for him to lean in closer. Gamzee’s basic expression of permanent, slightly dazed contentment breaks just long enough to fix you with a dirty look that makes it all the sweeter to wind your arm around Tav’s shoulder and whisper: “Are you gonna wear pants with those?”
“Oh for- Dave!” he laughs again “Yes! Yes of course I am! I’ve still got the, the essentials, that need the covering.”
At the moment, he is wearing a pair of shorts that stop well above the knee. It answers a question which might have bothered you in the future as bionic legs became more common- are you physically attracted to them?
You feel you can safely answer with a resounding ‘OH FUCK YES!!’ now that you have seen Tavros.
The others close in, full of congratulations and compliments. Feferi peels herself away from Eridan long enough to switch to the front of Tavros’s shirt, which she promptly soaks as well. Both Kanaya and Rose lean around Feferi to kiss him on the cheek. Kanaya tells him he’s going to bring prosthetic limbs into vogue. Rose offers her services as a counsellor, should he ever feel the need to talk about some the blackest, most painful secrets he might have simmering in the depths of his soul. Eridan has nothing mean to say, for a change, and tells Tavros he deserves this. Sollux welcomes him to the same lofty height range, telling him that he’ll feel light-
headed at this altitude for a few days. Karkat opts for a simple thump on the arm.
“I knew you could do it,” he says simply “And you did it. Whoop-de-fucking-doo.”
Sollux pulls him into a headlock and grinds his knuckles into Karkat’s pale head “A compliment
from Karkat! Wow, this really is a day of miracles!”
As they carry on, you have taken a few steps back and planted your back against the wall. On auto-
piot, your hand has dialled John’s number. It is ringing in your hand.
Don’t you fucking tough the phone Egbert, you think furiously, don’t touch the phone.
He picks up after two rings.
“What, Dave?” his voice is muffled in your pocket, but you can still hear the bitterness, the
exhaustion in his tone.
Your bring the phone to your ear “Tavros is walking.”
When he next speaks, his voice sounds thick “Send me a picture.”
You end the call without another word. The picture you send John shows Tavros in the centre of
your friends, wearing Feferi like a scarf and Gamzee like a jacket. John can’t see his legs from this
shot, but the fact that he is standing taller than most of the others and grinning like he just had the
moon handed to him should be enough to get the message across.
As you’re sending the picture, Tavros catches your eye. His smile doesn’t falter for a second, but a
shadow passes through his eyes. You know what he wants. He’s not getting it either.
Tavros has had his miracle successfully. Maybe one day you will finally show him and the others
what makes you draw away when they want a hug, change in a separate stall for sports or miss it
entirely, what has made you reject every single invitation that involved a trip to the ocean or by
plane.
It sure as shit isn’t going to be today.
John calls back not too long after this.
“He looks good.” his voice is soft and dull.
“Course he’s good. The man just got his legs back. It’s cloud nine up in here, dude.”
“I should text him.”
“No,” you say slowly “You should come down here and talk to him. C’mon. We’re all at his place,
except for the obvious. Just turn up and say hey.”
“I…I can’t.”
“I’ll protect you from Vriska.”
He snorts “I don’t need to be protected from Vriska, thanks.”
You bite the inside of your cheek, forcing foul words back down your throat.
“Dave?”
Some of them don’t make it all the way down “What the fuck is wrong with you?”
“I don’t know.”
“Well that’s a real shitty reason to stay away from Tav.”
“I don’t know Dave.”
“Are you pissed because you’re in love with him or something?”
He sputters and coughs on the other end of the phone for a minute “What the actual fuck, David?
You think I’m in love with- what? What even? No. I’m not in love with anyone!”
“Except for Vriska,” you correct.
He swears explosively “Of course except for Vriska! God, get off my back.”
“No, I will not. One of your childhood friends just got the last kink worked out of his crippled back
and he’s standing and you’re not here. That’s really shitty, John.”
“I’m not in love with him,” he repeats sullen, helpless “I’m just…I can’t.”
You take a deep breath, willing yourself to be stronger “You’ll see him at school on Monday.”
“I’m not going to school on Monday.”
A ragged sigh drags itself out of your throat, no doubt filling John’s end of the connection with a
bluster of static “Why not? Did the house spontaneously relocate? Is there a moat filled with
alligators and lawyers preventing you from leaving or seeking help? Is there a nest of wasps lurking
in the ceiling of your room so you absolutely cannot move a fucking inch, lest you summon their
silent, venomous wrath? Throw me bone here, John, or else my imagination will go wilder places.” He is silent for a moment.

When he finally speaks, you are not surprised to hear that familiar, quiet anger in his voice “I’m sick of keeping secrets. Tavros is on his feet, you should be on your wings.”

Immediately, you fall back on the old excuses “You know that’s not safe.”

“And you know that’s not fair. They love you, Dave, they won’t give a shit. Hell, Gamzee might have a little existential crisis with proof of some kind of beyond wiggling its ass under his nose, but who the fuck cares? Give him some ice cream, a pat on the back and a punch in the nose and he’ll be turning spiritual cartwheels again.”

“Jesus, John, you sound like me.”

“Stop trying to pull me off track! Listen, it’s not fair that I have—”

“John, dear, you’re missing the fucking point. This is about Tavros Nitram having legs again, not all the deliciously dark secret poor old John Egbert has to keep plugged up in his mouth with those goofy teeth.”

You hear him sigh and know you have won “What the fuck do you want me from me, Dave? An apology?”

“I want you to get your buck-toothed ass over here and tell your friend you love him. Platonically. And come up with the best excuse possible for not being here right now. In fact, go to the fort and roll around in the mud puddle by the stream. Stick some leaves in your hair then run over here. You can say you got jumped by the Sasquatch and you’ll look the part too.”

“I’m hanging up.”

“You do that and your ass is toast when I get home. Sword-speared, flame Thrower roasted toast.”

He hangs up.

Sighing in disgust, you drop your phone back into your pocket. Fuck John and fuck his island life.

You’re going to lick something he loves and presses to his face all the time, and you will laugh when he contracts whatever kind of deadly-ass avian flu strains you’re carrying.

Somehow, no one else noticed your power-struggle over in the corner. Granted, you kept your voice quiet so as not to draw attention to you. To do that would to be permission to call John out on his bullshitery. As much as you hate John right now, you don’t want to bash him. Neither do the others, you bet, even though they’re all probably as mad at John as you are right now.

Tavros withdraws his ringing phone from his pocket “Oh, hey John.”

Everyone goes quiet at once, like a switch was flicked.

“No…no, it’s, uh, it’s alright. Nothing that…remarkable…um, yeah. Yeah, I know.”

Tavros glances at you suspiciously. You hold your hands up in a gesture of surrender to show that you had no hand in orchestrating this.

“Tell him he’s an asshole,” suggests Sollux.

“They feel fine.” says Tavros “Great, actually. Like they’ve always been a, uh, a part of my body.”

“Tell him his legs had better be broken,” adds Karkat “No, scratch that, tell him even if he had shards of his bones sticking out of his legs from ankle to ass he should have crawled on his belly. Tell him he better not be wearing a scarf the next time I see him, or I cannot and will not be held accountable for whatever acts of violence I may perpet—”

Gamzee covers his mouth and shushes him amicably.

“He says he’s sorry,” reports Tavros “He said he had a fainting spell just after Dave left.”

“Sounds like a shitty excuse for an excuse—” Karkat manages around Gamzee’s fingers before Gamzee turns his face and pushes it into his jacket, drowning the rest of his protests.

Eridan rolls his eyes and pushes his thick glasses up the bridge of his nose “I used that excuse to duck a date once. It’s a terrible excuse.”

At once, kind of like they’re sharing a hive mind or something, Eridan and Sollux look at you. Even Feferi plucks her puffy face from Tavros’s damp shoulder to stare at you.

The spotlight is uncomfortable “He didn’t exactly look peachy when I left,” you lie “It’s probably true.”

“No, that’s fine. I’ll see you on Monday? Oh, really? Oh, um, no I’m fine with that. Ok. Ok…see
“What did he say?” ask Rose and Sollux in unison.
Tavros blinks, taken aback “Uh, he said he’s sorry he hasn’t made it so far, but that he’ll drive me to my doctor’s appointment at 2.”
Feferi lifts her glasses to wipe her reddened eyes “To make up for it?” she sniffs hard “Does anyone have a tissue?”
Kanaya presses an unopened packet of tissues into her hand. She has a never ending supply of those, painkillers, plasters and Neosporin. The title as the group’s ‘Mom’ is a hard-earned, well-deserved trophy to her.
Tavros shrugs “Yeah, I guess to make up for it.”
“I’m still goin’,” says Gamzee “Keep him company, or some shit.”
“I think I need to sit down.” says Tavros.
He is immediately offered five different chairs. Laughing, he makes his way to the couch and lowers himself carefully.
You need to get out of here, or you’re going to sit in his lap and ask for him for Christmas.
“Whoa, I better go make sure he isn’t twitching in a puddle of his own drool or something. Kiss me goodbye, Tavros.”
Tavros waves “See you later Dave.”
The others say something similar. Karkat encourages you to put the fear of God into John.
When you leave the house, a weight of about five tonnes drops out of your chest.
You can fly. You’re getting around to that one.
Even though your wings are itching underneath the binder by now, you walk all the way home. You need the extra time to think about John. Or you want it, at least, because by the time you round reach the end of your block and the forest has started off to the right of the path, you’re no closer to having a clue about what to do about that boy.
Jamie’s car isn’t in the driveway, of course, as the working day has only just begun. Tavros waited until spring break to get back on his feet. Helping him navigate his familiar city on a pair of working legs are what your spring break plans consist of. You’re not about to let John back out of something he was all for until this morning because he decided to pitch a fit at the moment of truth.
The moment the door is shut behind you, you call out “Johnathan James Egbert you are in so much fucking trouble.”
You’re not sure if your serious tone is supposed to be ironic, or if you’re really that mad. Either way, it surprises you to hear it coming out of you.
He makes no attempt to hide. He lies on the couch with a pillow over his face, his hands folded neatly on his stomach. And he doesn’t look at you.
Now that you stand over him, you find you don’t have the energy to berate him the way he deserves.
“I don’t get it.”
“What?” he mutters, muffled by the pillow.
“I don’t get any of it.”
“What’s to get?”
“You’re being an asshole. If you’re gonna get all offended about me complaining about whatever the hell it is that has tortured you so much you can’t be bothered to get up and support your friend, at least put on some goddamned pants.”
John turns on his front and places the pillow over his butt, which is covered only by his boxers.
You give up “I give the fuck up. Enjoy this, this…this sulk. I’m going to fly.”
“You just said to me it’s not safe.”
“It isn’t safe for me to be in the same atmosphere as your sorry ass right now. You had better make good on that promise to take Tav to the doctor’s.”
“I will. Go, fly already.”
You glare at him, tearing off your jacket “I might not come back.”
“Oh yeah? Where will you get your apple juice then, Dave?”

you later.”
“Oh just fuck off.”
No one can get under your skin as fast and as deep as John. Throwing the back door open, you stomp across the field, breaking into a run as you enter the forest. What a shit. He is such a shit. He’s such a shitty shit and you can’t understand how the guy skulking on the couch could possibly be the same person as that boy that snatched you away from death.
You spread your wings.
It begins (the bad stuff, specifically)

Chapter Notes

So I'm about to move house. The wifi service we use is notoriously casual about getting their butts in gear to re-install wifi, so I would be going without for 10 days under normal circumstances. Fortunately, I'm about to zip off to a far-away land to visit the old Grandfolk. They've got wifi, as well as flat-screens and a Wii and all sorts of swag that over 80's normally don't hold with. Whoopee. Expect another update in about, oh, a week and a bit? Apologies for the pause.

Your name is John Egbert and you’re extremely conflicted right now. The moment Dave tears out of the house, you throw off the pillow and look after him. He won’t look back (he never looks back) if you don’t call out to him. A dozen apologies and explanations teeter on the tip of your tongue. What’s more, you know he will accept them. They are legitimate, understandable reasons for being the jackass that you’re being today. He’ll forgive you in that sullen, quiet way of his. The glare behind his shades will soften. In a moment, he’ll come to the couch with a tub of ice cream and order you to put in something bland, clichéd and full of explosions. After a few minutes, he’ll start complaining about what a bitch that Vriska can be and how badly you need to dump her so she can concentrate all her evil on getting her shit shorted out.

Dave’s wings push free from their bindings, through the slots in the back of his shirt. That was your idea. Dave retorted that he’d never have the occasion to put his wings out, so you sneaked into his room while he was at school and cut the slots into five of his shirts for him. Now, on cold days when he knows he won’t have to remove the outer-layer, he wears those shirts underneath his hoodies and jackets.

As always, you’re struck breathless by the sight of him. Redder than anything you’ve ever seen, totally impossible and completely beautiful.

You’ve missed your moment. With one powerful stroke, he lifts himself from the ground and disappears over the tree-tops.

“Sorry, Dave,” you mutter “Vriska told me to stay home.”

You get up and snatch his discarded hoodie from the floor. Settling back on the couch, you fold it up neatly and hug it close to your chest. You gross yourself out when you get like this. It’s getting more frequent; this desperate longing that makes you want to hold him close, that makes your mouth itch every time you look at him or hear his voice.

If Dave knew how often you sat around wearing or clutching his jackets to feel close to him, he’d probably move in with Equius.

“Oh shit,” you feel a lump in his pocket and extract his phone “Great, Dave, now how am I going to scream for help if I get attacked?”

Looking at your phone reminds you with a pang of panic and guilt that you should be talking to Vriska right now. Ever since Tavros told the group he had given into his father and brother’s urgings and was going to get fitted with those high-tech prosthetics the media raves about, Vriska has been in a sulk.

She still stands by her story of the accident. Tavros was too close to the edge. She thumped him in the shoulder all friendly-like, not realising how close to the edge he was. He over-balanced and that was the end of his spine. You thought she might tell you, at the start of the relationship, because she was more willing to tell you things she would never say to anyone else now that she had you firmly
situated in the ‘boyfriend’ slot.

She has told you things like what she wants to do when she grows up (she’ll move away from her mother as fast as she can and join a band of pirates preying on the corrupt in international waters), and what she was scared of when she was little (of men in dark coats stealing her from her room in the middle of the afternoon, in plain sight), and what has made her cry most recently (every single time Mufasa dies, she has to reach for the tissues). She has told you everything but the one thing you actually want to hear from her mouth.

Sure, it’s kinda touching that Vriska will share these things with you, but honestly? You’re not very interested in her. She is a convenient distraction from the real object of your affections. You’re well aware this is extremely scummy and two-faced on your part- at least at the beginning, this worried you. As you have grown a little older, the way a relationship ages people, you have come to realise Vriska uses you to pass the time as well. The two of you are more like strangers stranded in an elevator who swap life stories because they know they will never see the other one again when the box starts to move up or down again.

That’s why you don’t kiss much. Or hold hands. Why you’ve never even talked about going further. Having said this, Vriska does expect you to act certain ways. She expects you to agree with her, because conflict sprung from disagreements of opinions are boring when there are inherent truths to wage wars over, she says. Your Saturdays are permanently reserved for her whims, so you can’t make plans with anyone from your friends to your family without what you think of as the ‘be gone’ text she’ll send as permission in the mornings, if she has decided your services are not needed.

It was the lack of that be-gone text this morning that has rooted you to the couch. Vriska is not abusive. Not in the conventional sense of belt buckles and knuckles on soft flesh, or the screams and the verbal beatings that you think of when you hear the word. She’s more like that scrawny, pale dude from the second ‘Lord of the Rings’ movie that was messing with Eowyn’s uncle.

As far as you’re concerned, you’re already half way to being that withered, wasted wreck of a guy propped up in his throne. You were hoping Dave would play the part of Gandalf, to charge in and swat Worm-tongue away with his white wizard/red bird magic, but you know that’s probably not going to happen.

You should be the one to end it with Vriska.

There is a wealth of reasons to send the break-up text, most of which Vriska could hardly object to. But the moment you wave goodbye to Vriska as your official girlfriend, you open the floodgates. You know you won’t be able to resist your attraction to Dave for much longer. You will eventually say something or, God forbid, do something to give yourself away and whatever Hell happens after that will happen no matter how you try to stop it.

Glancing at the clock, your heart sinks when you realise there are three hours between you and the time you promised to pick up Tavros. What the hell do you do with yourself until then? A shitty movie sounds like the kind of thing you need right now.

After a brief internal conflict, you tug on the hoodie and scoot over to your embarrassingly expansive collection of Nicolas Cage movies. Because you’re not in the mood for complete craziness, you stick in ‘Face/off’. This will be about the 30th time you have seen it, the 15th time you have seen it without Dave. His tolerance of your insistence on watching terrible movies over and over again is both amazing and concerning, as you think this much exposure to terrible art may have deadened him on the inside.

The movie is really just to fill your brain up with some idle chatter and familiar drama. The last thing you want to do right now is be free to let your imagination run away with you.

So you sit there and watch the movie you have seen 30 times. Occasionally, you mouth some of the cheesier dialogue. The best stunts bring a smile to your face. The biggest explosions make you chuckle and grin. You’re about to get properly lost in the movie when a crash from the upstairs jerks you back to reality.

Your heart skips a beat. With an imagination fuelled by a diet of horror movies and teenaged paranoia, you’re half certain already that is a serial killer lurking under your bed or extricating themselves from your closet (it must be hard to move in there with your sexuality hogging all the
“Dave’s stacking his stuff again.” you tell yourself “One of the CD towers fell over.”

Dave is less concerned about clutter than the average human. One of the few animal instincts that have edged their way into his behaviour is his instinct to live in a kind of nest. The others are far less innocent, like his penchant for eating small animals with his bare hands.

His books and CDs and other Strider-paraphernalia live in neat-ish stacks on the floor. He uses his bookshelves to hold his folded clothes. His bed is always a tangled mess, and you can pretty much see where he was curled up when he slept in the night.

Thanks to this unusual living arrangement, things are forever slipping and falling and scaring the daylights out of you when you’re at home.

You had better go up to make sure whatever fell isn’t something that will leak.

Just in case, you call for the cat. The family cat, named Godcat for the most frequent exclamation aimed at her (she is famous for knocking things over and always earns a ‘God, cat!’), likes to curl up in Dave’s bed, so she might just be wreaking her usual havoc on his possessions.

“Godcat?” you call “Are you breaking stuff again?”

A mew comes from downstairs- her, answering to her name from the kitchen.

You become a little more freaked out with every step. Lucky for you, your phone is in your pocket where it belongs and Equius or Nepeta are only a quick number away, if it does turn out to be something you need police support for. Equius and Nepeta are used to calls from you when you’re home alone with a horror movie playing. Hopefully they won’t confuse actual murder with your fear of getting murdered, because that would be an embarrassing way to die.

The door to Dave’s room is closed. He never leaves it open, unlike you. As usual, your door gapes onto your room, revealing a mess that is second to Dave’s, but impressive in its own right. You make a mental note to go right in there and clean up if this turns out to be the usual false alarm (which it will, you know).

You push the door open. A cool breeze washes over you, bringing the scent of a storm with it.

Swearing, you push against a couple of books on the floor and curse Dave for leaving his window open. Curse him for leaving in general- those storm clouds are heavy and the threat of rain and thunder is not idle. When you finally get the door open, you discover the window is not open. It has been broken open.

Somehow, you missed the crash of breaking glass. The stone that did it lies on the floor, between the piles of books it toppled. Fragments of glass are scattered all over the place. Jagged pieces hang in the window-frame.

“What the fuck?”

You negotiate your way through the towers of Dave’s stuff over to the window. It only occurs to you that standing in front of a window freshly broken by a large rock is not a smart place to be when you get there. Fortunately for you, whoever did it is no longer there. The sidewalk is empty.

You’re suddenly horribly aware of how exposed the house is.

You live at the end of the street, backing onto the forest. The nearest house is beyond shouting distance. The forest is expansive and extends all the way to the mountain range behind your town, which is hundreds of miles long and famous for the killers that supposedly stalk the trails. Alright, so you’ve lived in this town all your life and never seen a single thing in all the time you played in the forest to indicate foul play (the obvious and glaring exception being Dave’s existence), but that doesn’t overrule the possibility that you are about to be murdered by one of those rumoured killers.

You grab your phone and creep downstairs. The backdoor is unlocked for Dave. One of the windows in the living room is open for Dave. There is a spare key for the front door under a flowerpot for Dave.

You are wide open to attack.

Equius picks up after two rings “How is Tavros?”

“I haven’t seen him yet.” you say shortly “Listen, I-”

Equius cuts across you, his voice sharp “Why not? What was of such extreme importance that it held you back from.”
“Cut it out, I got enough of that from Dave.”
“As you should,” he says frostily “I hope you’re pinned underneath a box-a-lanche again, like you were when you missed your finals last year.”
“Somebody tossed a rock through the window.”
He is quiet for a moment.
Then: “I’m on my way. Stay away from the other windows. Lock the doors. Also, did the rock have a note of any kind on it?”
“What, you mean like wrapped around it?”
“Of any kind. Carving, paper note, whatever.”
“Have they found us?”
You think he has hung up, the silence lasts so long. You have the time to close that window, your heart in your mouth all the way there, as your eyes dart and search for an unfamiliar figure in the yard.
“What do you know about them?”
Something in his tone makes you shiver “There’s a ‘them’?”
“So you don’t know anything.” his relief is obvious and frightening “Where is Dave right now?”
“What’s there to know? I mean, I was talking about the people that made….made Dave….was he made?”
“John, I need to know where Dave is.”
“Why are you talking about this like you know stuff? Equius, tell me what the hell is going on! Did someone actually make Dave? What is he, a genetic experiment or an alien or…or what?”
“John!” he snaps.
You flinch, knowing what he looks like when he’s angry. Asian Terminator all the way “He’s in the forest, alright? He’s brooding! He’s being brooding and dark and intense and I think I’m gonna die!”
“Don’t be silly. You’re not going to die. I’m hanging up,” he says “Call Nepeta and stay on the line with her until I get there. I should be over in ten minutes.”
You manage to squeeze in one final protest :“Fuck your mysteriousness!” before the line goes dead.
The absence of Equius’s reassuring voice in your ear is like a ringing. Your stomach is cold with dread.
Was he scared for you? The Equius you know is rarely frightened by anything, except for the soaring price of gasoline and the demonization of Islam by the media. As a police officer, he’s grappled with criminals and minds that no amount of episodes of ‘Criminal Minds’ could prepare you to deal with.
When Equius is scared, either some kind of anti-Islam cult is on the move, or something very, very bad is going to happen.
With these thoughts in your mind, you approach the front door. The hallway has never seemed longer. Your hand shakes slightly as you call Nepeta. By the time you finally get to the front door, she has yet to pick up. You pause in front of the door and listen for signs that there is anyone on the porch.
How would you know? The window in the door is at the very top so you can only see the tops of heads, and there is nothing there. A quick glance through the peephole reveals nothing either. Still, you have to inspire yourself to open the door and grab the key from under the pot. You try thinking of how brave Nicolas Cage is in his movies- he never quakes, even when pitted against the worst kind of enemies (except for alcohol in that one movie you can’t make it through without tissues and a pillow to squeeze). That fails to work, however, since you know he’s just an actor.
You try thinking of how brave Tavros is being today. If he can get out of his wheelchair and walk, you can certainly open the front door of your own house and retrieve a key from your own porch. This would have worked if you are not assailed by a huge wave of guilt at the mere thought of Tavros. You should have been there today. Hang what Vriska things. In fact, just hang Vriska in general. The price you pay for peace of mind- not even that, just for a distraction from Dave- is far too high for what it is really worth.
“I should break up with Vriska.”
Nepeta answers in your ear, startling you “That’s what we all think, honey. Makes me glad to know that you think so too. Eq texted me about it, by the way…do you see anyone?”

“No. I’m just about to go outside and get the key from the porch.”

Nepeta sucks in a sharp breath “Don’t do that! Listen, I want you to go upstairs and lock yourself in your room.”

You open the front door just a crack. Your hand darts out, over-turns the pot and snatches the key from there.

Outside, as if condemning your actions, thunder booms. Rain starts to fall on cue, in great, lashing sheets. God, you wish Dave had taken his phone. How is he going to get back to you in this weather?

“John,” says Nepeta “What are you doing?”

The front door is pulled shut by the wind before you can shut it yourself. The resulting crash makes you flinch, but no giant killer comes tearing down the hall in answer to the noise, which is good.

You twist the key in the lock “I got the key.”

“John, if you were a bunny in the forest you would have died young. Too young to have babies… no, Roxy, he’d just get the knife turned on him.”

You gulp “What?”

“Roxy wants you to get a knife from the kitchen to defend yourself. Don’t listen to her. She’s been watching a marathon of ‘Daredevil’. She thinks you’ll become some kind of superhero if you’re scared enough to go berserkers.”

You scuttle to the back door, using the last of your courage, and lock it tight, going as far to push a chair underneath the handle. That’s it. That’s all you can do. There are too many windows and you’ve seen too many horror movies to not know where this is going.

You make tracks to your room, grabbing the cat from the kitchen counter on the way, and lock the door tight behind you. Exhausted, you lie back on your bed and put the cat on your stomach. Nepeta fills your ear with chatter as the rain pours down outside. The hoodie seems to grow tighter and tighter around your body with every moment Dave is gone. He has to come back soon, right? He doesn’t mind getting wet in rain. His wings are waterproof and years of practice have made him a competent flier in storms. He can get back if he really wants to.

Eventually, Equius calls you to tell you he is outside. He says he wants to do a sweep of the area (those are the exact words he uses and it makes you giggle helplessly) before he comes in, which he will do using his own set of keys, so you’re not to trouble yourself to come downstairs until he is sure you will be safe.

You tell him you have heard nothing from the downstairs since you got up here. No strange noises, no footprints, and you have seen nothing through the window. Although it’s not like you were hanging around in front of it after the first rock.

You listen to his footsteps loop around the house. Several times, he pauses. Each time, you prepare yourself for a gunshot or a cry of pain. And each time, he moves on. When he finally does come upstairs, his face is troubled.

“I didn’t see anyone. Are you sure you didn’t see somebody when the rock was thrown?”

You nod “Are you sure? Like, not even a clue?”

“Not even a clue.”

You wish you were like Dave. He can kind of tell when Equius is lying- enough to be able to formulate some kind of clever reply that will trap him, force him to reveal a little more than he necessarily wants to reveal. You?

You haven’t got the foggiest idea if Eq is telling you the God’s honest truth or a big honking stinker. And it doesn’t matter either. Even if you could wring the information out of him, you doubt you’d know what to do with the truth.

“John, what are you doing for the rest of the day?”

“I’ve got to meet Tavros at 1:30. Taking him to the doctor’s.”

Equius’s eyebrows shoot up “I thought you were boycotting the miracle-boy.”

Prickling with indignation, you sit bolt up and send the cat soaring off of you “I am not boycotting
him! There’s…there’s extenuating circumstances!”
Equius rolls his eye and tosses your jacket at you “I’m impressed you know that word. You certainly
didn’t learn it from Nicolas Cage. C’mon, you’re coming with me.”
Your heart skips a beat “I can’t! What about Dave?”
“Dave is in the forest, yes?”
You nod.
“Then he’s perfectly fine. He has shelter and can hunt for himself.”
If Equius could have avoided mentioning Dave’s natural eating habits, you might have been able to
gather up the courage to wait for him. But the image of Dave returning, his footsteps muted by the
thunder until he is right behind you dripping with rain and gore, it forces you to your feet so fast you
nearly beat Equius out the door and to his cruiser.
You make one more, half-hearted attack on him once the engine is fired up and the car is pulling out
of the driveway.
“Are there people who want to hurt Dave?” you ask him seriously.
Equius does not answer. Instead, he fixes his eyes on some point along the darkening road that you
cannot see
Well that was the trip from hell. But now I'm with the Grandfolk and there are people trying to find Bigfoot on TV and it's all good. The good news is that during that massive break i got some time to get some good chapters done. Here's one of them.

Your name is Dave Strider and you’re beginning to regret running out on John. Not because you have stopped being mad at him. To forgive him, you will need to hear some heart-felt, stumbling apologies and have the visual aid of his puppy-eyes scrunched up with worry.

No, the reason your regret leaving the house and leaving John in such an uproar is because you haven’t been able to calm down yet. You’re a little too mad this time. A little madder than you should be. Something else has you stirred up, and it’s reached the stuff you try not to think about. The stuff you shove back to the deepest part of your mind where it festers and rots and only re-appears in your nightmares.

The animal part of you.

Right now, you really want to kill something. Your body does not recognise itself as the human with wings that you prefer to be. You catch yourself moving among the treetops as if your legs are the thick tail you can also have. Often when you look down, you see your legs have begun to dissolve into one another, getting covered in a smooth, reddish flesh that engulfs your clothes too without prejudice. It takes a great force of will to drive the flesh back down and make your legs separate again.

The tips of your fingers itch, as they do when you’re angry or scared, or most frequently when you want to hurt someone. The claws underneath the tips of your fingers burn like a bug bite, aching to come out and do some damage. As if to taunt you, the familiar sensation of hot blood pouring down your throat ghosts into place. Unless you focus very hard, it feels as if there are chunks of a tiny animal going down your throat in a slick of blood.

You don’t want to do this. Those Bible-thumpers that want to call your sexuality unnatural? They should see you, isolated in the forest in the heat of a storm and hunger. You go from abhorrent to certain eyes to that kind of universal demonic that’s too visceral and deep to put into horror movies for mass consumption. Once, you caught sight of yourself like this as a reflection in the stream, and you thought you looked a little bit like what that fear that keeps children rooted in bed after a nightmare might look like if it were feathered.

“The Devil has feathers,” you mutter, looking at your warping fingernails “And Hell is a bird’s nest.”

You have no idea where that came from, but it sounds like one of those faux-deep comments amateur poets leave on Mogwai videos on YouTube.

But it’s true. It really is true. It’s a damned good thing that the transformation doesn’t hurt. For you, it is as easy as taking off a jacket. As natural as a girl’s period, probably, since this is one of those moments that you can’t avoid, that happens at least once every month and are a fucking pain to deal with in the first stages.

As always, you can only fight it off for so long.

The rain had just begun to fall when you realised you were too mad to justify. The transformation is like that- it makes a mess of your emotional logic and bathes the world in the reds of your eyes, so everything drips with gore and drives you mad with hunger. You felt your willpower slip and flapped furiously, taking yourself away from the hiking trail you had been following at a leisurely pace. The rain slid off your bare back (you had cast away the shirt somewhere in the field, not
wanting it to get in your way), and the cold of the wind made you shiver. An uncomfortable, feverish heat began to emanate from your skin. Your skin steamed as the rain soaked you.

After you made it into the cover of the treetops, you folded your wings in and clutched the broad trunk of a tree. The real trouble started then.

Really, it’s not a transformation. You are simply acknowledging that other part of you that you deny so hard the rest of the time. Like the human in the werewolf, you are merely allowing the wolf to take the reins for a while.

But it still does not feel good. It feels natural, but not good. Your blood boils. Your eyes sear with the light of explosions behind your eyelids, from the force of blinking. Your teeth drip into one another to create a long, curved beak, the much more wicked instrument of a predator than your soft baby’s beak was when John found you. Everything beneath the waist fuses into one tail thick with muscle (you can even feel your manly parts changing, inverting to something concave and something coiled you never ever want to investigate) and your arms and wings melt into each other.

You still haven’t decided which part is the grossest. Really, none of it should feel gross or be gross, because this body is still your body. The mind that inhabits it is still yours, albeit somewhat morphed by the sharpening of your animal instincts and the dulling of your morality.

But there is a reason you have never let John or Jamie see you like this. God forbid that any of your friends should ever see this. You can speak with this throat, though your voice is pitched lower and unrecognisable. If Roxy ever saw you, she would have a veritable field-day with what you called her, assuming she survived the experience.

As usual, the first word out of your beak is: “Shit.”

You coil about the trunk of the tree, now able to wrap yourself all the way around its girth. Rain patters down through the canopy. You lift your sleek head up and allow the rain to wash over your feathers. The water-proofing prevents you from being water-logged, but the rain still manages to refresh.

“I forget why I hate this,” you say, although you don’t mean it.

You turn upside-down and creep down the trunk of the tree, like a big cat on the prowl. Since the first time you took on this body for a hunt, you have been trying to figure out what kind of creature your form was inspired from. Obviously, you’re a bird or a snake. But snakes strangle their prey and birds strike from far above.

You? You like to stalk and creep and tear your prey’s throat out, kind of like a bear or a lone wolf. There isn’t a single thing recorded that is like you. At least, on the records that are up for public consumption.

The claws that top your wings can be used for gripping, as hands. On hunts, your wings become arms.

Maybe you’re a dinosaur? Man, would you love to see the star-crossed couple dumb enough to consummate their attraction and produce a bastard like you. Mom- the bashful palaeontologist that made an amazing discovery that she couldn’t help but fall for. Dad- the dashing dino-man, capturing the hearts of modern ladies wherever you went.

All to make you. A gay freak with wings (which bit of that makes you a freak was up for debate) and a secret, evil identity that compels you to eat tiny animals.

For a while, you just enjoy being free again. Too many hours have been spent locked in that box your hosts call a house, and even more spent locked in the corpse you think of as your ‘normal’ body.

Nope. No time for that. No earthly concerns at all, because you’re not from the earth. You’re made for the skies and the treetops, and you only come down to remind the cute little critters of the woodland realm that there is death from above, as well as death on the ground.

“This is gonna be good,” you rasp “Very good.”

About twenty minutes later, you are done.
Not with the transformation, no sir. Nope, still gotta do that shit. This is just a brief lapse. The lapses are something you manage if you’re scared enough to force it all back in.

So this is what you have earned- to lie on your back for a few minutes, your wings spread; the gore puddled in your shallow stomach and hips, still too fresh on your chin to begin to dry. Pieces of a ragged felt are caught underneath your nails. As much as you hate the sensation, you haven’t got the energy to pick them out when you know that pelt will just be replaced by another soon.

Your breathing is laboured. Right now, you would like nothing better than to be at home on the couch between John and Jamie with some massacre of the arts playing loudly on the TV.

The ground is soft and wet beneath you, not yet to the point of becoming mud. That point is not that far off. In about half an hour more, you won’t be able to set foot on the forest floor without the fear of slipping. Of course, by that time you’ll be a snake from the waist down, and who ever heard of a snake that trips?

“John,” you croak “Find me.”

Your name is…
Your name is kinda…
What the fuck does it matter? Is there another one like you in the world?
Is there another thing like you anywhere, in dreams, nightmares or the fever dreams of whatever cruel mind imagined you in the first place? No, there is not. Whatever hand you were made by only made you.
They did not create you. No, you created yourself.
You took the seamless body and the sinew and the muscle and made of it a predator unlike anything that will ever exist or ever has. A predator that is, for all intents and purposes, prey until there is no need to hide anymore.

What is your name?
Who cares?

Your name is Dave Strider and you’re sure of it.

Fragments of flesh and muscles are caught in your teeth. The harsh taste of iron makes the hairs on the back of your neck tingle, your spine prickle even more unpleasantly. God, it is awful every time. You’re on your back on the wide bough of a tree. The grey sky’s belly seems just about close enough to touch, if your arms were not too sore to lift. Rain falls in buckets. You are soaked, to the point that you can count your bruises clearly through the shirt plastered to your skin. Movement hurts, any kind, any direction.

This is extraordinarily terrible. This is almost as bad as the first time you transformed, when you became aware of yourself as a snivelling human again at the very top of a pine tree without a stitch on. As traumatising as that was for a naked eleven year old, it’s somehow worse for a fully dressed teenager.

You should be better than this by now.
But you’re not. No matter how you try to change, you will not change this about yourself.
“C’mon John,” you whisper “Now would be a great time to show up with an umbrella. You’re gonna hafta carry me back home, but…but yeah. Just come here and get me already.”

John thinks it is an unspoken rule that he should not follow you into the forest at these times. The unfortunate fact of the matter is that this is one of the many unspoken rules that exist between you.

So he never does.
He will never, ever try to find you no matter how bad he wants to and no matter how bad you want him to.

About three hours later, you have managed to stumble home.

Now that night is on its way, it does not matter that your wings are wide open. You washed away
the worst of the gore in the stream, from your face and your teeth. To get at the stuff that was trapped under your nails, you had to go at it with a bit of stick and have ended up with more than one splinter that will need the attention of the tweezers. Hopefully, John or Jamie will be awake, in spite of the awful fucking hour you have chosen to return at. As embarrassing as this is, the walk of shame, you really want someone to be there to throw a towel around you and pluck the bark from underneath your tender nails.

You hope it’s John.

When you stumble through the back door, open as always, he sits at the kitchen table. John’s eyes are dark with exhaustion. His phone is on the table, with Tavros on the loudspeaker. “…you were really good, um, even when they stuck the hooks in my legs.”

Since John has not noticed you, you are content to stand there with the rain on your shoulders. John smiles weakly, as he would if he and Tavros were face-to-face “I’m glad you’re better now.”

He laughs “I think I’m even gladder. You sound like, uh, you’re kind of dead, you know? I think you should go to bed.”

“I’ll let you stay up, but I’ve gotta stay up for a little while longer.”

He sighs “Something good on TV?”

“Yeah,” says John, his face troubled “Good movie.”

They say their goodbyes. You’re relieved to hear that they are not as awkward as they should be. They must have had a good feelings-jam at the doctor’s office, or as good a feelings-jam as one can have around Gamzee Makara.

You push the door shut hard.

John jumps violently.

“Dave!” he cries.

He hops up. For a moment, he is torn between wanting to throw his arms around your neck and knowing he should stand back or fetch you a towel. He leans forward, and backwards, and forwards again then darts for the living room and snatches a towel from the laundry pile. Quickly, he wraps the towel around your shoulders and scrubs your hair off.

“You’re freezing,” he notes “And shivering. There’s still hot water. Still lots of hot water, so you can take as long a shower as you need. Dad’s asleep, I think. I just told him you were at Rose’s tonight so he won’t ask questions. Just pretend to come back in through the door in the morning, ok?”

He stops suddenly, remembering you might still hate him.

You punch him in the shoulder “Keep fussing. I need it.”

John doesn’t leave you alone for the rest of the night, going as far to tuck you into his own bed, and volunteering to take your mess of a room for reasons he leaves mysterious.
Strong men don't cry from pain- they die quietly in corners

Chapter Notes

Seriously, what is with all this Tavros?
So much Tavros going on in this fic.

Your name is John Egbert and you should really stop doing this. Watching Dave sleep.

It’s creepy, it’s invasive, it’s an abuse of his fragile trust… you could go on. Dave is like a scared animal, deep down. He does his best to hide it so he can quietly come to terms with it, but you know there’s little difference between the little bird you scooped into your shirt years ago and the boy borrowing your bed tonight. If Dave discovered he was being watched in his sleep, it wouldn’t take him long to guess your motives. Who knows what might happen after that? But you’re scared for him.

Sometimes, scared of him, but more often just scared for him.

You creep forward into your room. You have memorised every creaking floorboard, every dip and everything you could possibly catch your foot on. The path to Dave’s nest is a well-travelled one you traverse at minimum twice every week. Normally, this is just to re-arrange his covers and kiss him goodnight on the cheek or forehead. That is what you do tonight. Careful not to move him much or brush any of the fresh batch of bruises, you settle Dave further under your blankets and pull them up to his chin. He stirs slightly, as he always does. And as always, it sends a thrill of fear through you. Once he has become comfortable again and you are sure he will not snap awake, you stoop and kiss him lightly on the forehead. His skin has begun to heat up with what you are sure are the beginnings of a fever. Perfect! How are you going to keep an eye on him tomorrow if he’s sick? You suppose he’ll want to go to be there for Tavros’s first day of school with legs (and you really, really, really want to be there to, with your biggest smile on and a nice ‘fuck you’ for Vriska if she tries to change that), so you might be able to get him to the nurse’s office if he’s really sick. Then again, there’s the danger that she will send him straight home.

By now, you and Dave are old enough that you are allowed to stay home when you’re sick. But if he stays home alone, then how will you make sure he’s safe if anymore rocks come through the window?

With these thoughts buzzing in your mind like a hive that has been kicked, you retreat to Dave’s room and settle into the chair to his desk. You had to transfer a few stacks of books and a couple of school-papers from grades ago to the floor to get the space. The plastic tarp you stretched over the window sags and dips against the wind, but it does not give. Luckily, you got it up before the rain could get in.

Now all you have to do is kill time until your dad gets home, which shouldn’t be too much longer. God, you wish his promotion didn’t demand these late meetings so often. You’d feel about 80,000,000% safer if there were an adult in the house. At least Eq’s going to pass the house tonight on his patrol, if he’s not called away before he can come by. It’s not like you always stay up, waiting to kiss Dave.

Dave likes to sleep early and rise with the bakers and the farmers to get a flight in at night. His eyes have been gradually getting worse, so he prefers to fly in the rosy light of dawn as oppose to the creeping gloom of dusk. He retires earlier than you every night. Either you’re catching up on homework that you should have been doing when you were dicking around on the Internet, or you
are still dicking around on the Internet. Every night you face the same struggle. Should you? Shouldn’t you? Will he wake up this time, if you do? What will he do if he wakes up in the middle of it? Well, he lets you curl up in bed with him when he’s having a bad night, doesn’t he? A chaste little kiss on the forehead isn’t much of a step from that, is it? Of course it is, because he is always unconscious when you kiss him, so he can’t ok it. You’re taking a dangerous, intimate liberty.

But you have a good reason tonight. One, it’s kind of cold in Dave’s room with the window busted. Your father isn’t home yet. The moment he gets in, you’ll drag him next door and show him the damage and help him patch it up. What excuse should you use? For the moment, you have decided that neither Dave nor your father need to know that someone might be coming for Dave. After all, Dave lives in such a delicate balance, you have reasoned, that the slightest perceived threat to his safety will have him spending every night in that other form.

You call it the Basilisk. Formally, you have never seen Basilisk. Dave doesn’t seem aware of just how close he goes to stream and sometimes even the house when he hunts. You have personally seen him run down a wild boar in the forest and devour it less than five feet away from the stream. You watched him from the opposite bank in plain sight, but he took no notice of you. Uninterested, or unaware, or pretending that he was not exercising his animal self in front of you to spare you both the shame.

To you, Basilisk is kind of like another person. He seems so distant, so alien to the Dave you spend your days with. He kills without mercy and smears himself in blood intentionally, because he likes the consistency between his claws or the brief warmth, you think. That’s not Dave. Dave is a harmless, self-deprecating nerd operating under the guise of a cool kid.

Even so, you’re kind of in love with Basilisk too. Brutal, feathery killing machine though he may be, he’s still Dave in the faintest sense of the name. You may only be able to appreciate his form in the way that you can appreciate the power and the grace packed into the lithe body of a panther, but you can recognise him as beautiful all the same. He may scare you silly, but you cannot separate Basilisk from Dave enough to think about him without feeling the rush of affection you feel for Dave. Both of them turn up in your dreams and nightmares.

Your nightmares aren’t always about Dave. Sometimes it’s Basilisk strapped to the operating table in Area 51, or Basilisk calling out to you as he is dragged bleeding and broken from the forest by cruel hands. Hell, sometimes it’s even him in your frequent Stream Dream, the one where you’re on your back under the stairs beside him and just talking.

You have only heard his voice a handful of times and you’re sure your dreams will have distorted it somewhat, but whenever you picture him, his voice fills your ear as loud and as fresh as if you were in the forest again at the very moment you last heard him speak. He said something to himself, again, not knowing or caring that you were there.

“I’m done here,” he said “Not long now, and I’m done here.”

You’re not sure what he meant by that. He could have been talking about his trip through the forest, or he could have been talking about the town and you. It’s been keeping you up at night for months. It distracts you now.

What would you do if Dave left? Apart from fall into deep mourning, of course. He’s become far too important to you now to lose him. As a friend, as a housemate, a first love. What could you do to shoulder a loss like his would be?

You can easily imagine yourself falling on drugs to numb the pain if he dies or is taken away, or leaves of his own volition. If not drugs, then you might do something even worse and have sex with Vriska. Something terrible like that.

You’re so lost in thought you don’t notice the two cars pulling into the drive at first. Eq’s patrol car parks on the street adjacent to the drive. Rather than coming inside, they choose to hold a furtive conversation on the front step. Because of the hole in Dave’s window, you can hear them quite clearly over the rain.

“Is it them?” asks your father, which is exactly what you want to know.

“I’m not sure.” says Equius, his voice flat and tired “I’ve checked the usual spots, but there are no
signs of fresh activity."
“So...no sign of that bastard doctor again?”
“If there was, don’t you think I would have saved a piece of him for you?”
The two men laugh. Equius sounds sad, your father nervous and twitchy in the way that he becomes when he is very angry about something.
“Who else could it be? Who would go to the trouble of vandalising Dave’s room? In fact, how would they even know which room to vandalise if they hadn’t been staking out the house already?”
Feeling their eyes on the window, you flatten yourself in the chair and hope they don’t see your limbs sticking out at the sides.
“Jamie, if the house were being watched I would know. If I didn’t notice, then one of the others would. There are at least five of us working to keep Dave around the clock, you know. Now, I am not saying that I think he is being attacked, but even if he is, don’t you think we could defend him? We have done it before and he still has no idea of it.”
Your father agrees sullenly “I suppose. I know you want me to pass this off as a casual act of vandalism, but the fact of the matter is that John didn’t see anyone fleeing the scene after the stone was thrown. That means they hid, yes? So you expect me to believe that someone went to the trouble of throwing that stone then hiding themselves so quickly, and it just happened to be bad luck and a coincidence that the stone went through Dave’s window? Out of all of the windows it could have broken?”
They are quiet for a moment.
“I love him too,” says Eq “He’s just as important to me as he is to you.”
Your father sighs bitterly “He’s not just important to me, Equius. He’s one of my own, now. If he is hurt, it will be the same to me if John is hurt. I don’t know how much longer I can live in fear like this. Some days I am barely strong enough to let either of them leave the house...the secret Dave carries on his back...how long will he be able to hide it? Something will catch him. An airport scanner, so he can never go abroad. An accident, the paramedics, so he always has to be close to someone he knows who is medically qualified too. Even the beach. He can’t even go to the beach with his friends. Every time they go without him... do you know what it does to me to see him alone when John and the rest of them are all gone?”
“The same thing it does to me, I would imagine.” says Eq civilly “Have you ever thought about...well, encouraging him to...”
“To come out?”
They both laugh again, but this time they sound less world-weary.
Believe me,” your father chuckles “He needed no encouragement to come out.”
“I know, Jamie, I got the same cookies that you did.”
When Dave was ready to start dating, he baked cookies and decorated them with rainbow frosting. A message written in carefully arranged sprinkles announced his sexuality to his nearest and dearest that ‘DAVE IS GAY’. Over the next week, he received no less than six reply pastries with messages ranging from ‘I KNOW’ to ‘DOES THIS MEAN I HAVE A CHANCE?’ (Eridan was responsible for the latter and only half-joking)
The memory of the lunch you opened your lunch and found that cookie waiting serves to lighten your mood a little bit, but not enough to dispel your unease.
They are not telling you as much as you want to know. Now, the question is how you’re going to get it out of them.
“He’ll do it when he’s ready,” your father assures “And only to the people he trusts absolutely, so I’m sure the results will be roughly the same as his coming-out.”
Eq groans “Something to look forward to in fear, eh?”
“Let’s get inside. It’s pouring rain. Honestly, I shouldn’t have left the boys alone.”
The door slams.
“John!” calls your father.
You hop into Dave’s bed, landing awkwardly on a book that was buried under the covers. Godcat mews downstairs. There is some more muttering that you do not catch, and a moment later your
father appears in the doorway with Godcat in his arms. Thinking you are asleep, he shakes you gently.

“John, it’s freezing in here,” he says in Salish “Why don’t you take my room for the night? I’ll sleep on the couch.”

You wonder if he wants to watch the door all night, but you agree wordlessly and shuffle to his room, pretending to be half-asleep. He hands you the cat for company and closes the door. Pressing yourself to the door, you listen to him go down the hall and open your door.

“Dave?” he says softly.

When he gets noreply, he quickly leaves and closes that door too.

Much to your relief, Dave forces himself to go to school in the morning. He wakes with a bad headache and a runny nose, but downs a few pills and declares himself cured. Your father is sceptical of Dave’s ability to function, and so begins a stand-off.

Your father puts his hand to Dave’s forehead and declares him too sick to go.

Dave points out that Tavros would want him to be there.

Your father replies that Tavros will not want him there to merely pass out from his fever, and that Tavros will understand Dave’s absence with his usual kindness.

Dave says that Tavros might appreciate having the spotlight taken off him and his new legs the way it will be if he passes out, especially if his wings are revealed.

Your father turns the colour of flour and that not only does he think that is a terrible joke, but that Dave has destroyed pretty much any chance of his leaving the house now that he has put that thought in his head.

You jump in at this point, saying you’ll watch out for Dave.

Dave asks your father if he can doubt an honest face like yours apparently is and accuses him of child-coddling, mistrusting his only flesh-and-blood son and general besmirching.

Your father tells him not to let the door hit him on the way out.

The first thing that Dave is told as you arrive at school comes from the man of the hour himself.

Tavros, standing for the first time at his locker (well, crouching, because his locker has low shelves to accommodate his former chair-bound state), takes one look at Dave and says “Jesus, Dave, are you, um, are you going to pass out?”

Dave sniffs, somehow making this extremely casual and laid-back “Why would you say that, man? I’m kinda hurt. Do I look like a fragile Southern Belle to you? It’s not even that hot, dude, don’t worry.”

Rose chips in “I believe Tavros was referring to your health, dear. You have the complexion of a plague-victim at the moment.”

Dave furrows his brow “That’s a raging fire on your pants there, Lalonde. That’s a shame. Those jeans commented your calves so nicely.”

Rose pretends to blush and fawn, then presses some pills into Dave’s hand.

He gives them a sceptical look “Do these have Benadryl in them? I’ve had like five of these already. Overdosing at school is not the way I plan to go. All that foam and the loss of bodily control and that. Give me sharks and volcanoes or a yaoi avalanche any day.”

While Rose and Dave check the medicine’s dosage, you smile at Tavros over Rose’s head.

“You look good on legs.”

“Kinda, sorta, not really.” says a voice behind you “You look like you with legs. Big shiny metal chicken.”

Here comes Vriska, which explains why Tavros isn’t looking at you. She wraps her arms around your waist and peers over your shoulders to appraise the situation. Tavros stiffens somewhat under her gaze, but he does not melt like he once did. He’s had enough of her shit and is taking great
strides towards telling her to ‘go fuck herself’. But, going by the way his eyes are trained stubbornly on the contents of his locker, you think that’s not going to be today.

Vriska’s agenda is simple: rule the world; get all the boys; punish and crush all those in her way. Unfortunately, she tends to count those she sees as inferior to her in any way as the weak that deserve every kind of psychological punishment she can dish out without attracting attention from the law. Tavros is something of a priority of hers. You’re sure she views it as a kind of challenge: if she cannot crush his soul and his weakened spine, what good is she to the world?

Plenty, you’re inclined to tell her, but she might bite you for saying something so sentimental.

“Hey, Vriska, you could be doing other things right now,” says Dave, jumping to Tavros’s defence “Like, you’re certified in first aid, aren’t you?”

She barely acknowledges him “Yeah, I am, but I ain’t interested unless you need a Heimlich. So, Tav, tell me, does it make you feel any better about being the school’s resident object of community pity now that you’re taller than most of us?”

Man, you’re glad the halls are empty right now. As soon as they fill up people will gather to stare at Tav, possibly to congratulate him, and you sure don’t want them to witness this ugliness. It’ll be a miracle if you can diffuse the tension before the first bell.

Surprisingly, Tav beats you to it.

He looks up at her for the first time in a long time “Yeah, it kinda does.”

She blinks, a curious smile curving her lips “So now you can talk back to me? Now that you’re the big strong man again and I’m just the weak little girl hiding behind my man?” she gives you a squeeze.

You’re tempted to bite her arms “Hey, I’m not gonna protect you.”

“Oh really?” her grip tightens a little “Chivalry is dead and John Egbert killed it.”

Dave suddenly shoves a fresh paper-cut in her face “So, as I was saying, certified in first-aid. Does this look infected to you?”

Recoiling in disgust, Vriska relinquishes her grip on you, if only to get away from Dave. She steps in front of you and squares up to Tavros. Her arms are crossed in front of her chest, reminding you weirdly of one of those evil old Republican minute-men, the guys who volunteered their sweet, conservative time to patrol the Mexican-American borders just for the fun of telling Mexicans to fuck off. It doesn’t help that Tavros is Latino and Vriska is as German-American as apple pie and schnitzels.

Tension crackles between them for a moment. You wonder if Vriska really will ease off now that Tavros is as tall as a house and could kick her the length of the football field if he wanted to. You doubt it. She’s never been one to shirk a challenge, especially not one so challenging as the one Tavros has presented her with.

“Listen, Tav, you’re no better than you were before. The only difference between this you and the other you is that they stitched your crutches to your hips. In fact, I’d be kinda embarrassed to walk around with those out.”

Vriska can’t actually see that much of Tavros’s legs. His jeans are down to his ankles, but his shirt is tugged up just a little bit over his stomach, so you can just see a slice of chrome. He has taken unusual care to cover himself up today, where he might have worn shorts otherwise.

“You’d be embarrassed to be walking around after six years in a wheelchair?” his stutter seems to melt away, and he stands a little taller “How come? Why is this embarrassing?”

She shrugs, although she does not look at a loss for ideas “Oh, I don’t know. Just thought you looked better down there in the chair, you know? More natural.”

God, where is Gamzee? Gamzee has gotten good and shooing Vriska off, or employing what you think of ‘distraction therapy’ by offering himself up as the target for her scorn. Rolls off him like water off a duck’s back, which has made Vriska determined to damage him in any way possible.

“Well that’s your opinion and you can have it.”

Tavros turns away and opens his locker wider so he the door cuts Vriska out of his vision.

“Hey, we were having a good talk!” she retorts playfully “We were making breakthroughs! C’mon John, tell him.”
You feel Dave’s eyes boring into your back, even through his shades “I think he looks fine. Really good, in fact. Maybe you should dust off your glasses or something. Might be some gunk on the lens.”

She turns to you, her expression that of mild horror and disgust. You reach forward and slip her glasses off the bridge of her nose, then lick the glass and wipe it off on your shirt. Vriska watches you do this with a slight frown. You pop them back on her nose and turn her again, by the shoulders. “See him better now?”

Tavros pretends to cough so he can hide a smile behind his hand.

She tilts her head back to look at you “I see what I saw before, with the added bonus of seeing a huge doofus here. You’re as blind as your prescription suggests, sweetie.”

Apparently having had her fill of fun for the morning, Rose finally jumps in “Vriska, don’t you have some irons in the fire? It would be a shame to concentrate all of your energies on one to have the others warp and melt because of negligence.” she speaks firmly, but gently, and makes a shooing gesture “Go on, dear, go ruin someone else’s day.”

“My day’s been fucked up so bad I might as well just go home. You game, John?”

“Nope. Dave’s sick. You’re being an asshole, also, so there’s kind of the fact that I don’t want to be seen with you right now.”

“Fair enough.” she gets up on the tips of her toes to kiss you on the cheek “Copy me out some notes for Chem, alright? Bye. Hope you kept the receipt for those legs, Tavvy.”

“I bet your mom wish she kept your receipt.” he mutters as she goes.

Dave nudges Tav’s arm “That’s actually pretty good. Shout that after her.”

Because today is a special day, Tavros allows himself to be egged on for once. He cups his hand around his mouth and shout “BET YOUR MOM WISHES SHE KEPT YOUR RECEIPT, YOU CRAZY BITCH!”

Vriska flips him the bird demurely and slinks around the corner.

The catharsis is almost palpable as she leaves. Rose claps Tavros on the shoulder in a sort of fatherly way.

“Well done, dear. You’ve got her shaking like a leaf.”

“Totally,” says Dave “Prey got himself some badass new wheels and the predator’s running scared. Now where is that creepy boyfriend of yours?”

Gamzee turns up five minutes later, long after the tension is gone. The rest of the school starts to file in in drips and drabs. Most know Tavros for being the kid who made the school bring the ramps up to code, so it is a surprise for them to see him stand straight and taller than expected. Those that know him from various classes and extra-curriculars come over to talk to him, to ask after his health and his prosthetics. Eridan and Sollux show up, so closely followed by Feferi you suspect she might be stalking them. Kanaya shows up with Karkat on her arm in a sisterly fashion.

As soon as Kanaya and Karkat appear, some of the strength seems to go out of Dave.

“Man about a horse,” he says, and heads for the bathroom.

Call it obsessive, but you have to follow him.

“Dave, are you feeling ok?”

He answers curtly “I’m fine. Don’t follow me.”

“You need someone to hold your shades while you puke.”

Dave folds an arm against his side and pushes at the bathroom door. He sags against it, looking like he’s about to faint. You wrap an arm around his shoulders and push the door open, herding him in. Thankfully, the bathroom is empty.

Dave props himself up on a sink. The colour is drained from his face. He is corpse-white, his eyes a lurid red like blood on snow. You wrench open the utility closet and dig through the cleaning supplies until you find the sign you need. Quickly, you hang it up outside.

‘Cleaning in progress, do not enter.’

“What’s wrong?”

He grits his teeth “I’m fine.”

You touch him lightly on the shoulder “You’re not. You need to go home.”
“I’m fucking fine, John, Jesus.” he has to hiss to get the words out “You’re getting way too into my personal space right now.”

“Did you hurt yourself in the forest?”

He always clams up and refuses to talk about what he does as Basilisk. Not since he thinks Basilisk is his persona nightmare.

After a while, he manages “I didn’t hurt myself.”

But you can see the awkward way he leans onto one foot. The way he hunches his back slightly. He’s in an immense amount of pain, probably coming from an injury in his chest. It’s bewildering-as far as you could tell, he was fine last night. Of course he came back with a host of small scrapes and deep purple bruises, but nothing looked life-threatening.

Suddenly, Dave’s legs give out underneath him. You catch him before he can get far and lower him carefully to the sticky floor. He plants his face in your shoulder, his breaths coming short and sharp.

“There was…there was something last night.”

“What?”

Oh God, was he attacked? What the hell in the forest would be foolish enough to pick a fight with Basilisk?

“Dave, look at me.” you cup your hand under his chin and lift his head, pressing your forehead to his “I need you to tell me what happened.”

He closes his eyes “I can’t…I lost most of it…just…there was…something green…”

An absurd idea pops into your head “Did you fly into a tree?”

He scoffs “No, I fought…a…green thing…”

“You fought a green thing.” you repeat “Ok. Ok, give me a little bit more than that.”

“It hit my…I think I’m broken, on the inside.”

As if to prove the point, Dave coughs into his hand and flecks it with blood.

Your name?

You haven’t got one anymore. You had one a long time ago, so they could tell you apart from the rest. So you could tell yourself apart and would come when they called.

His name? Not important. He shouldn’t have one. None of your kind should have names, because you are not the sort of creatures that should be named.

He fought hard. You’re almost sure it was a he. Not by the voice, nor the shape- those are both impossible as indicators of a gender. You saw him shrink. You saw him shrivel. He shrivelled and withered and folded in and became small, tender and pale. His claws went and his feathers went and out came these little, pearly nubs and this fluffy yellow-white stuff. He said a name.

One of their names. He was one of them, saying one of their names.

You don’t know if he was saying his name, because why would he want to tell you his name? Did he think you wanted to be nice to him?

No. No, it’s just not a fair fight if the other is all melted and weak and bloody. You like your fights fair and hard. To the death. You got a kill-strike in, you’re sure. When he changed back, he came back harder and faster. He struck with violence. More conviction. You gave him time to hate you and to want to hurt you bad.

It was a mistake, maybe, because look at how much you’re bleeding. But he’s worse. He’ll be lots worse. He’ll be dead by the next night. Nobody will help him. No one ever helps you, which suits you just fine.

But with no one to help him, he’ll die of the wounds you gave him. Lots of blood. Lots of broken things, in small, squishing places inside of him that will fill him with blood quietly and drown him when he falls unconscious.

Your opponent is surely dead. But he left you a lot of scars. A lot of things to remember him by. And now you’re really curious.

You really want to know what a ‘John’ is.
Fever dreams and the green wolves that cause them

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Your name is Dave Strider.
The possibility that you are dead seems strong.
There’s a man in your room that you don’t know. He might be God. You figured that God was a giant clump of star dust and clouds and maybe some grass. You figured He would be great and vast and unimaginably powerful, so this guy in your room is probably not Him. In fact, this guy kind of looks like you. What you might look like if you were older and your life had consisted completely of those hunts in the forest.
He stands beside your bed, a cool hand laid on your forehead.
“His fever is up again.”
Who is he? Is he a nurse? Is he a doctor? You know your paramedics. They are the only people that have ever treated you, from diagnosing a common cold to checking you for appendicitis and tumours whenever your get an inexplicable and searing cramp (most often you just need to fart). There’s no way Eq and Jamie and Peta and Roxy would ever allow someone new to stroll into your room, even just a nurse on their rounds.
He sneaked in, most likely.
Where is John? Jamie? Someone, anyone you know.
Someone needs to make this weird, Dave-looking man get his ass out of here before he discovers your wings.
“Can you pass me some pills? Thanks.”
Who is that, with him? Have you been kidnapped? Damn, your brain is foggy, so it stands to reason you’ve at least been drugged and tied to a bed. Only a reasonable assumption.
“Dave, sit up for me.”
Your body reacts without any form of command on your part, like a puppet being hauled up on strings. Sitting up, you prop yourself up on your elbows and become aware of heavy, slimy feeling in your chest, and a sandpaper texture at the back of your throat. Apparently, the bruises and cuts have changed into a miserable cold.
This is new.
The man perches on the edge of your bed and offers you half a pill.
“Swallow this for me.”
“What is it?” you ask, again, without planning to.
He smiles at you, tired and sad “It’s gonna attack all that stuff in you that’s making you sick. I mean, I could sit here and tell you all about antibodies and medication and penicillin, but you’d just get sicker and sicker and more tired. How about you just swallow this and wait for the magic?”
Your sore voice grows childish and petulant “How come I only get half?”
“You’re too tiny for more. You don’t want to overdose. Foaming at the mouth. Loss of bodily control. Trust me you want a big, epic death like falling in a volcano, not overdosing in bed.”
That is enough for you. Taking the pill from his hand, you swallow with the help of a proffered glass of water. The effort of getting the pill and the water down your tender throat makes your eyes water.
“Oh, I know,” he gathers you to his chest, cupping the back of your head “I know, little man. You’re gonna feel better tomorrow.”
“Promise?”
“Promise.”
You smile at him “I don’t believe you.”
“You don’t believe me?” he echoes.
The man gathers you up to his chest. You shift into him, cuddling up to him, all the while thinking
that he could be the most heinous of tricksters and murderers. Still, you feel like you know what he is— not the who at all, just the simple, easy what. He’s safe.
The man (he’s barely a man, just out of his teenage years) cups your head in a large, calloused hand and presses it against his shoulder. His skin is quite cool compared to yours. Fever heat pours off of you, like steam from your skin after a hot shower. Being held against him does little to help physically, but you’re suddenly much more relaxed, much more ready to sleep again.
“You don’t believe me.” he repeats “Why not?”
The words come from thin air “You always lie.”
He tilts your head up and looks you in the eyes, his expression carefully neutral “What did I lie about, Dave?”
“You lied about Rezi. You…you said she got away.”
He furrows his brow “What makes you think she didn’t get away?”
“Because. She said she’d find us.”
Who the hopping fuck is Terezi? Wait a minute, where did you get that from? How does ‘Terezi’ come from ‘Rezi’? Ok, so you’re not dead, you’re just having one of those weirdly complex dreams, the kind where you wake up and for a minute think you’re still in that imaginary world. This guy holding you? Probably just your subconscious inventing an older version of your reflection.
“Maybe she found a safe place, buddy, did you ever think about that? Some of us…when we got away, we just settled down in safe places.”
In the dream, you feel a swell of triumph “But you say nowhere is safe for people like us.”
He nods his head from side-to-side, as if considering an offer “Well, so long as they don’t know that there are people like us, there is a reasonable chance of being safe in some places. Some of us got really, really lucky.”
“All we get are colds.”
To your surprise, your cheeks have grown wet. The man mops up your cheeks with his sleeve and rocks you like a child— which you suppose you are, in this dream.
He gives you a little squeeze “You got me. You got Tulip.”
He tucks you back into the covers and settles beside you, balanced on his side. The man runs his hand over your hot forehead once more, sighing.
“Go to sleep. I’ll stay right here.”
“Creep,” you mutter past a yawn “My throat still hurts.”
“I know,” he pats you on the head again “Sleep will make it better, I promise. Science promises. Ok?”
“Ok.”
“G’nite, lil’ man.”

You’re younger. So young you can barely stand up on your own legs.
You’re outside, with the man, except the man is a boy creeping up on 12 or 13 this time. He is holding your wings open, very gently, with each wing-tip between his finger-tips. He knows exactly how and where to hold them, so he must have some of his own.
You stand on the top of a hill. To you, it’s the summit of a giant mountain. The perimeter fence is leagues away (half a mile in every direction- you can run it in 30 seconds if you book it). The sun is far away ‘cos it’s going down and the forest is far away and the town is far away, but it’s so dark you can see all the lights that you can’t see when it’s not dark. You can see the people. You can hear the people.
He holds your wings open for the breeze and says “You’re almost big enough to try flying. What do you think?”
And you say “I’m scared.”
And he says “Don’t be scared of falling. That’s why you’ve got wings, dummy.”
And the woman behind you says, just before a loud siren goes off: “Wrap it up boys, we have a busy
afternoon ahead of us.”
And then the siren goes off and he picks you up and takes you back inside.

He turns fourteen. He talks to the other guy a lot. The other guy is the guy that takes care of you when he can’t and reads you stories and helps you take your pills (by which you mean he helped you crush them to powder, collect the powder, flush it and fake the drowsiness that the pills should have induced) when he can’t. You don’t listen to much. You don’t know what birthdays are, they never happen here, even with the people in the white-coats, so it’s just a normal day for you.
But he talks a lot.
He talks with words like ‘life-span’ and ‘expiration date’. The other guy says stuff like ‘impossible’ and ‘moronic’. They talk for a long time, until he gets tired and he puts his head on the desk and the other guy has to hold him until he stops shaking.
Then the other guy talks about how he’s going to help.

It is another rainy day, which has you excited.
As soon as you have rubbed the sleep from your eyes and retrieved your slippers from underneath the dresser, you go to his room. The new house is kinda big- like, the biggest HOUSE house you’ve been in a while. The complex was big and difficult to navigate as well, but there was an order to it, made by signage and strict routines. Here, this house is bewildering. A jumble of random rooms, hallways in every direction and nothing to do all day. It’s kind of scary, in fact. You don’t know if you really like living in a house yet, except that it’s way better than being outside in the rain and the cold all the time.
To be out there and be safe, you’ve gotta be the other guy. The other one is a little scary.
When you wake him up, he gropes automatically for his shades.
“Eq?”
You perch on the side of his bed “No, it’s me.”
His face crumples for a split second as he remembers, but he shakes it off quickly. He’s not talking about it. You wish he would, but you’re not brave enough to tell him that.
“Hey lil’ man, what’s up?”
You nod towards the open window “It’s raining…why did you leave the window open?”
Guilt flashes across his face just as briefly as the grief did. Chewing on his bottom lip, he formulates a suitable reply “Oh, you know. I got in late last night. The other bro was hungry.”
You know he’s lying. Every time he lies like this, his skin is a mass of broken blood vessels and chipped bones underneath his baggy clothes. You’re always careful not to throw yourself at him, even when you long to cavort and play and wrestle him to the ground so he’ll spring back shrieking and chase you around the yard to show you who’s boss. In your life, there are few chances to play like this. It will only be so long before the magic decays, the people who own this house realise that the house for sale is not unoccupied, and you’re forced to move on before the authorities come.
But he needs his rest.
Even though your heart is sinking towards your feet, you start to retreat from the room “Sorry I woke you up…I thought we might be able to – but nah, that’s fine. You need your sleep.”
He smiles weakly “Yeah. Sleep would be nice.”
On rainy days like this, he takes you flying. It’s your favourite time to fly because the cloud-cover is low and thick and no one looks up when it will only get water dumped in their face.
You can wait.
He stops you before you can get to the door “Dave?”
“What?”
“Dig out that big colouring book. Bring me the crayons. Let’s colour some princess ponies, ok?” he squares his shoulder, a movement which obviously causes him some pain (that he will never admit
to) “Sleep is for the weak, and what are we?”
You grin “We’re better than the X-men.”
He spreads his orange wings wide. You see they are slightly ruffled, dishevelled from his night rough night, but it really doesn’t matter, with the way the sun glows through them and bathes the room in his rich, bright colour.
“Damn straight we are.” he says firmly.

You wake up with the taste of blood in your mouth and the sensation of your hand being squeezed tight. Pressed into someone’s chest, held there over a rapid heart-beat. The smell of John’s shampoo (yours too, but you always remember smelling it on him rather than yourself) competes with the harsh smells of medicine and sterilised gauze. John wins out.

You become aware of the bed underneath your bruised back. Your skin is stiff with the combination of scabbed-over cuts, bent bones and the bandages that are holding you all together. Seriously, if even one of these things slips, everything else will. Pieces of Dave will skitter across the floor and stain the bed-covers. John will be left with a single hand in his hand. He may never let it go, in fact. You can picture him living the rest of his life with a part of you clutched in his hand. He’ll have to do everything one-handed.

He’ll meet his future wife one-handed, date her that way, marry her that way. He’ll be holding your hand all the way through his wedding day. He’ll have to hold his first child with one hand, because yours fills the other. John will die holding your hand, the poor sucker.

You feel like you should be thinking about something more important.
Like what those dreams were. But dream-amnesia has already begun to steal them in great chunks, leaving only the vestige of impressions of impressions. You think there was a man. A man, or a boy, or both. He had eyes that were remarkable in some way, probably for an unusual colour.
That’s about all you can remember. That, and the smell and greasy feeling of wax on your hands and the sound of rain coming in through an open window.

John’s talking to somebody. Doesn’t it embarrass him to be holding onto you like this in front of somebody? You’d never hang onto him with an audience. On your own, you’d sure as hell just like, fucking sling yourself over him. Get all weeping-widow on his shit if he ever got the rough end of a fisticuffs with a weird furry thing in the forest. Seriously, like, with wailing and tearing at your hair and everything. But the moment someone came in? Nope, you’ve been calm all the time, invested in your out-dated copy of ‘Cosmo’, spending your time giggling over the sex-tips. No tears here, no sir.

What does John think he’s doing, crushing your hand like this?
Ok, so it’s sort of nice that he cares. But also like having Jamie kiss your forehead in public. Yeah, thanks pseudo-dad for that unnecessary display of affection. Next time why don’t you climb a lamppost and shout ‘I LOVE MY FAKE-SON DAVE’ and just spare yourself the tire of being subtle?

“John,” the tissue of your throat seems to have been replaced by sandpaper “Let go of my hand.”

He turns those big blue eyes on you, and you see they’re red and watering “Oh thank God.”

Jamie is the guy he’s talking to.

His dad. Also your dad, technically speaking.

You remember they were all you could think about the other night (who knows how many nights you have been out, in fact?), when you were being slammed into tree after tree and the taste of your own blood mingled with the taste of hers, and your ears were filled with the sounds of the snaps coming from inside you. But when you came home at night, all you felt was shame.

They couldn’t see you like this.

They couldn’t know what the other guy had dragged you back-ass-wards into.

All you wanted to do was to collapse into Jamie’s arms for a good, solid cry and a bit of screaming.
John would stick a few plasters on you. Jamie would do what he always did - throw baked confectionaries and apple juice at you until your sugar high was such that you couldn't feel your toes, let alone pain, then he'd get Eq on the horn and freak out to him.

But nah. Nah, because you're Dave Fucking Strider, you had to play it cool. You suspect you nearly died, in playing it cool. It sure felt like you were dying in school.

Jamie drops heavily into the chair on the other side of your bed “Dave…I want you to answer me honestly. What happened to you?”

Swallowing (it feels like you’re swallowing broken glass), you pause to think. In ordinary circumstances a lie would just fly out of your mouth. Most everything you say is a fucking lie in some form or another. The only real truth you have ever told was iced on rainbow sprinkle cookies when you were ready to come out, or more like, ready to stop kidding yourself and embrace the sickeningly sweet crush you were nursing on Tavros at the time.

Right now, the lie is slow and sluggish. It’s hard to think through morphine. “It’s kinda embarrassing,” you say slowly, struggling with each word “I… I sorta fell, in the forest… a wind knocked me into a tree… then it knocked me all the way down…”

Jamie gives you a sceptical look. Gently, he takes your free arm from the top of the covers and rolls up the sleeve. He points to a livid, purpling ring of bruise tissue. It has already scabbed over, but it is obvious that you were bitten. Hard.

“Oh look at that. Wolves gnawed on me.”

“David, please.”

In his voice is every ounce of pain you have caused him for however long you’ve been unconscious. The bags under his eyes are so deep and large they’d probably charge him a fee if he tried to get on a domestic flight with them. He rolls your sleeve back down and closes one hand over yours. With the other, he cups his face, and doesn’t say another word.

You look to John.

His mouth is pressed into a tight line. He does not avoid your eyes, however, which means he’s kept your secret. You cannot fully recall how much you blabbed to him before you passed out on him, but whatever he heard he hasn’t told.

Good old John. Forever your partner in crime.

“You’re cutting off my blood circulation.” you complain.

Reluctantly, he lets go of your hand. Without him to hold it up, it falls limply to the bed. You’re disgusted to see a wire taped under a bandage, snaking up to a drip. You can’t feel it at all.

“Four days.”

“What?”

“Four days,” repeats Jamie, his face still hidden “And all you’re going to tell me is that you fell. You fell and wolves chewed on you.”

You lick your dry lips “Yeah. Sorry. I don’t know what else you want to hear.”

He withdraws his hand from yours and stands up suddenly “The truth would be nice. I know you and the truth aren’t exactly on the best of terms, but it would do me a world of good to hear just one sentence that isn’t intricately woven with bullshit and poppycock come out of your mouth. Is once just too fucking much to ask?”

He leans in close, his eyes sad “I’m not just giving you room and board. It’s my job to protect you.” The words are out before you can stop them “You don’t know anything about me.”

He snaps back “You barely know anything about yourself! How am I supposed to protect you from that when you won’t tell me the simple truth!”

God, you wish you could tell him about the other guy. If he hadn’t started this and if you hadn’t allowed yourself to be whipped up, you probably would tell him. Now you’ve been challenged and you’re compelled to stand your ground, however worthless your stance is.

“What the fuck do you think is gonna be knocking down our door to claim me, Jamie? Do you know something I don’t?”

You don’t actually mean that last part, but something flashes across his face. Jamie’s worlds better at hiding his feelings than his son. John wears his heart on his sleeve and his emotions written all over
his face. Right now, he is utterly dismayed by the conflict and has no idea of how to stop it. A deer in the headlights.

Jamie’s face is a different story. In your drug-hazed state, you wonder if you’ve imagined it. Jamie looks guilty.

Jamie does know something you don’t.

Oh but that’s a story for another time. You can’t handle any more of this shit today. You don’t want to know and you don’t want to care. You just want to go back to sleep for another painless four days.

He lets out a shuddering sigh “I don’t know, Dave. I think I’ve given you everything you need to protect yourself. I think with Eq and Peta and these people in place…” he gestures around the familiar, private room in the hospital where you’ve been treated by the same four people for everything from a tetanus shot to an infected paper-cut “I think you’ll be safe. I think you can live maybe a normal life…but look at you. I can’t do anything to protect you, can I?”

The strength seems to leave him. He lowers himself back into the chair and leans back, like he does in the armchair in front of the TV after a long day at work.

“Dad…” says John softly, concerned.

Reaching over you, John touches his father’s shoulder. Jamie doesn’t shrug him away, but he doesn’t look at him either.

“You don’t know what it’s like to have your children hurt. I pray to the gods you never do.”

With that, he gets up. Jamie leaves the room without a backwards glance and closes the door quietly behind him.

You and John exchange a glance, not knowing what to think.

A few moments lapse into silence. John spends this silence just looking at you. This is when he makes you uncomfortable- when his face goes blank. He could be thinking anything. Anything from how stupid you look in a hospital gown to how good your flesh would taste if he stir-fried you in honey and soy sauce. You just don’t know.

You can do nothing but stare back at him and think about how stupid you are. Despite the morphine, your whole body quivers with a kind of aching pain. Trying to get rid of it would be to scratch without fingernails. You know you’re all there, under the blanket. Tavros will be the only one with a prosthetic in your friendship group for the foreseeable future.

Oh God, your friends.

Shit. What the hell must they think is going on?

What the hell did John tell them?

John somehow senses your worries “We told them you were in quarantine. Super sick. Super contagious virus.”

He points to a little table which you failed to notice before. It’s loaded down with get-well cards, one from each of them and a few others from school it would seem. There’s a larger card full of signatures that must have been passed around the class, an effort you suspect was spear-headed by Rose or Kanaya.

“Uh, I threw away Vriska’s. She kinda told you to die, so…” he shrugs helplessly.

These days, half the words out of John’s mouth are apologies on his absent girlfriend’s behalf. You know he’ll be over the moon the day that bitch finally comes to her senses and dumps him for someone as mean as she is.

“Thanks for covering my ass.”

He nods “No problem.”

“It… it is. It’s not very cool of me to do this to my bro, you know? I’m putting all kinds of wicked pressure on you.”

“What hurt you?”

You can’t lie to John. Not right now.

“I think it was a green wolf.”

He blinks “A green wolf. Well we got red birds, so why the fuck not, huh?”

You sigh, your chest feeling full of needles “This is why I love you John. You cope with this shit so
much better than I do.”

He shivers, like a wind rolled over him “Yeah, well. Gotta keep an open mind when a member of my family has red wings.”

Thankfully, your paramedics have left your wings free while bandaging the rest of you. They know to leave them free, breathing. If you can’t move your wings, you kind of freak. Most days at school, you have to sneak away from the crowds for a little while to open up your wings or at least shift them around a little. This usually happens in a bathroom stall. While other boys sneak in between classes to jerk off in here, you strip off your shirt and shrug wings almost twice as big as you are. Right now, your wings are resting, folded comfortably into your spine. They’re a little sore for having been cooped up and flattened for an excess of four days, but there’s nothing a quick couple of flights can’t fix.

“Does it hurt?”

You nod “Lots of stuff hurts.”

He furrows his brow “That’s not right. The medication should fix that.”

“I don’t know if that’s the way it works.”

He shakes his head angrily “I mean I heard Dad talking to them about it, they want you not to get hooked on the drugs and they’re being sparing with the doses ‘cuz they don’t really know what it’s going to do with your body, but like…fucking, still, man, you shouldn’t be in pain.”

“John, you’re focussing on me being in pain here? I did say there was a fucking green wolf, didn’t I?”

“Green wolf. Ok. Did you kill it?”

The steel in his eyes surprises you “Uh, no. I just fucked it up badly.”

John becomes business-like “Alright, where did it attack you? I’ll see if I can get Eq and Peta out there to hunt it down, or look for the body.”

“I can take care of it myself.”

John rolls his eyes “No you can’t. You’ve been beaten half to a pulp. Dad will shit a brick if you do something like this again and I’ll shit one right along with him. You’re not immortal.”

With an effort, you lift your arm to scratch your nose “I don’t know, dude. That wasn’t so much a brush with death as a slow-dance with death. And yet look at me, I’m fine.”

“There is more bandage than Dave. I was tempted to draw all over your dressings, but Dad would have killed me.” he grows serious “Promise me you’ll run away if you see the wolf again. Just run away unless it’s on the verge of death, and if it is…kill it dead.”

You don’t know what to say to that.

After a while, he lies his head down beside your arm, his arms folded underneath his chin. You rest your hand on the top of his head. Because your eyes are fixed on the door, waiting for Jamie to return or for Eq to arrive, it takes you a long time to notice he has been weeping silently into your blankets.

Chapter End Notes

Ooh.

Little mystery there. Little mystery has just become a thing. If the memories seem a little too jovial, it was because I was seat-dancing to Architecture in Helsinki’s ‘Heart it races’ while writing most of it.
Chapter Notes

Sorry for the incredible delay between chapters. Had to get a new laptop, as the old (Samsung, netbook) finally went belly-up. But I'm back now and will be updating regularly again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Your name is………………………

Gone. The gone-stuff, a thing that leapt out of your head because you don’t need it anymore because there’s not enough room and you don’t want it anymore.

You don’t want your name. You don’t want the time before you wore your fur all the time. Not any of it.

Well, some of it might be nice.

You can’t remember how to make the blood stop.

All you can remember, all you still know, is that it hurts less when you put away two legs, so you put away two legs and crawl on your belly under a bush and wait for the pain to fade a little. The rough forest floor scratches you up a little, but you can barely feel it over the rest of the pain. Now, without your fur, you’re cold too.

They used to put you in this stuff called ‘kloats’ or ‘kloths’ or something. They used to cut your hair and put glass over your eyes that made you see better because you can’t see very much when you put two legs away. When you put two legs away, you’re soft-fleshed and your skin rises up in a hundred million little bumps from the cold and your head hurts because your eyes aren’t good. But it hurts less. Less to hurt.

The REDBIRD hurt you bad. Fucked me up big time, you would say out loud. He had big claws and a curved beak and a mean mouth on him that spewed a whole lot of words you haven’t heard in a long time. Words you that are gone, but are coming back with a bunch of other gone-stuff. Some of it is nice and some of it should stay gone, you think.

You almost want to put your fur on again just to bury the bad gone-stuff in your instincts, but the words are kind of nice.

The taste of words. Words, you never use them anymore, so you forgot they tasted.

The REDBIRD said things like ‘fuck’ and ‘God’ and ‘please’ and ‘John’. He said that last one a lot when he took off his fur- no, his feathers- and showed you he was just like you are.

You think ‘John’ must be bad because he cried when he said ‘John’. When he said ‘John’ you almost wanted to go over and lick his wounds and curl up around him because he looked so, so sad and scared, but you were fighting.

The REDBIRD took off his feathers for only a little while, only a few dozen heartbeats, then he put it back on and he tried to take out your eyes.

Your hand goes up to the big, shallow scratch the REDBIRD put on your cheek with his beak. You think about how much it hurts. It bleeds a lot too.

To you, there is a lot, and a LOTLOT. You used to have different words for a lot and a LOTLOT. They’re gone, so you think those things instead. For example, the wound in your side, not shallow, definitely not just a scratch, is bleeding a LOTLOT. That is bad. So much blood that you left a bright red trail to your bush when you limped and later when you put two legs away and crawled on your belly.

If you saw that you would follow the trail and find the bleeding thing and eat it. If you weren’t
hungry, you would go make sure it wasn’t a Dangerous thing like the REDBIRD (first time you’d seen a Dangerous thing like him, except in the reflection of water, for a long time) or one of those things that looks like a smaller you and always has a pack, waiting to strike, or worst of all, a People. If it was Dangerous you would kill it.

If it wasn’t, you might kill it anyway to put it out of its misery.

If you weren’t yourself, you might kill you.

How many darks and lights has it been since you got in the fight? A lot. More than one or three, but less than a dozen, which are the only numbers that aren’t gone yet. Maybe that one that comes right after four?

The REDBIRD slashed your chest and side, both really deep, so you can see a little bit of bone. He clawed up your arms and legs when you pinned him down to go for his throat. He bit your shoulder and knocked out a tooth (one of your front teeth, the funny one) and smacked your head on the ground a lot.

You’re sure you did worse. You know he doesn’t fight much. No one who fights much would take off their feathers or fur in the middle of a fight to cry about a ‘John’. Seriously, that’s a LOTLOT stupid move to pull.

You think ‘John’ must hurt him a lot.

In the bad stuff you can’t make gone, you remember being hurt a lot by a group of Peoples that wore white skins all the time and called you by your name, your gone name, and put glass on your eyes so they could be good. They also stuck metal stingers in you to put fire under your skin (like the fever-fire on your forehead from the infection in your chest and side) and took a LOTLOT of your blood and made you do a lot of ‘tests’ and ‘exberryments’ to see how you worked.

‘John’ is probably like that.

If you had the REDBIRD here you wouldn’t have to worry about fever-fire when you’re hurt. You could tell him what to get to make it better and he might know how to stop blood when there’s a LOTLOT and he could hide you so you can get better and not worry about being killed to put you out of your misery. Sometimes, when you can’t get food, he could get food because he can fly and he can get places your four legs would never carry you, so you wouldn’t be hungry as often. When you get scared by thunder or darkness or just for no reason at all, he could be there to make you less scared.

You’re sure the REDBIRD would leave the ‘John’ too, because the ‘John’ makes him sad and scared.

You’re so lost in your imaginings of the new, better life you could have if you had a partner that you don’t see the People coming. The fever-fire burns your senses so you don’t even realise you’ve picked a bush right on the road that the Peoples walk on in the summer, with big bags, in big groups.

So many in the summer that you eat them, sometimes, because hunting them is easy and you have no fond memories of any Peoples ever.

The People calls out to you.

You freeze and curl up under the bush, protecting your squishiest bits and worst wounds. Of course they can see you: you’re so fever-fired and sick you dragged yourself right across the path and left a big, bright red trail to you.

The People runs over, spewing words.

“Oh my God, are you alive?”

You don’t move.

“Hold on, hold on, I’m going to call for help…wait, shit, I don’t have any connection.”

You think instead.

“Can you hear me? Please, if you can hear me, say something.”

The People touches your shoulder with a warm, sweaty hand. Letting yourself stay limp, you are turned over. Your wounds exposed. Your squishiest bits exposed.

You don’t like that.

You open your eyes just a little bit. They’re bad when you put up two legs, but the People is sitting right over you. The People has dark skin. Dark skin like you, but darker and darker. You sometimes
forget that Peoples come in different colours, like the way the furs of the smaller-you’s can be all light or all dark or both or something else.

“Oh my God.” says the People “Do…do you know who did this to you, honey? Did they take away your clothes?”

‘Clothes’. That’s the right gone-word. You got put in ‘clothes’, and it’s not glass they put on your bad eyes, but ‘glasses’.

You don’t like knowing that.

You’re so tired, but you know you have to make this People go away. They will try to take you away back to the People Place and give you back to the white-skinned (no, white-coated) Peoples (doctors) and you’ll be full of metal stingers and fake-fever-fire again. On your own, you may die. But you don’t care. You’d rather die in a mess of your own blood with your bones on the outside than get better with the white-skin-coats. Dying would be so much better.

With a LOTLOTLOT effort, you put your arm up. The People ducks and puts it around their shoulder. They shrug off their bag, probably to pick you up. You whisper. A bubbly nothing noise that the People thinks is a cry for help. They bend towards you to hear what you were saying.

You cup your hand on the back of the People’s head and put your mouth near the People’s neck. The smell of the People Place is on the person like stink on the stink-cats that even you won’t try to eat.

“What is it?” they ask.

You open your mouth. Blood goes over your lip and splashes on the People’s shoulder, making them flinch.

“I’m going to get you out of here,” says the People “I promise you’re going to be ok.”

You bite their neck. Unlike your bad eyes, your teeth are always sharp.

The People starts to buck and scream, but you know the right way to handle prey. Even when you put two legs away, even with so much of your blood on the outside, you know how to hold the prey down while you chew away at the biggest blood-straws and put all the inside of the People’s throat onto the outside. You know how to anchor your teeth in and how to cut the death-throes short by just twisting your head to the side, just slightly, just enough to crack the bones in the neck so the head goes at a funny angle like a bird’s head after it hits a tree.

The People dies quick. Not quick enough that it doesn’t get a LOTLOT of pain and screaming done while you’re trying to put it out of its misery, but quick. Quicker than you’ll get. You’re almost jealous.

But at least now you don’t have to get better in the People Place with the white-skin-coats and their metal stingers.

The People is so warm. Ever since you took off your fur, you’ve been cold. The tips of your clawless fingers are turning blue with cold, so you stick them in the People’s throat. The warm is going out of the People quick. Tonight will be a Bad Cold, you can smell it on the air. They’ll be all icy by morning, so you better get the warm while it’s here.

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You don’t want to take the People’s clothes. If it gets really, really, Bad Cold before the light goes into dark, you’ll put on your fur again and be fine and have a lot of the warm in your fur. Just no People-stuff. Most of the People-stuff is gone, but you what you remember is nothing good.

Time to move, you think.

You get on your belly, not caring about the dirt you’re going to get in the wound on your chest where the bone is on the outside, and crawl away again. Slowly, painfully, away from your kill. You don’t want to eat. Your tummy wouldn’t hold it down.

You crawl away for a long time. Up the mountain, even though it gets colder the higher up you go. The good thing about being high is that other Dangerous things, the ones like you and the REDBIRD but not you, they don’t come up here. There’s something scary and Dangerous on top of the mountain, you think. You don’t know what it is or why everything stays away. You haven’t been here for more than a few dozen lights and darks. Normally, you’d know what the biggest Dangerous is by now because they always come to look at you, to let you know they’re the boss, or try to before they get scared and leave and everything leaves you alone after that.
The Dangerous hasn’t come to see you. It just pops into your head that you should go see the Dangerous, to see what it’s like and why it hasn’t come to see you. To see if it will put you out of your misery.

You won’t get close before you die, you know. But you also know that without a goal, you might as well lie down and spend your final moments letting your blood freeze and your bones on the outside get chilled. Moving with a purpose is better than dying quiet. Losing all the warm in one spot because a LOTLOT of your blood is draining out is worse than keeping some of the warm because you’re moving.

So you move. You bleed. You get colder as the Bad Cold gets closer and the light goes into the dark. The forest floor scratches you up, your arms and your tummy and sometimes your bones on the outside, which gives you pain like crazy. The numbness of a nearing Bad Cold is made weaker by the fever-fire under your skin. You almost don’t feel it. Or your pain until a twig goes into your inside and it gets really bad.

As you go, you smell some Dangerous. They could be coming to eat you, and they would, but they smell that they’re much less Dangerous than you. The other Dangerous just watch you go on your way. Some birds take flight when they hear you moving beneath them, not waiting long enough to realise you wouldn’t be able to get close to their nests if you wanted their babies.

They’re all scared of you, which is good. Except that you’re just going to go all swollen and rotted when you die because nothing will eat you. You’d rather be eaten. Otherwise some People might find your body and take you to the white-skin-coats so they’d get you dead instead of breathing.

Finally, you can’t move anymore.

The Bad Cold is here and comes down in the little white bits that burn, they’re so cold, and turn into big whites, so much it’s like the grass on the forest floor except all over everything.

Just when you think you’re going to die, just when your bad eyes are going all dark even though you can see fine in the darks, you smell a Dangerous. It’s standing right over you, on two legs.

Over the smell of your own blood, you couldn’t smell it coming.

It says some Words: “Bismallah.”

You don’t know that one, even in the gone. You never heard it before.

A hand touches your shoulder again “Still with me, child?”

You can only stir weakly under the arm.

The Dangerous, and you know it’s the big Dangerous that owns the top of the mountain, they turn you over and say some more Words “I assume you’re the one responsible for that ruckus at the bottom of the mountain the other day.”

If they’re going to eat you, that wouldn’t be a very bad way to die.

They pick you up. Your body is so heavy, the weight hurts you. They gather up your limbs and make you more comfortable in their arms. They have a lot of the warm. The warm like a fire.

“I really should leave you out here. You’re going to be far more trouble than you’re worth.”

The Dangerous carries you away, to the top of the mountain.

Chapter End Notes

For reference, 'bismallah' is an Islamic term which loosely translates as to 'Allah help me'
So what's going on with you, John?

Your name is John Egbert, and for four days you couldn’t breathe. The thought that Dave was going to die was like reckoning with your own death. How would you be able to keep going, if that had happened? The colour would drain from the world. You would never laugh again. To wake up with the weight of your loss weighing down on you every morning? Too much to even think about.

You couldn’t come to grips with it. Not Dave, dead. Anybody but Dave, dead. How could he have been hurt so terribly? Whatever that green wolf thing that attacked him was, you swore to yourself you would hunt it down and take its life with your bare hands if Dave left you.

On the first night, Dave came so close to dying you swore you could see his soul leaving him. His skin grew pale and drawn over his bones, although he had lost no body fat or flesh. Like his skeleton had finished the job of supporting a living being and was eager to be out of him. His blood seemed in as much of a rush to be free of him, draining from his cheeks and lips and hands. He became so, so cold you could hardly stand to touch him.

You were sure he was headed for the ghost town. A red bird to join Blue Jay, fishing for leaves and branches from the canoes of the ghosts’ and skinning logs as if they were whales. But he made it. He pulled through, thanks to the hard work of his doctors.

You didn’t sleep a wink for the whole of the 12 hours they were working on him. Neither did your father. In fact, you don’t think he slept much at all during the four days Dave was unconscious. You did, out of sheer exhaustion and never too far from Dave’s bed.

Now that Dave is awake, your father is sleeping a lot. During the day, he entrusts Dave to the care of his doctors and goes to work. He comes home in the late afternoon to sit beside him. Dave has taken to pretending to be asleep when your father is here. You’re sure your father knows—he’s no fool—but he has yet to make an issue of it. On the rare occasions that Dave will open his eyes and speak to him, your father is sparing in his words, only asking Dave how he feels and if he thinks his painkillers are doing the trick.

He does not talk about what happened anymore. He does not talk very much at all. He just sits at Dave’s bedside and lets the silence expand between them.

And as for you?

Well, you’re being stalked rather mercilessly.

You don’t want to go home, but you don’t have a choice. Dave will interpret any attempt to stay over-night in the hospital as a comment on his condition and he’s grown quite sensitive when it comes to being able to take care of himself. He makes a special show of getting up to limp to the bathroom by himself, of showering on his own (even though you and one of the doctors secretly sit outside the bathroom every time he goes in), of dressing himself and preening his wings with minimal help.

The only reason he lets you touch those wings is because straightening and trimming his feathers has always been something you help him with. A weekly tradition, in fact. Every Wednesday night, you and Dave are parked in front of the TV with a rerun of ‘House’ on and comb through his wings to remove the various pieces of debris that get trapped there from a few days of flights.

He prefers to preen himself, though. He’ll climb up the house and sit on the roof, concealed by the chimney, with his wings spread and let himself slip into one of his half-transformations. The one where his legs fuse and his skin takes on the fluffy texture of down. Not Basilisk, but the closest to Basilisk that you have ever seen...as far as Dave knows, anyway. He nicknamed the form ‘Davesprite’ during the Peter Pan phase that roughly coincided with the peak of his crush on Tavros. Over the last few days, Dave has chosen to distance himself from you. You’re used to him holding you at arm’s length with his crippling irony and refusal to talk about feelings, but this is far more overt and insidious. He flat out refuses to look you in the eye. Like his first summer with you, he has
chosen to plant his face in the curve of a book and ignore your presence as much as possible. It’s pissing you off like nothing else.

At school, you have to play calm, to pretend that there’s no cause for alarm because they identified that disease that suddenly and mysteriously struck Dave down and required an ambulance to transport him away. You have to be the messenger boy, carrying their fears and hopes to Dave. And every day you go back, every time you get another call or text from them, you’ve got to disappoint them by telling the truth: Dave doesn’t want to talk to them.

Dave doesn’t want to see them either (though they’re under the impression it would mean risking their health if they went to see him), or you for that matter.

In love with his sorry ass or not, you might have stopped coming already if you weren’t afraid to be at home alone. Every time you are there, you get the feeling you are not alone.

And it’s not Godcat that makes you feel that way. The presence is different—human.

Considering what Dave said about that green wolf, it should relieve you to be feeling a human presence. At least you know that whoever is after you can probably be scared away with a gun or some harsh threats.

But it doesn’t make you feel better—worse, if anything, to know that there is a special brand of people that can project that kind of demonic presence. The fear washes over you unexpectedly, but unmistakable. You understand that there is a pair of eyes on you, possibly several, and that the owner means you all kinds of ill. It only comes when you are alone. So far, the feeling has yet to climb your spine outside of your house, so you feel relatively safe when you are outside the house. It is undeniable that the person or people are following you outside of the house, but they must not be getting as close to you outside as they do in your house.

Possibly the worst thing about the whole situation is the shame you feel. Sickening, corrosive shame. Having these unknown eyes roaming all over, and the fact that once they fall on you it doesn’t matter where you go because you just can’t get away, it has transformed from fear to guilt, in the aftermath. Like being touched by some anonymous pervert on the train and being so, so disgusted with yourself for attracting the attention, for not turning on them and screaming at them and breaking their spine over your knee.

It’s strange, but you can’t escape it. You guess the only good thing about the stalking is that the eyes, although they will pass through plaster and stone and wood, have yet to attack you in the bathroom on in the shower. Thank the gods for small mercies.

You are formulating an explanation to Dave, concerning what has been troubling you. Dave probably hasn’t noticed. He’s so absorbed with his recovery and not looking at you, that he has completely missed how traumatised you have become. Really, the stalking has only been going on for the seven or so days he has been in the hospital. Way more than you’re prepared to deal with. More than long enough to affect a change Dave would have noticed before you did, before he was injured.

But now?

You’re invisible. Even so, you plan an explanation every time he falls asleep and you are stranded at his bedside, counting down the hours until you can no longer avoid going home. You’ll tell him all about it. You’ll wait until he wakes up, then you’ll tell him every single, solitary detail. How you check all the locks twice before you go to bed and have taken to sleeping with a pair of scissors under your pillow. How you can barely sleep, even with your hands closed around the handle of the scissors. How you have had to do most of your homework in the library because focussing at home is so hard, when you spend every moment waiting for the eyes to start burning into your back. How, when they finally do start to burn into you, you almost relax because you know the hardest part of the night, the waiting, is over and all you have to do is get through this and you’re scotch-free.

He often doesn’t wake up again for the day, when he’s fallen asleep.

So you spend your time mouthing useless excuses for a problem he has yet to discover and admire how your bird can look beaten to shit and angelic at the same time. The bruises aren’t going to fade for another couple of days, according to the doctors. In a way, they complement his pale skin. If you
didn’t have to think about the horrible fight that caused them every time you looked, you might kind of enjoy the effect.
Your sexuality is currently unexplored territory, but it might turn out that you have a thing for bad boys.
Dave’s hand is a little warmer than it has been on the other days. You suspect it has something to do with his body healing. Probably, there is no scientific basis at all for this, but you think that the body gives off a certain kind of vibe depending on its condition. When a person is hungry or depressed or, in Dave’s situation, beaten to shit, their bodies grow cold and unresponsive, so they are fractionally slower to feel pain or to protest in a conversation. Healthy, happy people are warm and alert wherever they are.
Dave grows warmer each day, although his bruises and other injuries beside will linger for the rest of the month. With his unusual biology, his healing is greatly accelerated. Paper-cuts are gone within an hour of the cut. Obviously, trauma on this level is going to take its sweet time healing. But the fact remains, Dave is getting warmer.
“Christ, John, are you still here?”
Your spine prickles. Under the current circumstances, ordinary surprise is as pleasant as finding an extra five dollars in your jeans. Quickly, you drop Dave’s hand and fold yours in your lap.
One of Dave’s three doctors has come into the room. His girth fills up the jamb, and he stands at a slight, almost sassy angle so as not to wedge his massive shoulders in the small space. The white coat that should be a doctor’s uniform caused more than one panic attack in the early days of his and Dave’s acquaintance, so now, whenever he ventures into this private, sealed ward, he hangs up his coat and wears only the scrubs underneath it. The largest size, stretched to the seams trying to conceal this man’s muscle and sinew. A slight gut curves the uniform, a consequence of his fondness for samosas, and makes him look like a woman in the early stages of pregnancy at certain angles. Not that he could ever be mistaken for a woman, even a transgender woman in the first couple steps of her transformation. That jaw is strong, so boxy, so MASCULINE you feel like it should be stamped with a warning.
Hieronymus Boxcars is Dave’s favourite. Then again, they are all Dave’s favourite, for very different reasons. Dave happens to live Boxcars for his improbable name (his parents were fans of Early Netherlandish art, and not casually), and his lax attitude towards authority. Every time he sees Dave, he has some new piece of incredibly manly advice to offer.
The best so far include “don’t trust anything that don’t respect a dame for bleedin’ a week and not dyin’” and “head-banging is a great way to cause permanent damage to your spine, so if you want juvenile arthritis, you go ahead and listen ta your heavy metal and don’t come crying to me when you can’t turn your head”.
For someone with such a flowery name, Boxcars is not one to mince words.
His square jaw contracts into a frown, like a lever being pulled that tugs his lips down at sharp angles, folds his short nose and crinkles his forehead crisply.
“It’s five at night, on a school night. Haven’t you got homework and a girlfriend?”
“Girlfriend’s got me,” you say with the same grim humour you reserve for all references to Vriska
“I’m really not too busy to be here while Dave-”
“Pretends to be asleep ta avoid you then actually falls asleep and drools?”
You try not to smile “Busy night. Party hard, am I right?”
He shakes his massive head and scratches at his short, dark hair with the air of a father trying to break it to his family that he just backed over the cat on the way to work “He’s not gonna wake up again today. You might as well head home and get on with your own shit.”
You’d like to tell him that nothing more important than Dave. Even if you’re just sitting at his side, watching him sleep, there is literally no place you would rather be. But that would raise eyebrows. Significantly. No amount of ‘no homo’ would dissuade whoever heard that tale from Boxcars’ mouth from realising you are 100% Strider sexual.
“How is Vriska, by the way?” he says her name is if it has a sour taste.
“She’s fine.”
“And when are you gonna break up with her?”

Like you have previously observed, Boxcars has as little bed-side manner as his profession will allow.

“I don’t know,” you say truthfully, then tack a lie on the end of it to make yourself feel better

“Probably not going to break up with her unless one of us dies. At least, any time soon.”

Boxcars frowns his odd frown again “If you’re just lookin’ for a better option, what about that girl?”

“Which one?”

“The girl with the hair. Oh, wait, is she in one of those things, with those other two guys? Shit, help me, it’s somethin’ like the Chinese mafia.”

“They’re not a triad, no.”

“Well, go get her boy. What’s stoppin’ you?”

“Vriska.”

He rolls his eyes, muttering “Oh yeah, girlfriend. Stinkin’ stupid girlfriend.”

You have a feeling that on the day you finally dump her or are dumped, half of the town will throw a celebration. John Egbert and Vriska Serket are the most miss-matched couple ever to enter onto the little town of Archer’s Pass’s romantic scene, and almost everyone you know, your and her parents included, doesn’t ship it. Oh well. You can live the dream for a little while longer, before it’s time to address what desperately needs to be addressed.

Boxcars approaches Dave’s bedside and picks up a limp wrist. He draws a blood-pressure pump from a mysterious location and sets to work, testing Dave’s resting pulse. The news must be considerably better than it was yesterday, because he does not swear and punch the wall.

“Kid’s doing good,” he notes, freeing Dave’s wrist and tugging down the collar of his hospital gown to inspect the bandages around his chest “Better than he’s got a right to be. This stuff would have you or me in critical condition for months.”

Then he puts his hands under Dave and flips him on his back, gently, but with all the dexterity of a fork-lift. Dave barely stirs at being flipped onto his front. Sensing they are free, his wings unfurl slightly beneath the gown. Boxcars tugs the gown down and eases them out. First, he checks the condition of the long, bone fingers that serve as the frames for Dave’s wings. When Dave came in one of them was bent at a dangerous angle, and has since been giving the doctors a lot of grief. Since Dave can’t just lie around with his wings out, no matter how secure the room is, he has had to sleep on them, which only deepens the doctor’s concerns that he might cause some permanent damage to them. Already, there is some empty talk of moving him to one of the other doctor’s house where he can at least recover in peace.

Chris Deuce lives in relative isolation compared to the rest of the town. It was the third and final doctor that brought up the idea of moving Dave, David Diamond, or ‘Big Dave’ as he’s referred to around here (the man himself is about six feet and six inches altogether, so the nickname is both a reference to his age and a subtle dig at his height), but it was quickly and unanimously shot down by the whole assembly. Dave included. You, personally, rejected the idea of taking Dave out of a place that you could visit easily and knew from past experience was safe.

Dave has recovered here every time he’s busted a limb (which was a lot, back when he was perfecting his landings), got an infection, had an illness that refuses to let up because you’re afraid to leave him home alone for long stretches of time, and that one time he was having a bad test season and made himself sick with stress. Frankly, you’re worried that Deuce will have some unexpected company if he lets Dave into his house.

Unpleasant company. After all, these sensations from these people only began the night after Dave checked in.

You can’t let that happen.

“Did you hear me John? Hello, I’m talkin’, not the wall.”

You snap back to consciousness and realise you have been staring intently at the wall for a long time. Abashed, you look up at Boxcars “One more time?”

He grinches in what might be an attempt at a fond smile “I said I’d drive you home, if you’re ready ta go.”
The thought of leaving Dave makes your stomach flip. Then, secondly, the thought of being alone and undefended against those eyes makes your stomach contract painfully. You smile and thank Boxcars.

He folds Dave’s wings carefully away and then flips him like a pancake onto his back “I gotta go check out. I’ll swing by and grab you when I’m done, then we’ll go.”

You nod.

Punching in the exit code on the security keypad, Boxcars slips out of the first door and stuffs his massive frame into the short hallway between it and the second. There are two doors and a small hall between them, so Dave or you can see who is coming when someone comes through the first door, and if the company is an undesirable that has somehow busted in, hide Dave.

When the second door is shut, you take Dave’s hand again and bring it to your mouth. Your lips move against his cool hand.

“Take your time with the recovery…things aren’t quite right at home.”

The shadow of his eyelashes flits across his face, as his eyeballs move behind the lids.

“You know you’re going to have to talk to me soon. I mean, it’s fine as long as you know.”

Burning with the shame of it, you press your lips to his first two fingers and linger there, listening to the sound of the blood in your ears. He once told you he can hear your heartbeat when he’s asleep, all the way through his dreams. There tends to be a moment of stirring lucidity, just enough time for the epiphany that he is asleep and dreaming before the dream seizes your sound and makes it into thunder or footsteps.

He must be dreaming of being chased, or the storm of the century, if he can hear you now.

Finally, you let his hand fall from your lips and back into his lap. You lean over him and kiss him once, on the mouth, as chaste as can be. You make it quick in case Boxcars comes back while you’re not looking. But you can’t resist another. Confirming that the two of you are still alone with a glance over your shoulder, you kiss Dave on the forehead twice, and on the third time you rest your mouth against his hairline and think about what he looks like when he’s drifting off to sleep in your arms, his lashes still glued together from the tears of another bad night.

“Love you. Sleep well.”

Then you pull away.

A moment later, Boxcars is there, and you shut the door on Dave without a backwards glance.
The djinn at the top of the mountain

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Your name is still John Egbert. Shouldn’t it be Dave Strider, or that other girl’s name by now? Haven’t you already had your chapter?

Apparently no: you still have some trauma to go through before the author is satisfied with the development of the ‘plot’, which is allegedly in play here.

Well it just so happens, John Egbert, than when Boxcars pulls up the drive and waves you off, he waits only to make sure that your key gets into the lock and allows you inside, not to make sure you don’t come sprawling out of the house in terror. So when you do that, he’s not there to ask what’s wrong.

What is wrong is something you might have missed if you did not enter totally on edge, totally prepared to be jumped by a monster. There are a variety of small but glaring changes in the house since you last set foot over the threshold.

In the front hall, the welcome mat is muddy, when it was not before you left. Dave’s umbrella is missing from the stand. His coat is facing the other way, hung from the collar with the interior facing outwards, and you know it was facing the other way before because you stopped to sniff it for mildew (and Dave) on your way out to make sure it didn’t need to be washed.

A black terror seizes you. The only thing that forces the scream in your throat back down is the feeling of total, complete loneliness. You are alone. There is no need to call Boxcars back, because there is no one left here to attack you. Even so, you retreat to the front step and sit down heavily.

Planting your head in your hands, you stare vacantly at the ground in the dim twilight and your mind races.

Who do you tell?
No one.

Why aren’t you telling anyone?

Because you’re afraid. Afraid that if your father discovers that the house is being raided, he’ll send Dave away, or spirit the both of you out of town in the middle of the night, without giving you a chance to farewell your friends. You can’t leave your friends- out of the question. This is your home, and Dave’s, and it is where Dave’s protectors and doctors and friends and first love lives. The way he is, Dave may never find himself in such a good situation again.

Besides, what if you’re just being crazy? What if there is a stalker, but they’re after you? They have no idea of what Dave is- there is never any danger to Dave at all, and you force the whole family up by the roots because you acted rashly.

This is the first time they’ve been inside.

You can deal with this.

The whole street is dark and your house is conveniently far from the nearest neighbour. Convenient for Dave, as he can sunbathe on the far side of the roof (protected from the cars by the slope) and not have to worry about any Mr Wilsons catching him with them out. Bad for you, since you won’t realistically be able to run for help.

That’s fine.

Your stand, your legs like water.

The living room has not been visibly disturbed, except you cannot escape the notion that someone has spread themselves out on the couch. Then you notice that there is a DVD in the TV player. The screen has been paused with a large, blurry frame that is unmistakably from ‘Face/off’. Several organs attempt to climb into your throat at once, making it thick and so difficult to breathe you sway back, ready to fall over, until the backs of your legs bump into the couch and you just sort of fall.

You spring back up again immediately, as if burnt.
“Godcat?”
They wouldn’t. Not the cat.
The trip upstairs is more of a flight. Dave’s room is as messy as he left it. The window is still intact (it was repaired in a secret visit from Roxy, who’s surprisingly good at DIY) and the room shows no signs of being disturbed. Your heart in your mouth, you continue down the hall to your room. Also untouched. For a few days, actually, since you’ve been sleeping in Dave’s bed while he recuperates in the hospital. It’s the only place in the house where you can be surrounded by his smell. You have been careful to sneak in and out while your father isn’t awake.

You keep searching.
Nothing to find, it would seem. Apart from what changed in the living room, nothing else has been moved a fraction of an inch from their last positions, as far as you can tell.

Deflated and drained of all energy, you drag yourself back into Dave’s room and collapse on the bed. Inhaling the familiar smell of him, you slip your hand under his pillow and shut your eyes tight. If you let yourself drift away, the craving to have Dave with you can almost trick your brain into thinking he is there. A presence will fill your arms, as if his back is to you and your arms are around his bony sides and his wings are pressed into your chest.

Concentrating on it, on him, chases the trick away. You have to be relaxed and indifferent to the climate of your thoughts.

You let yourself slip into this state, and for a while, Dave really is with you. He lies beside you, breathing softly, undisturbed by the foul dreams that are the only reason he has ever sought refuge from the world in you. To match his breathing, you slow yours. Almost sleeping. Almost dreaming.

Not quite there. Not quite here either. Just where Dave is.
When you open your eyes again, you are marginally more relaxed and not at all prepared to see the one thing, the one sure, certain thing that not everything is peachy you somehow completely missed.

Scrawled on Dave’s mirror in lip-stick letters is the word: ‘SSSSHHHH’, as garish and red as blood. Beside this message is a picture that is unmistakably Dave in the hospital bed, asleep, his wings peeking out of the back of his gown.

Jamie Egbert: what are you doing? ==============>

Following this man up a mountain, that’s what.
Objectively anyway. An outsider looking in would see two grown men behaving like good friends (which you are, thanks very much) on what seems to be a hike, if a hike far removed from any of the recommended trails. Perhaps these men are daredevils? They carry no supplies, nor a way to call for help should they need it. On this lonely part of the mountain, where the town is so far its lights will barely penetrate the screen of the darkness and the trees come night-fall, it is more than likely that they will need it.

But when you ask yourself what you are doing from a purely subjective angle, then the answer is far simpler.

You’re wasting your fucking time.

While one of your boys is hospitalised, the other is bending to some kind of mysterious stress you have yet to successfully identify. In short, they’re both going a little bit mad for reasons you cannot influence or improve no matter how hard you try. And what are you doing about it?

Climbing a fucking mountain in the snow.

The air tastes kind of burnt with cold “What makes you think he’ll help us this time?”
Equius wears far less than is necessary to protect himself from the cold. The miles melt under his feet while you struggle behind him, cursing your officer-worker’s legs and irregular exercise schedule.

Just watching him forge effortlessly ahead makes you feel a little bit better about the people who are on Dave’s side, and about leaving him in their care as you run this fool’s errand.

Only a little bit.
This time he contacted me.
That’s surprising “You’re serious? He called you?”
Not once in the six years you have had Dave has Equius’s distant brother ever reached out to you first. You always have to come begging for his help and walk away empty-handed.
Djinns are, as a rule, pedantic and cold towards the problems of mortals. Rus Zahhak may have lived among them and even passed himself off as one a few times in the last century, but if anything, that has only made him even more hostile towards humans.
You’re certain he hates you “What did he say he wanted you for?”
Equius shrugs “Haven’t the foggiest. He only said I had better get up the mountain as fast as I can, and to bring you with me.”
“He’s not going to eat me, is he?”
Equius doesn’t laugh “Not while I am around, he isn’t.”
As far as djinns go (and you have only met these two), Equius is far more tolerant of the human race and its strange, often backwards customs. When he was forced to live as one, he did not spend the entire time marvelling at how above all the chaos he was. Rather, he was sucked back-ass-wards into human chaos and has no idea, nor a real desire to extricate himself from the mess. Apparently, there are plenty djinns like him, embedded in mortal societies all over the world, participating as if they are the same species.
“Why would he want to see me? He thinks I’m no better than an insect.”
It is hard to gauge Equius’s real expression, since he is 10 feet in front of you with his back to you “I honestly don’t know, Jamie.”
“Not a clue?”
“Not a clue.” he confirms “But I doubt it is anything too terrible.”
“Well as long as he doesn’t mean to eat me, I’m sure we can come to terms with each other.”
Since you have discovered the djinn living on the far-side of the mountain, you have only seen him three times in person. Never once has he shown any interest in either tormenting or aiding you. The boys never complain of sleep paralysis or strange, blue-skinned men in their rooms either.
“What do you think about that green wolf?” if you can’t solve the problem of Rus on the way up, you might as well get to the bottom of that one.
Between work, checking on Dave (well, sitting at his bedside waiting for him to grow sick of pretending to sleep), watching John’s rapid and weird inwards-retreat and everything else that needs to be done, you haven’t even had time for one more tryst with Equius, Roxy and the rest of what they have dubbed ‘Strider protection squad’ since Dave was wheeled out of surgery.
You know literally nothing about what attacked your boy, except that it lives somewhere deep in this very forest.
And you want to kill it with your bare hands. Possibly teeth.
That thing is definitely in trouble if you get within sprinting-distance.
“Are you asking me if I know of a wolf such as it being a subject in the Trials or do I know of the species?”
You over-step a log fallen in the path with some difficulty “Both, please.”
“I never heard of a specifically green wolf in the Trials, but I could tell you of about fifteen wolves off the top of my head.”
As usual, your gut plummets at the shock of how little you know about the world you share. How many species has Equius informed you of, since you became aware that you were really not the only things on the planet that could speak and think and create? From your childhood to this, your middle age, you always took the stories of the spirits and gods with a grain of salt, like any person growing up in this more modern age would.
Many of your ideas about the world have been dashed to pieces. Having children will do that to anyone, but it is particularly confronting when one of those children comes with red wings sprouting from between their shoulder-blades. Your grandmother and the other elders on the reservation may not have been telling you only the stories of your religion, but the stories of actual people that lived in an unimaginable time and plane, separate in every way from yours and theirs.
“Are they like werewolves?”
Equius grimaces at you over his shoulder “Well I can tell you now to abandon any ideas you might be entertaining about pursuing Dave’s aggressor with silver bullet.”
Your neck colours in embarrassment “You abandon those too! I wasn’t thinking that at all!”
Yes, you were. You were already counting every source of silver in the house.
“So they are werewolves?” you press, swearing as your foot catches on some brambles “What can I do to keep them at bay?”
“Not that much, on your own.” says Equius frankly “It will be mostly up to Dave to protect himself. Believe me, I will be having a talk with that boy the moment I get off this dratted mountain.”
Drawing your coat tighter against the snow, you smile wryly “Am I invited?”
“He is your boy, Jamie. What exactly is it that you want to know about wolves?”
“Are they territorial?”
You have long since made peace with the fact that Dave is no human. He’s an animal under the guise of a human-Equius explained Dave’s favoured form as a kind of survival reflex, adopted when the wilderness is encroached upon for a speedy escape or disappearance into the invading society.
Being the animal that he is, Dave hunts, so of course he has a territory which he will defend. As far as you know, that giant bird thing you have taken to thinking of as ‘Dave Senior’, with Dave’s normal form being the Jr, owns the land that begins at the stream where John found him first and ends somewhere close to the end of the hiking trail. Dozens and dozens of miles to protect- a tall order for someone who has to worry about school and the typical teenaged troubles at the same time.
Equius shrugs “I am no expert, but I believe that is entirely up to their personality. If the wolf lives with a pack than it is likely that the pack has an expansive and jealously guarded territory. But if that wolf belonged to a pack, then Dave would be dead. I doubt it is anything more than a nomadic loner. Nothing to worry about. I’m sure it has succumbed to its injuries by now.”
“Good,” you say, with feeling “I hope it was painful.”
“They’re called lycanthropes, by the way.”
“At least we got that part right.”
He smiles.
The rest of the hike passes in a comfortable silence. You can’t help but feel safe with Equius around, even though you’re on a remote part of the mountain in a snow that grows steadily heavier. There is just something inherently safe about the man; he’s stronger than you are, more powerful, more intelligent, and best of all, he’s on your side. If you didn’t know him, you probably wouldn’t like him, though. His arrogance is also inherent and ingrained.
The blame is not really his, though, for that unfortunate arrogance. Had you ever found yourself in a situation where you were integrated with a lesser society, say, a society of cats, you’re sure you would think them quaint and backwards and adorable in their convictions that their world-views are the only way to go.
Dave has never been that way. Probably because his only memories of his life are that with humans. The humans he has the most contact with are his family, his friends, and the SPS (Roxy wants to get that on a shirt), so why would he have a reason to scorn the species? Alright, so he is skittish as hell.
He pretends to be comfortable in any and every situation by his sheer lack of emotion, but you can see through that. Dave spends most of his time with his guard all the way up. Nothing you can do about that, except protect him and make him as comfortable as possible,
You don’t even want to think about what will happen to Dave in the future, when his friends are dispersed like seeds in the wind to colleges and he’s stuck at home, unable to travel by plane or risk revealing himself to a larger community, for fear of someone who knows him from the Trial days.
Dave doesn’t even know about the Trials in the first place, or about Dietrich at all.
You mean to get around to that. The moment just never seems right.
“Here we are.”
Equius breaks through that train of thought before it can make much more progress, to your immense relief.
He points to a cave set into the face of the mountain a couple hundred feet away, almost lost in the
snow. A flickering blue glow issues from the mouth of the cave, like firelight.
You can’t help but smile “He lives in a cave? Will I have to rub a lamp to see him?”
Equius shudders “For the love of Allah, do not mention that movie to him. He’s already going to
despise you on the basis of you being a human, Jamie, don’t feed that fire.”
He starts up the slope with you trailing nervously behind.
“I thought you said there are normally horses around here.”
From Equius’s descriptions of his elder brother’s cave and lifestyle, you expected something kind of
like that movie about the horse, Spit or Spectre or something, with wild and attractive horses moving
in herds all over the mountain. Apparently, these horses belong to Equius’s brother- they recognise
him as some kind of spiritual authority. They make special trips from the plains that are not too far
from this particular peak just to see him, although you can’t imagine how the hell they would get up
these slopes with spindly legs and hooves. You’re having a hard enough time with your versatile legs
and flat feet.
“What should I say to him?”
“Be polite, but not obsequious. We’re asking a favour, remember, not here to beg him.”
You’re surprised by the bitterness in his tone “You don’t get along, do you?”
He shrugs again “We do not see eye-to-eye on many things.”
“How come?”
“Because my brother is an arrogant knob, obviously.”
You laugh “I know how you feel.”
Your own sibling, John’s aunt, is long-dead of a bout of Venereal Disease, the source of which she
would never identify (and God do you hope it was just an illicit boyfriend, not the other thing), but
you remember each one of your fights like it was yesterday. You were just a few years older than
John when she died on you.
Even know, you remember the way she had the power to ruin your day with a simple remark.
Siblings are like that.
“I’ll try to keep our spat to a minimum,” mutters Equius “But I can’t promise that this will not look
like an episode of ‘Full house’.”
You laugh at the same time that the mouth of the cave shadows, filled by the silhouette of your host.
Rus Zahhak appears in the flickering light and surveys the snow with a mix of distaste and relief.
He’s not as tall as you pictured- in fact, he’s only about as big as John, who you think is never going
to hit the 6ft mark. There is a definite, bluish tint to his skin that does not look unhealthy at all. This
blue colour swirls around his skin like ink on top of water, and you realise you seem to be watching
his blood. Or rather, the fire rushing around in his veins, occasionally flaring, sort of like volcanic
activity. His features are pleasant, if a little intimidating. He’s got Equius’s long nose and strong jaw,
and the same pitch-black shade of hair that seems to suck up the light in the room and throw it back.
Apparently, djinns do something like photosynthesis with fire-light. But they prefer to get their
sustenance the way the average meat-eating human does, at least, the way they would have in the
Dark Ages.
On the surface, he can’t be more than twenty-three or twenty-four. Equius says his very first memory
of his brother formed just before the Crusades hit Turkey. His clothes kind of throw you off. For a
man that supposedly hates the human race, he looks pretty at home in jeans and a plain black T-shirt.
Equius senses your surprise “He’ll do that sometimes. When he knows I’m bringing up a human or
semi-human. Otherwise he looks like he just stepped out of a souk or something.”
“Let’s keep the bitterness to a minimum, little brother.”
Rus’s unnerving blue eyes are fixed solidly on the two of you. Of course, he knew you were there
the entire time.
“That was a polite observation for the benefit of my friend here,” grumbles Equius “Not every
comment directed at your person that isn’t a glowing report of praise is an insult.”
Rus actually rolls his eyes at this, and sweeps a sheet of long, dark hair over his shoulder “Get in
here before you freeze.”
He looks at you while speaking to his brother, as if sizing up a dog he would like to pet. Are you
trained well, or will you bite him? Have you been house-broken yet? If he lets you get up on the furniture, are you going to shed all over the upholstery?
“You’re even younger in person.” he says.

Apparently, djinns have a way of watching people who interest them that doesn’t require them to be physically close. Equius hasn’t explained it to you yet, but you’re not sure if you like knowing that a perfect stranger can just poke his nose into your life whenever it strikes your fancy.
“Um, I’m not sure I understand what you mean.” you like to think you sound defiant and cool, but you’re probably very squeaky right now.

He shrugs- exactly the way Equius does, too “Aren’t you a little young to be a father by human standards?”
“I was twenty-seven when I had John.”

Rus frowns “It bewilders me that humans scramble to have children at such a young age.”
“Well, our productive lives are basically over at 60.” you say scathingly “Gotta have fun while we’re young.”

He blinks “You’ll have to excuse me. My brother tells me frequently that I’m ignorant and unknowing and the like. I haven’t had much contact with your kind these past decades.” he nods towards Equius “His adolescence has been keeping me quite busy.”

For all intents and purposes, Equius is a young adult in the human world. As a djinn, he’s no better than John or Dave. Rus, for all his appearance suggests, is closer in mental age and wisdom to your grandmother and the other elders would have been than you are.

Equius reaches the mouth of the cave. The two djinns stare at each other for a moment, wondering if they should hug, or….? Eventually Rus gives Equius a good-natured slap on the back and ushers him into the cave. You follow them inside, a little stung to be ignored. Well, they haven’t seen each other in a while, you reason. Equius never comes up here unless you ask him to talk to Rus or Rus personally summons him. Even if they can’t stand the sight of each other, they must be just a little bit glad to see each other, right?

Rus’s cave is something out of a dream.
The interior is unmistakably a cave, with the high stone walls and vaulted ceiling and the stalag-whichevers (you have never been able to remember which one hangs down and which one sticks up) coming out of the floor and the ceiling. However, the cave is well-furnished, and it has the smells of a home; books and spices and a little bit of the harsh tang of snow that follows you in from the outside. Great sweeps of cloth hang from the ceiling to the floor, providing some kind of insulation. The patterns are all gorgeous, you’re sure, but for some reason you can’t look at one of the curtains for very long before your eyes are sucked away by the next.

The furniture is surprisingly normal. Bookshelves are everywhere, lining the walls, extending far towards the back of the cave. There are volumes in just about every language you know of, and a few that no current societies still speak. Cushions are flung about the place like a college student would fling papers over a dorm-room. In the centre of the cave, a good way back, there is a low couch-type thing that kind of reminds you of those things that sultans are always shown to be smoking hashish on.

“I can’t smoke hashish,” says Rus, literally reading your mind “It makes me sick.”

You will yourself not to blush and pretend you didn’t hear him.
The couch-thing is surrounded by neat stacks of books, reminding you of Dave’s room. On a little table in front of it is an assortment of what seems to be mechanical supplies you can’t begin to identify. Some of the slender tools bear a vague resemblance to wrenches or nails, but most of it is as alien as if it were fished out of the wreckage of a space-ship.

Beyond the almost-couch and the table, you can see a fire burning. The hearth, casting the warm blue glow that ripples in here in a pattern similar to what light through water will make. And even a little further beyond that is what you do recognise as a small kitchen unit, with a stream cutting across the cave that must serve as the sink, a small counter-top of polished rock and a collection of pots and pans. The cave past that point is lost in drapes, concealing what you guess the place where Rus sleeps and bathes.
Equius casts a disapproving eye all around the cave “You’re a terrible house-keeper.”

You don’t think so. In fact, you know one or two lifestyle magazines that would shit their pants if given the chance to represent this sort of rustic, fantasy chic on their pages. But you keep your mouth shut.

“Pardon me, little brother, is one of the books a fraction of an inch off the shelf again?”

Equius glowers “As much as I would love to explain everything that you have done wrong in excruciating detail, I cannot forget that we come heeding your summons. What is it that you wanted talk to us about?”

Rus’s blue eyes flick over to you. His eyes are all iris. Twitching, sparking iris- literally blue fire inside his sockets that leaves no room for sclera or pupil.

“It’s about your boy, Jamie. The winged one specifically.”

You blink “Oh really? And what do you have to say about him, after six years of ignoring him? Sorry, I’m just a little bit surprised. I was under the impression that you were completely unaware of my family’s existence.”

Equius drops his face into his hands and sighs, but Rus is not offended “I am now. Certain external factors have come to my attention that suggest that it would be a well-advised decision to start involving myself in your family’s affairs. Up to this point, I saw no real reason to interfere. The boy was at least somewhat content to live the way he was living. Now that that is threatened, and I mean really, really threatened, not just a little bit at risk, I think it might be appropriate to bring in a higher power.”

Your head is swimming in confusion “Are you talking about the green wolf?”

Rus blinks “The lycanthrope? Uh, no. No, I can’t imagine she will be much of a bother again. I’m referring to the agents of a certain power that have recently introduced themselves to your town. I’m afraid David is something of a sitting duck.”

“I still don’t….are they from the Trials?”

Rus looks at you flatly, as if he cannot believe how thick this silly human is being “Let me put this into the simplest terms possible. David’s well-being is not only at stake from now on, but his life. If what you call the ‘Strider protection squad’ (he shudders) is not very, very careful and vigilant from this point on, I think it is safe to say that Dave will either be killed soon, or robbed of everyone he loves.”

Chapter End Notes

It's occurred to me that I should probably do dramatic reveals for secrets, otherwise t just confuses the readership. Half of you must be going 'wait, what? what did i miss' because we're just casually talking about Eq being a djinn and Horuss is there with some nickname in a cave nicer than my apartment and Dadbert's totally comfortable with it all. For reference, a djinn are a race of people that came before humans as we know them, supposedly as intelligent and spirituals creatures as humans, except better because they're made of fire. According to the Qur'an, djinns are like a form of angels. Plenty of modern Muslims believe in their existence. I've got a cat's-eye charm somewhere in my jewellery box, a gift from a friend to protect me from sleep paralysis that djinns supposedly cause. Being that 'Zahhak' is a name of Arabic origin and I've always entertained the head-canon that the Big Z's are Iranian, I thought: 'hey, why not?'. In retrospect I should have made them some kind of rad sort of centaur.
Some friendly, platonic spooning

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the short chapter.

Your name is Dave Strider, and your dreams are driving you to do something dangerous.

What are these dreams?

Eh. Who knows? You certainly haven’t got the faintest clue of what’s going on inside your head, nor what to do about it. The only thing you are truly certain of is that, when you wake from these dreams, you carry with you the strong impression of fear and grief. You can never remember what has happened between the time you closed your eyes and the time you awake, except that it’s bad. It is probably better that you do not remember your dreams. But what is there to recommend the waking world to you, these days?

John?

How the fuck are you supposed to face John, with the way you’ve acted? God, he must think you’re a bloodthirsty animal. It’s why he shies away from you, you think. Lately he has been unable to look you in the eye. Granted, you are not giving him very many opportunities to do so, what with pretending that you’re asleep half of the time he’s around.

He can’t look at you. You can’t look at him. You don’t know if there’s a way out of this.

The days have been passing at a snail’s pace.

You are of the opinion that every day that passes without at least an hour spent pin-wheeling in the sky is a waste of time, so the weeks you have spent cooped up in this single room are akin to a purgatory. Yep. If there’s a hell, you’re in it. Each interminable day blurs into the next. The only changes occur when the doctors arrive to turn you over and check on your wings, to make sure everything is healing right and your bent ribs are going back into their original shapes. John retrieves and refreshes your stash of books. By now, you must have worked through half of your many shelves and even a few books pinched from Jamie’s shelves, when you’re in the mood for one of the gritty crime thrillers he favours.

When John’s not here, sometimes you will talk to a doctor.

They are the first group of men that looked you over- once, they were paramedics, but once your special conditions became apparent, strings were pulled with Roxy and Eq’s shady and apparently extensive influence to arrange these jobs, and to ensure they could put aside a private room for you. Officially, this ward isn’t even on the hospital blueprints. The youngest of your doctors thinks this is the most exciting thing ever. His name is Deuce and he’s the kind of person so trusting that even at this incredibly advanced age (thirty-two) you suspect he’d follow a strange man into a white van at the promise of some candy.

Deuce’s father was an ornithologist, which is why he’s considered the expert on your wings. He comes in twice every day to make sure the bone fingers have healed straight and the health of the feathers is good. While he does this, he’s delighted to chat to you about Marvel movies and how the comics are so much better and how he thinks Deadpool is really, really owed an intelligent and edgy movie of his own instead of a bullshit cameo where for some reason his fucking mouth is sewn shut. When he has exhausted Marvel, he tells you a little bit about growing up on what he affectionately termed a ‘bird ranch’.

“Everything I owned was peppered with feather dust and shit,” he’ll say happily “They used to call me Robin in high-school, but not in a nice way.”

And then there’s Boxcars. Rough, tough, vague about his family in a way that makes you suspect he
comes from a powerful crime-family and has been on the run from them for most of his adult life. Almost every word out of his mouth is pure, masculine gold. The man is just so damned manly, he makes Eq look like a Southern Belle. You love Boxcars like you’d love an awkward, slightly distant uncle you only saw a couple times a year. Boxcars is not specific as to where he fits in on the medical team, but he seems to know practically everything. He is totally, 100-fucking-percent your favourite doctor, and favourite person in the world after John, Roxy, Nepeta and Karkat.

Finally, there’s Diamond. He hated his former surname so much (and being that it was ‘Droog’, you can’t really hold it against him) that the first thing he did upon obtaining independence from his parents was to change it to something stupid and pretentious. They call him ‘Big Dave’ around here, because your first names are the same.

There’s not all that much to Diamond. He’s got a short temper and a massive stature, no patience for fuck-ups or recalcitrant patients and always wears a stethoscope, even with his casual clothes. Diamond’s duties extend to prescribing you the right kind of drugs when you come down with something. Due to your unusual biology, there are a lot of precise calculations and adjustments he must make to ensure you are not poisoned or over-dosed. Every time, he manages to get the adjustments just right for you.

For example, your current pain medication. He’s got you on just enough to keep the thrashing and wailing to a minimum, and the ripping, stabbing pains down too, but not enough to let you get addicted. You’ll thank him for that later, but for now you kind of hate him.

You’re always in pain.

Flat on your back, squishing your wings, locked away in an underground cell so no one can discover your dirty secret…far from the sky, from the people who love you…it all kind of sucks, and somehow you’re kind of glad of it.

You think you needed a break. Time to take a step back and look at it all from a distance. Normally, you treat your problems gingerly, like you’re handling the china heirlooms of another person. In this room, however, the ennui is crushing. You have nothing to do but try to read while your head swims.


Jamie and Eq and Nepeta and Roxy and the three doctors and how they will do almost anything to keep you safe and comfortable. How much you are loved. If not loved, then at least prized.

No. You know you are loved.

There’s a reason John has a girlfriend, and it’s not the reason he wants you to infer. But today is the last day.

Slowly, the thick gauze has retreated and shrunk into large, snug plasters and a few loops of bandages on your upper arms and the insides of your legs and your cheek. There are no more drips stuck in your wrists. The number of pills you down daily is down to only a few, as they are weaning you off the painkillers. Soon, you’ll be free to stumble home, aching and sour, to face the friends you owe a major explanation to.

John is going to get to know about the other guy, too.

You have only decided this now. Sitting on the edge of your bed, shirtless to allow your wings some space. The tips brush either wall and are in danger of knocking some books off the dresser where your clothes live when you live here.

John has already been in today. Something was especially off about him today. He wasn’t just avoiding your eyes, but his head was hung to the ground. He didn’t look up at you once and spoke in the same, low muttering voice the entire time he was here. Seeing him like this, you didn’t have the heart to pretend to fall asleep. He is afraid of something. Of someone. For someone? Probably the last one, knowing John. He doesn’t worry about himself until he’s on fire.

You need to tell him.

The first thing you’re going to do is take him to the fort. You’ll sit him down on the grass, by the slabs of cement the two of you have used as a fortress over the years, and you’ll show him the other guy.

And he’ll say something like…
“You look better.”
If it weren’t completely against your conditioning to show emotion of any sort, you would jump a foot.
John lingers uncertainly in the frame of the last of the two doors. He has changed his clothes since the last time you saw him, but just for a clean shirt and jeans. The night must be cold, because his coat is thick and his face is still flushed from the chill.
“How did you get in?” you can’t help but feel a little violated to have had him penetrate your quiet bubble while you were thinking about him.
“I know the passcodes. I took the train. I’ll go back home in a moment, but I just…I just remembered you don’t have anything else to read.”
Digging a book out of his pocket, he passes you your battered, much-loved copy of Shirley Jackson’s ‘We have always lived in the castle’. You take it from him, barely concealing a smile.
He didn’t come all the way out here just to give that to you, but you sure do appreciate the gesture. It was a thoughtful way of covering up his real intentions.
Folding your wings, you sit with your back to the headboard and pat the mattress beside you “Might as well spend the night. Looks like it’s snowing out there.”
You watch John choke back a protest, squirm as his stomach flips and his heart does other things, then finally smile a little when he relents and strips his jacket and shoes off. Cruel though it may be, you kind of enjoy it when John writhes with embarrassment.
You lay down just as he sits down, compelling him to do the same. Just because you’re feeling extra cruel today, you unfurl a wing and drape it over the two of you like a blanket. John’s throat spasms as his breath catches. You listen to his pulse jump up and hammer. He says nothing, staying on his back so he doesn’t have to face you.
“I didn’t tell anyone you’re coming home tomorrow. I figured you’d want to have a dramatic reunion scene.”
John knows you too well “I hope there’s a thunder-storm tomorrow. Gather the others in the library. I’ll throw open the double-doors and there will be doves and a heavenly chorus. Eridan will weep for what could have been.”
“You like Eridan?”
“When I have to.”
“No, I mean, do you LIKE him?”
“Gotta give that ass some kudos. Swimmer’s ass, John. Real specimen, right there.”
His face is troubled, his eyes fixed to the ceiling though you get the feeling he longs to look at you “Oh. I guess so.”
“Whoa there, what would Vriska say?”
John flinches a little at the mention of her name “She’d agree with you.”
“But would she agree with you lusting after another ass? Another man’s ass, no less.”
“I don’t know.”
You should stop pushing him. You were determined to be open with him only a few minutes ago, so what’s changed? Well, maybe you’re a little bit mad.
Maybe you’re a bit mad that John just rocked up in here without a warning. He came through snow and sneaked into a hospital as night fell over the city, risking his ass and your ass and everyone’s asses, just to hand you a book. That’s not what makes you mad, though, is it?
Honestly, it’s Vriska that makes you mad. It’s how he hesitated when you patted the bed. It’s how he stays even when you pretend to sleep, how he takes your hand when he thinks it’s really safe and how the cool pads of his fingers feel on your raw knuckles as they brush over the cuts, counting them.
John just kind of makes you mad sometimes.
“Hey Dave?”
“Hm?”
“Karkat’s really worried about you. Like, you know how he gets when he knows there’s a secret and he really wants to know the secret. But also, he knows that if he barges in he’s going to break
And he sorta just sits there fuming silently?”
“Yeah. He’s like that. He knows something is up.”
Finally, John’s pulse has slowed. Because you kind of enjoyed the frantic tattoo, you reach over under your wing and pat him on the shoulder, as if in sympathy. Immediately, the blood rushes to his face and pounds in his veins. He turns his head slightly to the side to conceal his reaction. Your tongue is kind of heavy “What do you want me to do about it? Did you fuck up the quarantine lie or something?”
“No. He’s…he’s asking me if it’s really a quarantine, or something else that’s long-term. He said long-term. That means it’s been bothering him for a while, right?”
It would have to be fucking Karkat, wouldn’t it? Still, out of all the friends to out you as some kind of supernatural creature, he is the only one you have ever considered coming out to on your own. Out of your friends, he was the first to get his rainbow cupcake.
“You want me to tell him?”
John shrugs “Maybe things would be easier then.”
“For me, or for you?”
He wriggles under your wing, settling into it almost subconsciously “For both of us. We’re a team, remember?”
“Batman and Robin.” you say automatically “But the saying is keep my wings flat and my chin up, John. There’s a reason I’m hiding and it’s not because I worry that I’m not pretty enough.”
He snorts “You trust me, right? And you trust them.”
As if that solves it.
You would love to show off your wings. If you had your way, you’d be hopping from roof-to-roof all the time. In another world, you wonder if you’re accepted as you are. Just a part of the furniture. Wings and the other guy and all. In a parallel Archer’s Pass, folks see Dave Strider perched on the edge of a building with a book in his hand and his wings casting a stained-glass shadow on the sidewalk and they don’t point and scream. They just call up, asking if the winds are good for flying today.
That Dave probably has a family- parents and a brother and a next-door neighbour he’s wooing over the backyard fence called John Egbert, soon to be John Strider if that Dave gets his way.
Meanwhile, in reality, you’re aware every day that a slip-up that could out you as a winged freak will result in your getting whisked away by shad government agencies. Eq and Nepeta won’t be able to do a thing. Your doctors will be penalised, punished, interrogated and possibly imprisoned for treating you in secret for six years. That handful of policemen that saw you and vowed their silence will be discovered and dealt with in a similar way. Jamie will end up in Federal Prison. John will be orphaned of family and of friends, who will no doubt be forced to stay away by their own families, and ultimately left alone in the world.
And you?
Well, from there it’s only a matter of time until you find yourself lashed to a table and facing the business end of a scalpel.
“John, you know you saved my life.”
He blinks. You’ve never said that to him before, you think.
John turns on his side “Yeah. I know.”
“And you took me in. You just, fucking, scooped this little feather-ball with a snake tail off the ground and gave me apple-juice and a blanket and a home. There are so many people who wouldn’t have done that.”
His eyelashes cast long shadows over his reddened cheeks and he has to clear his throat before he can speak “Karkat is a good person too. He would have done the same thing.”
“But would Mr Vantas? Would Kankri? I don’t think they would. I think they’d tell somebody. I just got so, so lucky with you weirdoes. Eq and Nepeta, Roxy, Boxcar and the others. I can’t risk that for no reason.”
“But it’s not for no reason!” he retorts “I’m sorry, shit, but…it’s not for no reason. Imagine how
much easier it would be to just be around them if they know what you’re hiding. They wouldn’t care. Rose would love you more for it, I bet.”
“You, well, Rose is a freak. An unnatural freak.”
“So are all of our friends, in case you haven’t noticed!”
You sigh, rubbing your eyes with the heel of your palm “I’m tired. I don’t want to talk about it right now.”
John softens “When do you want to talk about it?”
“Never. We’ll talk about it on the way home tomorrow. See what Jamie thinks.”
John groans “If you tell Dad, he’ll shit a brick and lock you in a tower like a princess. I mean it, Dave. He can’t know.”
A cruel accusation fills your mouth and spills out before you can stop yourself “Are you really this sick of keeping my dirty secret that you need to tell like six other people?”
The silence that follows this is heavy.
John flips onto his other side. You reach for him, but he folds his arms tightly across his chest.
“I’m not sick of it,” he says, sullen “I’m not asking you about this for me. It’s for you, Dave. Jesus.”
“Sorry.”
“Yeah, but you still think I’m being selfish.”
You touch the small of his back. He becomes taut at your touch. Not to be discouraged, you draw closer to him and push your face in between his shoulder-blades, thinking all the while that you really need to learn to keep your mouth shut.
John’s breathing is shallow and tense. Coiled, fit to spring back and snap in your face.
“I know you’re not being selfish. I’m sorry. I’m just a little scared of everything right now.”
His voice breaks “Me too. I’m always scared for you, ok? The others are great, but they’re not at school with you. School’s a danger-zone and I know I can’t be there all the time. I try to be, but I can’t be there to watch your creepy winged back all the time.”
You laugh softly “Some back-up, huh?”
“Wouldn’t you feel safer?”
“Yeah. Guess I would.”
“Let’s just try it. With Karkat, to start.”
“What do we do if it goes wrong? If he wants to tell people?”
John thinks for a moment, then says very seriously “I’ll kill him and bury him at the fort.”
Your heart skips a beat, and you force yourself to laugh “Sounds like a start.”
John has the good sense not to pursue the issue.
Eventually, he starts to relax. Upon realising that you’re not about to let go of him, he has no choice but to uncoil, to breathe again. He allows you to draw the covers up over the two of you. You don’t draw away your wing. It has created a small, comfortable shell of body warmth that beats the heater by miles.
Growing drowsy, you forget yourself and tug on John’s collar insistently until he turns around. You plant your face in his chest, craving the warmth and the security. It gets too lonely, sleeping weeks’ worth of nights straight in this lonely room in the basement of a hospital.
You shouldn’t ask this. Have you ever asked this before?
Here goes.
Somebody stop you.
“Why’d you save me, anyway?”
John’s response is equally sleepy “Why wouldn’t I?”
You want to point out that, at the time, you were a small, freakish bundle of snake and bird bleeding, alone in the forest that was about to be slammed by a storm, but you’re far too tired to get out much more than a short, derisive laugh before sleep claims you, and the dreams begin again.
“Come here, Dave.”
That’s you. Your real name. Not your ID or serial number or nickname- they called you the Sprite a little while ago, and the name makes your tongue buzz like you’ve eaten something sour and your toes curl on the smooth insides of your shoes. But you don’t mind answering to Dave.
“What? Did you find Narnia?”
You just finished the last book. It was the very first book series you picked and finished under your own steam, with only your own whims dictating how much you read each day. You’ve been completely giddy about it since you have finished it and try to reference it each day, just to show off. Your brother doesn’t mind. Next, he says, he’s going to get you to read ‘Cirque du Freak’ by some guy whose main character has the same name as him.
Your brother kneels on the edge of the rooftop. He smiles at you when you duck under his arm and tuck yourself into his side.
“Look at that.” he gestures beneath you.
You take a moment to identify the structure he’s interested in. The last couple of weeks have been incredibly disorientating like this: suddenly, the outside world has become a think you have to see and sneak through and experience in all its noise and chaos. You almost miss the safety of viewing it through only pictures and the brief glimpses of towns you’d get by risking punishment, straying a little too far from the mountain during flight exercises.
“Is it a school?” you venture.
“Uh-huh.”
“Are they my age?”
“Some of them.”
“Uh, how old am I?”
He does that laugh he uses when he wants to pretend he’s not sad “You’re eight, little man.”
“How old are you?”
“I’m sixteen.”
“Are there kids your age?”
He shakes his head and lowers himself to his stomach, propping himself up on his elbows. You settle beside him and scratch his back absently between his wings. Your brother sighs and pushes some hair out of his face.
“This is an elementary school. Kids go here until they get to a certain age, then they move to a high-school, for older kids.”
You brighten “Oh! You mean like how we had generations in the Trials?”
He sighs “Something like that.”
You frown. The children are all clambering over strange cages and a thing that spins. They shout and shove and run with others’ toys or a thieved ball stuck under their arms, until they’re caught and chewed out by their fellows. The only thing you recognise on the ‘playground’ is a set of swings.
There were swings in your generation’s out-doors area. You never really got to go on it, though, because Terezi always got there first and she was impossible to get off once she was on it. The other one was too rusty to use properly.
You remember that the earliest game you played with other kids was a daring game- daring each other to stand on the rusty swing and swing standing up a few times, to see if you could bring it down. The chains would leave red-brown stains on your palms that smelled like metal. One time, a kid cut himself on a stray nail and only a few days later he couldn’t open his mouth anymore.
The doctors were really mad about that, because the kid was an important specimen with lots of
teeth. You think he was a ghoul, or part vampire? They didn’t take down the swing, however, they just made it very clear that anyone caught on the rusty swing would have hell to pay.

So Terezi got to swing alone.

“Am I gonna go to a school?”

He blinks, surprised “I don’t know. You want to?”

You shrug “Well, I can’t live in the woods forever.”

He frowns “You can’t, huh? What are you going to do if you’re not going to live in the woods? Go to school? To a university? What are you gonna major in?” he turns on his side, the anger in his features muted but unmistakable “Are you gonna fall in love and get married too? What do you think your wife is gonna say about that, when she ends up with kids with little wings and snake tails?”

“It’s not gonna be a wife.” you mutter under your breath.

Groaning, he throws an arm around your shoulder and grinds his knuckles into your scalp “Don’t matter who strikes your fancy, you little bird-brain. The problem is that I didn’t spring us from a maximum security genetic experiment to get us put back in there under even more security. The government was doing it, Dave. That means everyone is in on it.”

You glance back at the playground “Even those kids?”

“Their parents are.”

“I bet some of them are like us.”

“Oh yeah? How can you tell?”

“I can’t,” you shove his arm off “I just bet they are. Just because they look normal and mean to you doesn’t mean they are. Not everyone is the way they look.”

He ruffles your hair fondly “Got myself a little existentialist here.”

“Can’t we go to another country?”

“Maybe we can. But it would be a bitch to learn the language and the customs and figure out if there government is on the look-out for people like us.”

You start to sulk “You’re just scared to try new things.”

He gather you under his arm again “You’re not wrong. But I’m scared for a good reason.”

“Well, that’s you. I don’t want to be scared anymore. I just want to go to school and be normal.”

He says nothing else. You don’t press him.

Instead, the two of you watch that other world screaming and spinning on strange devices and taunting you with everything you will never have.

“Dave?”

That’s your name.

“Fucking hell, bro, we thought y’all were dead.”

Shit.

Oh shit, they found you. How did they find you?

You and John turn around to see Gamzee and Karkat staring at you in a mixture of relief, shock and disgust, on Karkat’s part. Jesus fuck, is he mad.

Eq clears his throat “Ah, I see one of my colleagues. I had better go. You know the way home from here, yes?”

John nods, mute with distress. Eq claps him on the shoulder and weaves away into the crowd of the streets, leaving you to whatever mercy Karkat might show. Very little, you’re guessing, since you have been quarantined for the last two weeks without speaking to him or anyone else.

And John’s right. He’s totally got that ‘I want to know something but I won’t force it, you shit, because I’m a nice fucking person’ look all over him. Gamzee just looks mildly concerned, which is nice, you guess. His get-well message was consisted of a doodle of a cluster of skulls, each smoking from the mouth, and a message that read ‘Die motherfucker, die’.

Wow, you really don’t want to have this heart-felt reunion on this busy street. Or in a slightly more peaceful coffee shop. Or anywhere you can be observed.
You hold your hands up “Before you say anything, I’m promise, I’ll tell you everything. But you have to keep your fucking mouths shut, Karkat, for the next ten minutes until I find I place where we’re less likely to be recorded and uploaded and go viral. I don’t need all that meme and fame shit. Understood?”

Karkat opens his mouth to snap at you. Gamzee covers his mouth with a single, huge hand and nods pleasantly.

John’s giving you the weirdest, most mixed-up look ever. He knows what you’re about to do. This is kind of swan-diving into a ready-made grave, isn’t it? And up until two minutes ago, when you were between John and Eq and the world looked right and safe and you were comfortable in it, you never would have breathed a word of it to either of them. To anyone.

You have always known this secret would be the death of you. Somebody important, somebody who knows what you are and where you came from will hear the rumour, track you down and haul you away, leaving your friends and family with their throats slit for daring to help. So, it is in yours and their best interests to nest on this, right?

Well, maybe you can’t do that anymore.

Beckoning with one, bruised hand, you lead Gamzee and Karkat through the crowd. You are aiming for the playground that is attached to the elementary school. The playground also belongs to a nearby park, but it is generally uninhabited at this hour on a Sunday. Parents have hustled their sunburnt kids indoors and parked them in front of colourful children’s shows. Teenagers are off to movies or skate-parks, and will only brave the nostalgia of the playgrounds during the night when everything is under a bit of gloom. No one will come by.

The area is relatively sheltered, and if they demand to see your wings after hearing the story, you’ll let them peek down your shirt.

It occurs to you now- they have never seen you undressed, have they?

As you near the park, John twigs to your plans and leans in close to whisper “Don’t do this just for me.”

“Try and stop me.” you hiss back with a cheerfulness that is not entirely fake.

It’s not just for John, is it? This is also a selfish move. True; the next time you are beaten to a pulp by mystery animals, John will have Karkat and Gamzee, and the others too if you get your way, to rely on for support. The stress of this secret has put him into a kind of bubble. You’re not sure if he understands it himself yet- if he knows how he shirks his own desires, how he bends double to satisfy other people even when he hates them. How he can never do anything for himself.

This will help him. It has to help him.

And as for you?

Well, you just want to go to the fucking beach with your friends. Is that too tall an order?

You don’t think so.

When you finally reach the park, Karkat takes it as permission to unhinge his jaw and begin the assault “What the fucking, fuck Dave? What parallel universe are you living in where people do shit like this? Hello, welcome to the modern age, here’s a gift fruit basket full of the finest, local and ripe FUCK YOU, DAVID STRIDER!! THAT IS NOT THE WAY PEOPLE DO THINGS! When people get sick, they tell their friends they’re sick! They get on the fucking phone and say ‘hey, friend whom I love, there are currently pathogens wreaking havoc on my immune system, please don’t come over because I worry for your fragile, mortal health!’, they don’t go into a freaking quarantine and refuse to talk! If you could talk to John and make him miserable, then you can sure as the fucking sun is hot scroll down ONE CONTACT on that PIECE OF SHIT PHONE and make me MISERABLE TOO!!”

Karkat pants, red in the face, surprised to have been allowed to go on for so long. He kicks vaguely at the woodchips and sawdust on the floor and stumble over to that big piece with the monkey-bars and slide that every playground in America is equipped with. Dropping heavily onto the slide, Karkat digs out his inhaler and takes a few puffs.

He coughs “See what you did to me? I have never before had an anger-induced asthmatic reaction. Pat yourself on the sack, Dave, because that is literally the first time in the glorious history of my
rage-fuelled conquests that I have ever had a rage-attack.”

Concerned, Gamzee squats next to Karkat and plants his face against his friend’s chest. This is Gamzee’s way of judging how Karkat’s breathing is after an attack. He does it every time, however small the incident. And, as he does now, every time Karkat relents a little, disarmed by his weakness, and threads his arms around Gamzee’s shoulders, holding him close.

Karkat’s features soften, with the worst of his anger out of the way “What happened to you, Dave? I know what sick looks like. You’re not sick.”

“Beaten ta shit, more like.” adds Gamzee, muffled in Karkat’s hoodie.

You sit down on one of the swings (swings are the best thing mankind ever did for their children—forget vaccinations, this is the real deal, this is the apex of human creation) and anchor yourself in place by digging your feet into the woodchips. God, you remember this. Leaving with your shoes full of chips and splinters. After getting wet and making marshes out of your socks, that is the worst possible thing shoes can do to a person.

John takes the swing next to you. Sensing the atmosphere, Karkat turns Gamzee around, who settles between Karkat’s knees like a king on his throne.

You struggle for an opening line. John trains his eyes on the ground, his brown skin becoming pale and bloodless.

What you finally come out with is: “Adoption is a lie. Actually, no, it’s a wonderful thing that gets kids off the streets and gives the abandoned little humans of the world a way to have nice childhoods. But for me, it’s a lie. I wasn’t adopted. I was pretty much literally brought home for a pet.”

None of that came out the way it should have. Going by Gamzee and Karkat’s expressions, they think you’re about to relate a horrific tale of sexual abuse.

You scramble to move them past the notion “No, not like that you fucking perverts! Jamie is a saint. Seriously, we’re getting him beatified this month. The Pope and everything, it’s gonna be-”

“Dave.” says John.

“Yes, no, I am not a sex slave. I’m an animal.”

Your stomach fills up with butterflies, but you walk over to your two friends and turn your back to them.

“Look down my shirt and tell me what you see.”

After a few awkward seconds, Gamzee hooks his finger in your shirt collar and pulls the back away. You hear a faint cry die in his throat, and Karkat gasps like a Southern Belle getting ready to faint.

“Looks ta be wings, ta me.” reports Gamzee.

“Now you know why I like nuts so much,” you say, giddy and terrified “Nuts and seeds that is.”

This prompts a slightly hysterical giggle from Gamzee.

Quickly, you retreat to your swing and the relative safety of John’s side. They don’t look grossed out. Or mad. Just really, really surprised.

Karkat is the first to break the silence “Where did you come from?”

“The forest,” John ventures “I found him there during a storm. He…he has this other way he looks. Like a little bird attached to snake. He was so little I could carry him then.”

“Was that the same summer y’all all up an’ disappeared, motherfucker? Jus’ ‘fore Dave came ta stay?”

He nods “That was when I found Dave.”

“We don’t know anything else. Why I’m like this, or what I am. I’m just…well, this is just me. Not much else I can say about it. I’m a bird-man. Surprise.”

Karkat folds his arms “I fucking knew there was something off about you. You never let us see you with your shirt off and you never go to the beach or take showers at school. I fucking knew there was something.”

“I thought y’all musta had some kinda heinous scar.” offers Gamzee “My ol’ man’s got this big-ass burn scar on his back, an’ I swear ta God he’s payin’ for my college fund with assassinations or somethin’, but ya know…I mean, I kinda thought y’all were from a a family that got their beatin’ on ‘fore y’all became an Egbert.”
“I’m a Strider, not an Egbert. They are two very different species.” you say automatically, making John smile.
“Can I ask about the Striders?” asks Karkat “Why did you leave them?”
You shrug “You can ask, but I can’t remember a thing. My head was bleeding when John found me, so…I guess I’m an amnesiac. Just, fucking, just ask whatever you need to.”
“Y’all eat little animals an’ stuff, like a bird?”
You nod shamelessly “Voles are awesome. Best food on the planet. No one will ever convince me there is a better meat than a vole.”
Karkat blanches and covers his mouth “Gross. I mean, uh…yeah, no, to hell with sensitivity. That’s really gross Dave.”
For some reason, Gamzee is delighted “Tav kissed that mouth an’ everythin’.”
“Can you fly?”
“Hell yeah. I’m awesome at flying.”
“Terrible at landing.” adds John “Every time he lands on the roof I think he’s about to break through it.”
You shoot him a dirty look and the message is so clear, even from behind your shades, that all three of them crack up. A second later, you’re laughing along with them.
This is impossible, isn’t it? This is some kind of a fever dream.
No way in the world is coming out as a winged, rodent-eating monster this easy.
Karkat looks at you with a kind of affection and relief that is unusual for him “Do you want to tell the others?”
“No. I mean yes. But not today.”
“Ya know we love ya,” says Gamzee, pulling a weird face as the ‘L’ word comes out “I don’t like ya very much, but I ain’t gonna use yer…yer wings against y’all or nothin’. Shit’s sacred bro. Ain’t gone get this shit outta my mouth, ‘less the FBI an’ CIA get their torture on.”
“Oh God,” gulps John “Don’t talk about that stuff, you dork. I don’t even want to think about that.”
You can’t help but feel a little offended at how easily this has gone.
You have imagined this moment many times. There are two main themes: their immediate, overwhelming acceptance, and their immediate and unrelenting revulsion. Generally you reveal yourself to an assembly of your friends at the fort, they still love you, Vriska dies from a brain aneurysm and John announces he always hated her anyways, and you proceed to show off with the other guy and some mad flying skills.
In the second version, everyone screams and Vriska spears you on a pitch fork she must have been keeping in her pocket the entire time, then they deliver you to the hospital where the medical staff call some government agency that slaughters everyone from Jamie to Roxy, and whisk you away to some island where they can continue their research on their most valuable patient in peace.
Sometimes, in this nightmare, John is brought too and has his limbs and torso fused together to make bloodless, slimy-fleshed worm-man.
You forgot to factor in the fact that your friends love you. That they are their own people, with thoughts and opinions independent from a society that would rather make an experiment of you than acknowledge you and the world you have come from. That they wouldn’t mind the surgery scars that the wounds the wolf left now criss-cross and join- the only protests will come from the fact that the scars are a sign of all the trauma that is lost in your past.
And sometimes you forget your wings are not horrible, rotting sails of flesh. They are smooth and glossy and natural, and the red goes great with your complexion.
You have nothing to fear from them…except for Vriska, maybe. You’ll cross that bridge when you come to it. Or toss her off one.
“What was it that attacked you?” asks Karkat.
Whew. What a question.
Forming a basic template of the lie, you open your mouth to tell him but end up laughing in his face. Doubling-over, your face to your knees, to conceal the tears that are starting down your cheek. John puts a hand on your back and mutters some dry comfort.
You fucking did it.
It's finally out there. You fucking did it.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to address Vriska's characterisation and descriptions so far before people get the wrong idea. Now, for me, Vriska is one of those characters I hate, but also can't wait to see because she's so layered and complicated and wonderfully evil. Kind of like the Homestuck's version of the Joker, right down to paralysing a hapless fan-favourite. Just remember that her characterisation so far comes from the limited POV of the two boys, who are either too mixed-up to know they're in love or think that eating their emotions is a viable diet. Also, from other people who think they know her at a glance. Vriska's character arc goes deeper than causing little problems. She's actually got something planned for her I hope will be very interesting. So, yeah. I'm not an 'eew Vriska' person.
A succession of scandals

Your name is…
Your name is…
Something J. There’s a J. A big J, which makes you think it must be at the start of your name.
The Blue asked, do you have a name, and you told him it was a gone-thing and he asked, do you know where you come from, and you said that didn’t matter ‘cos you’d never ever go back.
The Blue said, I won’t take you back, and you said you knew because the Blue was a thing like you.
You can smell it. The same-ness.
The Blue looks like a People, but also not like a People. Too…too…it’s a gone-thing, but it’s a word like tree branches that fan out against the sky and are smooth and curved and not at all sick. A LOTLOT pretty, and a LOTLOT scary because it came right out of the earth and it’s better than anything a People would ever make. He’s like you, because he’s not a People. That is what you smell.
He was the Dangerous that lived on top of the mountain, but he was not a Bad Dangerous. He was a nice Dangerous. He picked you up and washed the dirt off your tummy and put some stuff over your wounds. At first, you screamed and bit because the stuff was what the white-skin-coats used after they put fire under your skin to stop your blood coming out.
The Dangerous is smart. He didn’t try to hold you down. He let you get scared and bite him hard, on the hand, and smiled a little as his blood came out all hot and sizzling on his skin and as blue as the sky.
He said, do you see now that I won’t hurt you, when your teeth were still in his hand.
And you took your teeth out and nodded and let him put the white, soft stuff on your skin. It was nice and clean, like the stuff that comes with the Bad Cold, but then your blood got on it.
How long have you been here?
There was a People in the (what’s the word?) a little while ago, but the Blue told you not to worry about them, and that they didn’t see you because you were sleeping all the way at the back.
A few lights. A few darks. You can’t tell in the Blue’s Place (the word is… the word is…) because there are always lights. From little sticks (cave, the word is cave) that fill up little grooves in the walls of the cave, where the big bits of cloth that keep it warm don’t cover it up. He has a bigger fire in the side, kept in place by a lot of rocks. When you could leave your nest at the very back of the cave, you went to sit in front of the fire.
A LOTLOT of heat. The wood that burns in the fire talks to you. Makes a lot of crunchy, nothing noises. You asked, what is it saying?
And he said, I don’t know. I don’t speak the same dialect of fire.
And he smiled, like it was funny, but he did not laugh. He’s got the same stuff under his skin. A fire under his skin and you wonder if it’s because he had a bunch of metal stingers in him.
You asked, do you know the white-skin-coats?
He said, I have met them, but I have never been under their control.
And you asked, what is control?
Control, he said, in this context means it is something another person has over others to make them do what they want.
And you said, they put fire under my skin and made me sick.
He said, they cannot reach you anymore
You said, no, because I killed some. Not a LOTLOT, but…one…two…three. I killed three. I took the middle one’s heart to eat because they never fed me until I wasn’t hungry anymore.
He said, was that why you attacked the…what did you call him, the Redbird?
Yes, you said, REDBIRD, and no, I attacked him because he saw me and I thought he was a People before he put his feathers on. I could have put two legs away and showed him we were the same, but I was….scared.
He said, that is alright, but you cannot hurt that boy again. He’s an important person to many powerful beings who would show you no mercy if they knew it was you that had hurt him. He said, looking a little sad or scared or mad (you can’t tell what’s on faces very well), I will not tell anyone about you after you have left, that is provided that you refrain from attacking anymore humans or… Redbirds.

You wanted to tell him about the John.
The Blue is like you. The Blue wants to help you and has helped you and wants to help the REDBIRD as well. So you should tell him about the John, right?
But the Blue might stop you. From him telling you not to attack the People anymore, you know he doesn’t know things like you do. He knows smart things, because he’s a Dangerous and like a People, but he doesn’t know what you know.
The REDBIRD needs your help. You have made up your mind.
Gone-things have begun to come back to you, and so has a plan. You sit in front of the fire and listen to the nothing-noises of the fire. And you think about the REDBIRD and how hard he cried because of the John and how much you want to hurt the John for what he has done to make the REDBIRD so sad.

Every moment you think of the REDBIRD you think of the way the white-skin-coats used metal stingers to put fire under your skin and how much it hurt and how, while you sit and listen to the talking fire, you decide you will kill the John.
Not quickly. First, you will take the John into the woods and, if he’s just a People like you think, you will eat his arms and legs one-by-one. Then you will eat everything up to his chest. Then you will tell him everything Bad he has done and why he deserves to die like this.
A LOTLOT of pain, for sure.
And the REDBIRD will watch and he’ll be happy and when you leave the mountains, he’ll come with you and you won’t be alone anymore.
As soon as you feel better.

John Egbert: who’s that in the van? =========>

Your name is John Egbert, and you are extremely suspicious about the intentions of that white van sitting outside of your school. It has been parked outside the gates, on the opposite side of the street for the better part of the lesson. All the way through the lesson, you have had the sensation of those murderous eyes crawling all over you. The same one that hits you every time you are home alone. Or, increasingly, when it is just you and Dave. You’re not sure what you should do about it. If you alert the teachers, one of them will undoubtedly go out to the car to confront the an. Is there any red flag redder and bigger than a hulk of a white van parked outside a school, after all? Assuming they do catch the bastard watching you, then it’s only a matter of time until Dave is dragged out of the mutant-closet. Then you’re all screwed.
So you ignore the sensation. You try to comfort yourself with the fact that you are in the middle of class and surrounded by your friends. Really, what are they going to do? Snipe you through a window?
“Oh, Jesus fuck.” you rasp.
Sitting beside you, Eridan whispers back “What’s wrong?”
“I…it my leg on the table.”
Eridan gives you a weird look “Oh. Ok. Weirdo.”
He must notice the way the blood has drained from your face completely, because he shoots Kanaya a concerned glance over your head and mouths something to her. Out of the corner of your eye, you see her nod primly before she turns her attention back to the board. Most of the lesson has been a blur to you. You are autopilot at the moment, you hand moving automatically to write out the notes.
You’ve got no idea what is in your notebook right now. All you can think about is Dave, in the next classroom over. With Gamzee and Karkat. So, if something bad happens, they can help him hide. If something bad happens to you, then Eridan is going to be spattered with your gore and Kanaya may finally show some terror, for the first time in her life. Nothing to do about that, is there?

Unless you can find some excuse to get under your desk and stay there.

Groaning, you put your head on the desk and fold your arms around your stomach. It must look like you are in immense pain, because you feel the eyes of the classroom now finding you as well as that hot glare that has been pressed into you for the better part of an hour.

The teacher’s droning stops.

“Young man, what’s wrong?”

“I think he’s sick.” says Eridan. When you do not respond.

Kanaya jumps in “He did not look at all well this morning, and he mentioned a bad headache when he woke up.”

You said none of this. What great friends your friends are, willing to lie at the drop of the hat.

The teacher keeps talking to you “Well, the lesson only lasts for another five minutes, then you have a free period. Can you hang on until then?”

 Honestly, you just can’t be bothered to pretend like you care about the rest of the lesson. If it’s only five fucking minutes until you’re all unleashed anyway, then what the hell is the point of staying here? But you can’t say that to her.

So you nod, keeping your forehead to the desk, and don’t lift your head for the next five minutes. A current of whispers starts up in the classroom. You get the gist of it without even hearing it properly—they’re worried you have caught whatever it was that Dave had. Shit, you should have told your friends another story to spread to the rest of the school. Now, if you so much as sneeze, you’ll have them running in waves, screaming “WALKING DEAD!” or something.

The moment the lesson is up, Eridan gathers up your books as well as his. Kanaya slips an arm around your waist and guides you out of the classroom like an invalid. You don’t protest, but the moment you are over the threshold, you feel the burning weight fall from you. And feel a hundred pounds lighter. A million pounds lighter. Finally, you can breathe.

Kanaya and Eridan fall into step on either side of you. They usher you past the classroom where Dave is, and you don’t protest. You’re just too tired to protest.

“It is the stress, isn’t it?” asks Kanaya.

Your mouth is dry “Yeah. I kinda don’t know what to do now that he’s home…after seeing him get that close to being dead.”

The escape you made from the school with Dave once he had started to cough blood was so speedy and sneaky that no one was even aware you had left until you called Karkat from Nepeta’s car, after Dave had been handed over to the good doctors. You can’t quite remember what you told them, so you have been vague with the details and the continuity of Dave’s ‘illness’. All they know is that he had to be away from home for four weeks, and you have only just begun to recover the sleep and the energy and the vitality you lost during those four weeks.

“Let’s go sit down, yeah? Get you out of the crowd, or somethin’.” Suggests Eridan.

Shrugging, you let them lead you away from the crowded part of the hall. You are relieved to encounter none of your friends along the way. It would just be too much of a hassle to explain yourself to anyone else.

Soon enough, the three of you end up on the beanbags in the library. You sink into the depths of one of them and decide you are never going to get up. You could live in this beanbag. You could work from this beanbag. Sleep, eat, work out some way of going to the bathroom too. It could work, it really could.

Kanaya tries to find a neat way of composing herself within the gelatinous grip of her beanbag “I don’t suppose you want to talk about it? I can’t promise that my insight will be as deep or revolutionary as my partner’s, but I am willing to listen.”

“Oh, uh. Me too.” says Eridan a little uselessly. He’s still not quite used to being approachable.
The library is relatively empty, and the three of you are sitting in an area guarded by shelves on either side, but with your backs to the walls so no one can sneak up from behind. A free period. A safe place, to tell them everything.

Fine. You can’t really take this anymore.

Maybe, if it were just the stalking. Maybe if Dave weren’t fresh from a near-death experience, you could keep it all to yourself the way you should be doing. But you just can’t handle the pressure of protecting him on your own. Or, telling yourself that you are protecting him when you keep these things from him.

For once, you want to hear someone else say it.

“John…you may not want to admit to it, but we have all noticed you growing wan and ill since Dave has been hospitalised. Now that he is back, you have not gotten much better.”

Is that true? Are you really still that same, grey waif that wandered around in your place while Dave was gone? Funny. You thought you at least looked a little bit less like death, by now.

“What are you seeing on me, Kanaya.” you are curious “What do I look like to you? Sick or dying?”

“You look like a solider.”

Both of you look at Eridan quizzically, and he grows embarrassed.

“You don’t look over your shoulder anymore. You walk in straight lines and you’re not interested in stuff anymore, when we’re out in the city. You just want to get inside, and when you’re inside you just look really tired.”

“I look like a solider?” you repeat, still confused.

Eridan nods, uncomfortable “Just…just like you’ve got some huge fuckin’ mission and like your mission ain’t goin’ so w-well.”

It must be really bothering him, if he is stuttering.

A solider, huh? Is that really what he thinks of you right now? Are you really like that? Kanaya seems to think so “I must agree, John. This military attitude Eridan describes is a new thing, though your unhappiness is not. It’s Dave, isn’t it?”

You shrug “I guess.”

“It is not unhealthy, you know. To have feelings for a person your family is fostering.

The noise you make is the same noise a chicken makes when its head is chopped off. Eridan’s eyes go wide in shock and he shoots Kanaya a filthy glare, as if she has just given away a surprise.

“I- I…no! That’s not it at all!”

Kanaya gives you a tight-lipped little smile “Well, I will not make you admit to anything you do not wish to admit to….but it is pretty goddamned obvious, John. To me, anyway.”

You hide your face in your hands, feeling yourself glow red. This is not how you wanted this to go at all.

“Well I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it. You an’ Dave aren’t related by blood or nothin’.”

Eridan motion to pat you on the back, then lowers his hand awkwardly into his lap and pretends he never moved.

Your head has begun to ache.

“I don’t know what’s going on with him. Or me. I just…that’s not what’s making me crazy.”

“Dump her.” says Kanaya automatically “I assure you, she will survive the blow. In fact I bet she will revel in the challenge to climb back to her position of power, after you can her.”

There’s a kind of vicious glee barely disguised in Kanaya’s green eyes that make you want to inch away from her- you would, if it weren’t for the beanbag holding you in place. Under her eyes, you seem to be peeled. Layers of secrets and defences peel off like the petals of a rose being shredded. Actually, something way less poetic than that is appropriate at this point, because you are about to make a mess of yourself crying.

You really don’t want to cry, but the prickling heat behind your eyes will not be denied. You crumple with your face to your knees before they have time to notice.

You need to tell them something. Anything to distract them from you and Dave.

“I’m being stalked.”

That came out a lot easier than you had hoped it was going to.
Once you get started, it is like a tap has been turned on. Then the handle was removed and now there is no way to stop it unless a plumber is called to twist it shut.

“It started out really little when Dave was in the hospital. First I just got this feeling that I was being watched at home when no one was there, not even Godcat. And I only got it when I was home alone. It never followed me into the bathroom or anything, so I thought, it must just be me being paranoid if it stops in certain rooms. But like, once, before that, there was a rock that got thrown through Dave’s window,” you hesitate slightly here and decide to substitute something for the truth, in case they want to know why Dave was targeted. You can’t quite bring yourself to tell them yet. “But I think it was meant for me. Then it got worse. Then I started getting that feeling when I was at home with Dad and Dave. And sometimes I look out of the window at night and I see the tip of a cigarette burning, but the second I start looking, they walk off the road, around the corner where the woods start. Then, like, two weeks ago, I started to get these envelopes. They’re full of pictures of me.”

With shaking hands, you dig into your bag and produce the freshest of the envelopes “This was sticking out of my locker this morning.”

Kanaya accepts the way she would take a poisonous snake from your hand. Eridan scoots over to look over her shoulder. You hear her flip open the already torn-up seal and tip the photos into her hand.

There are only three in this batch.
You, between Sollux and with Feferi hanging off your arm like she tends to do when walking with a friend. Each one of you wears your school back-packs and the gates are still in view in the unfocused background. It was taken as you were crossing the street, from the street you were crossing to, and almost directly in front of you.

You and Dave, from the back, dressed in the clothes you wore last Monday, so the photo had to have been taken when your dad sent the two of you out on an errand for more milk from the corner store. You distinctly remember growing nervous during that walk, looking over your shoulder with such a frequency that Dave thought you were looking for Vriska and sulked a little. Even in the photo, your shoulders are squared and tense, while Dave is about as relaxed as he ever gets in public. Somehow, even with your creeper-senses on full alert as you waited for a fresh attack of the heebie-jeebies, they sneaked up and snapped a photo less than 10 feet behind you.

The third is the worst. Taken from the street, of your bedroom window. There is a faint, orange glow towards the bottom of the photo, as if the person who took it was smoking. You are in the process of closing your blinds as the night grows dark.

You remember that moment. You remember that it was a few seconds before the feeling of being watched struck you, and how you felt a prickle of fear. Dave had entered your room just as you saw the flare of the lighter on the street. No way is your stalker stupid enough to be using a flash while snapping photos of his target in the middle of the night, but what if Dave had seen him?

A note too. There was a note. But you are not going to let them see the note. Not yet.
The note said: “Next time we’ll pose together.”

How can you show that to them? How can you show that to anyone?

After a few moments of thick and uncomfortable silence, Kanaya speaks.

“I think it would be best if you and Dave sleep over tonight. What do you think, John?”

You shrug.

If you stay over tonight, more things are going to come out for sure. Dave might reveal himself.

Dave will probably find out about the stalking, because he’s sure as fuck going to want to know why Kanaya is insisting on a sleep-over in the middle of the school-week.

“I don’t want to tell anyone.”

“And you don’t have to,” she assures you “But you do realise that your life is clearly being menaced?”

“Whoa, slow-w dow-wn there. W-why the fuck shouldn’t we tell anyone? The cops could sort this fucker out in like, tw-wo seconds. What about your friend? The scary cop with the Terminator face and the Disney princess hair?”
Looking up at him, you shrug “I…I don’t want to.”
How can you explain this to him? You can barely explain your motives to yourself, let alone justify them. Equius could fix this for you. Quickly, quietly, and if necessary, they could just bury the body in Nepeta and Roxy’s yard. It’s not like they haven’t removed inconvenient barriers before. Ok, so never an entire person, but…
Somehow, you get the feeling that it would be better for Eq and Nepeta and the whole gang if no one knew the kinds of problems you are dealing with right now. They should be focussing on Dave.
“Why the fuck not?” presses Eridan, his face ashen “You know-w about all them hikers and shit on the mountain, right? The people bein’ killed? There was one like one day after Dave w-went into hospital and there was another one tw-wo days ago.”
“What?”
“Well, what if they’re the same fuckin’ bloke? W-what the hell do w-we do then, if you don’t want to tell anyone?”
You clear your throat uncomfortably “Listen…if they approach me, then I’m going to tell Equius and Nepeta. Then I’ll bring the whole police department down on their heads. But I’m not going to do it unless I really have to. Trust me, please, just trust me. I have a really, really good reason. I just can’t tell you what it is right now. But if you report this on your own, without my permission, I’m gonna deny the whole thing, ok? I really need to be in control of this situation.”
They stare at you like you’re insane, and look at each other in awe. They wonder: did we really just hear that?
You are also impressed with how determined you are to keep your troubles quiet. When did you become so willing to suffer for Dave? Willing to risk your life for the dumbest reasons- intuition, of all things?
Eridan sighs “Fine. I won’t say a thin’.”
“I will say something. I am going to tell Rose, and that is as far as it will go. No, don’t give me that look, John. Rose is smarter than the three of us put together. She may think of some way we can quietly dispose of your problem without outside help. Oh, no, no not murder. I meant scaring the fellow off. If this is really how you want to do this, John, then of course we’re going to help you. The only question now is how we convince your father to let you stay the night, and get Dave to come along quietly.”
You can’t help but let out a bitter laugh “Shit, that’s gonna take some work.”
Eridan comes over to your and puts his arm around you awkwardly “It’s gonna be ok.”
“Ok.”
“Ok?”
“Yeah.”
“Good. Now-w let’s get you up and get you some w-water or somethin’.”
You decide they don’t need to know about the white van.

Dave Strider: discover the rat that got in your locker ==============>

Your name is Dave Strider, and you should be singing the song of freedom and joy.
Free periods.
God, do you love a good free period. Time to relax and shoot the shit with your friends while you pretend to be catching up on work and homework assignments. Time to casually sneak out of the school to get food, even though you’re supposed to, on pain of death by teacher, stay on the grounds until the day is formally over. Above all, sometimes you can snatch a moment to yourself to sneak up to the roof and stretch your wings in a secluded corner.
The best part of your week.
Unless certain people decide to fuck it up with their unnecessary curiosity.
“Who the fuck did this?”
You can tell the damage done to your locker will be extensive, just from the outside.
Sollux appears at your shoulder, and Tavros at the other.
“Is…is your, um, is the locker bleeding?” asks Tavros nervously.

“That’s paint.” points out Sol, sticking a finger-tip in it “See? I mean, I fucking hope it’s not blood.” Trails of bright, saucy red paint are indeed leaking from the bottom of your locker. That pointless little filter bit on the top, probably the breathing holes for kids who get stuffed into theirs, is also dusted with a light, red mist that comes off on your palm when you touch it.

You feel like a goddamned hunter tracking an elk, here “It’s fresh as fuck. Somebody did this like three minutes ago.”

Tavros starts to whisper the V-word about two seconds before she stalks around the corner, looking more pissed off and hungry for a fight than she normally does. Her name dies a strangled yelp in his throat, and he scoots slightly behind Sollux.

You throw your locker open in about the same second as Vriska comes up to talk to you.

“Where the hell is that buck-toothed beau of mine?” she demands as you throw the door open, not caring if you smack her between the eyes.

“Holy shit!”

“Oh my gosh.” echoes Tavros.

Sollux just stares with this blank kind of glee. Nothing like this has ever happened in your school, so far, so you guess he might just be enjoying the scandal.

Vriska wrenches the door out of your hand and pushes it flat “Uh, excuse me, Mr Irony, I was talking to you-”

“Did you do this?”

She blinks, surprised by the venom in your voice “Did I do what?”

You open your locker and make a dramatic gesture up and down the red-spattered interior of your locker “Did you steal all of my shit and spray my locker as red as a blushing school-girl’s cheeks?” Sollux snickers. Tavros hooks an arm around his skinny waist and tugs him back a little bit, to safety.

Vriska gapes at the damage “Uh, wow. No, thank you. It’s a great idea though.”

“Well if you didn’t do it, then who else do you know of with a specific grudge against me?” She cups her chin, pretending to think very hard “Hmm, well, I know for a fact that half of the school thinks you’re a pathetic poser and the other half actively want to remove you forever, so…I don’t know, only about the entire school? Anyone smart enough to stroll out to our local art supplies store and buy themselves a can of red spray paint? Congratulations, Dave, you’ve had your first hate-attack, or whatever. More to come, I’m sure.”

“Vriska-” starts Tavros.

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“Vriska-” starts Tavros.

She sticks her hand up like a stop-sign “Shut up, honey. The grown-ups are talking.”

You feel a red hot anger rising up in your chest. Even if it wasn’t Vriska that emptied out your locker and painted it red, she doesn’t have the right to talk to you like this. To talk to anyone like this. Somebody’s gonna need to teach her a lesson, really soon. A small crowd of other students have gathered around the locker, whispering about the damage done to your locker.

She continues, comfortable in the spotlight “Besides, I was just in class. This looks like it happened about five minutes ago, right? I didn’t leave my class early. Anyone can vouch for that. You’re starting to sound like a crazy old man, Strider.” her eyes narrow in a black glee “Why are you so ready to attack me, anyway? Do you like me or something?”

Oh she did not just fucking do that.

“Wrong team, Vriska. Even if I were straight, I wouldn’t look at you once. I don’t date would-be murderers.”

The crowd goes silent. The blood drains from Tavros’s face, and you regret your words immediately. But not enough to stop talking, once you see her face. You have her on the ropes.

“It was an accident. Old news.” she snaps.

“Yeah, I get it. An accident he survived, right? So not only are you a would-be murderer, but you’re sloppy as fuck. What again was it that made you think I was gonna change teams just to chase your ass? Was it your winning personality?”

“Listen, I didn’t mess with your shit! The person who did is probably laughing their ass off right now, watching us!”
“Let them laugh. No, seriously, Vriska, I’m really interested. What makes you think anyone would want anything to do with you, like, really? We all know John’s just too scared of the wrath of retribution you’ll bring down on his head if you dump him.”

Vriska folds her arms tightly across her chest, her hands curling to fists “And we all know you’re still lusting after Tavros’s ass.”

“No he’s not.” says Tavros suddenly.

He shrinks back into the wall as the attention turns on him.

“We’re cool,” he croaks, somewhat unconvincingly.

Sollux can’t resist the golden opportunity to face-palm.

But, bless his heart, Tavros presses on. He’s got something to say and he’s not going to let the staring crowd stop him anymore “You’re, uh, you’re the one with the problems, Vriska. I know you like to–to imagine that, um, everyone else is as messed up and complicated and just...disturbed, emotionally, as you are, but we’re not. We’re just trying to get by in high-school. You’re trying to take over the world or something.”

Some asshole in the back goes ‘oooooh’, which sets the rest of the gawking assholes off.

Vriska gives him a long, cool stare that makes you want to jump in front of him. Sollux actually does inch in front of Tavros, his hands curling to fists at his side.

The tension breaks all at once. Vriska whirls on her heel and basically shoulder-charges the crowd, who can’t spill out of her way fast enough.

There are scattered, uncertain laughs and someone tells you they’re going to get the janitor.

You barely hear them and turn back to your locker. The blood roars in your ears.

You can’t do this.

You can never let your secret spread. Not with someone like Vriska waiting in the wings to destroy you, just for the fun of it.

Karkat and Gamzee are as far as it goes.
Police-people don't cry unless there's a good reason

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the length of this chapter. Long, hard day and a longer, harder week before it. School is a sport and no one can tell me otherwise.

Jamie Egbert: worry ==========>

You do.
Your name should just be changed to Worrywart Egbert, because that is what your boys have made of you.
If you aren’t worrying about Dave’s health and safety, then you’re worrying about John.
While Dave’s general moods seemed to have improved just a little bit- such a little bit it would be as imperceptible as he likes to believe his moods are, if you weren’t always watching him like a hawk for any improvements or lost ground, John seems to have grown more miserable every day.
Over the last two years, you have watched John wither from a happy, healthy child into this flinching, downcast teenager. His smile is now closed and forced, and you miss his bright, buck-toothed childhood smile so much some days it just hurts.
And some days, it just doesn’t stop hurting, when you get to thinking about how much your boys are going to have to go through in the future. Speaking of the future, one question that really, really plagues you is the question if Dave will have a future at all? What can a boy with wings on his back and the darkest history imaginable behind him hope for in this world, except for imprisonment and a life of experiments and pain. Every morning you wake up, you wonder if this will be the last day that you have Dave under your roof.
What will take him from you? What will try? And what will you do if they succeed? It’s not like you can tear the entire government down to the ground with your bare hands, but you’re sure as hell going to try when and if Dave goes missing.
These kinds of emotions are natural for a parent, you suppose.
Back when it was just John that you worried for, and only worried for in the most natural ways, you felt as if you had removed an important internal organ, packed its lunch and sent it on its way with a cheerful warning not to talk to strangers every time John left the house.
But now, that feeling has escalated to the equivalent of removing your whole spine and your brain too, and telling them sternly to be home before dark.
What can you do, but let them go? They are both fifteen years old (according to Equius, Dave could be as old as two hundred, what with the life span of the average of Dave’s kind) and they will have their own lives outside your household in about three years.
Dave will have to sort his own problems out as best he can. You have no doubt that he will discover some way of keeping his secret exactly that, and he will excel in the outside world once given the space, the time and the chance.
And as for John?
You are not blind. Your son is a profoundly unhappy child. Each day exposes him to some kind of unrelenting misery, which you can neither lessen nor identify. If only you knew what it was, you would brush it away in an instant. You might have blamed John’s change on his relationship with Vriska, but this greyness of the mind that has fallen on him predates the meagre few months those two have been dating.
There’s nothing you can really do for either of them, as difficult as that has been to come to terms with. Apart from provide this roof and fill the fridge and supply whatever emotional support they will
allow you to give, at this delicate and prickly age.
And of course, the obvious, being the djinn you are about to bind to Dave at the cost of your soul.
Little things like that.

Dave Strider: sun yourself ===========>

Your name is Dave Strider, and God knows you need a break from the world. Going up to the roof is just the right thing for it.
Not your roof. John’s acting really, really weird and you kinda don’t want to be trapped in close quarters with him if you can manage it. Right now, it would be all kinds of awkward if he climbed the drain-pipe and joined you flat on his back in the winter sun. How are you supposed to get away from him without making it obvious and not hurting his feelings?
You can’t.
So you’re borrowing Nepeta and Roxy’s roof.
When you were younger, the meetings with Roxy were a regularity every fortnight. You have since out-grown the need for a therapist. Roxy says you ‘pout-grew’ it, because apparently after you turned fifteen you just clammed up and refused to speak to her about anything, like a sulking little kid. Once she could no longer get what she needed to hear out of you, the meetings were no longer productive and she cut them off completely. Now the only time the two of you meet up is for a coffee, when she has a weekend free and you’re sick of looking at your friends’ faces.
The weather is not good. The smell of a snow-storm has jammed itself up your nose and refuses to move. The clouds themselves are still tangled in the peak of the mountain, casting a light fog on the mountain and the streets around it. Your view from the roof is pleasant and secluded, since Roxy and Nepeta live on a little hill towards the back of the town. No need to fear for your safety up here.
The only thing that is risky about being on this roof is the risk of getting speared on the spikes they have above their gutters. Some kind of Gothic, pseudo-Victorian dealie that looks fashionable in theory, but kind of camp in practice.
God knows you love a bit of camp.
For a long time, you sit with your wings open in the weak winter sun. The wind is cold, but it is not strong. You have had to strip down to one of your specially modified shirts, with the slits in the back, to be able to spread your wings, but the cold doesn’t bother you very much. It never has.
At the moment, you are trying to keep your head empty of thoughts of John. Well, if you’re being honest, it’s just fears for John.
You get the feeling that he’s slipping away and he won’t come back, once he has completely slipped. But you don’t want to get that feeling.
You want to pretend it’s all ok for as long as possible, and maybe it will all turn out ok.
You trust John to fix himself. He can do it. He’s a strong, reliable guy. You just wish he would smile more, and like he did when you were little kids, when there was nothing in the way of his smile or behind it.
He was just plain happy to see you, as you were to see him.
That would be nice to have back.
And you are doing an extraordinarily shit job of keeping your head empty.
“MOTHERFUCKING SHIT-MASTER BASTARD PENIS!!” howls Nepeta from the attic.
Apparently she sympathises with your general train of thought at the moment.
Concerned for her health, you hook your fingers in the drainpipe, trusting your wicked bird-boy balance to keep you from pulling the whole thing down, and peer into the attic. Nepeta sits in a flurry of papers. There’s a paperclip caught in her curly hair and a look on her face that makes you want to creep into a dark corner and hide.
“You ok?” you squeak.
Luckily, she doesn’t hear you. You get to try again, making your voice as low and manly and
uninterested as possible.
Nepeta looks up, flinching “Dave. How long have you been there?”
Hours.
“Not that long.”
Seriously, Nepeta, you have been up here for just so fucking long. You’re the roof-master, you’ve been up here for so long.
Nepeta squints at you “And just how much did you hear, Mr Man?”
She calls you that when she’s mad. Or trying not to be mad. Or covering something up really badly.
“Not that much.”
To your surprise, you see Nepeta’s eyes are wet. She sniffs and opens her arms, beckoning you for a hug.
Obediently, you lower yourself into the room and dodge through the pile of papers to her side.
Nepeta enfolds you in a hard, breathless hug. She cups the back of your head and presses your head to her shoulder, so she can cry a little bit into the back of your neck.
You are stunned “Did someone die?”
“Just another hiker.” she whimpers “Oh, honey. You’re so young.”
“Am I dying?”
“No! No, no, not for a long time, no!”
“Then what the heck is wrong with you?”
Nepeta is easily one of the most bad-ass people you know in the world. She might even be more badass than Equius. If anyone can out bad-ass that man, it is her. She’s a fucking police-person, for fuck’s sake.
What is it that you missed?
Over her shoulder, you catch a glimpse of the papers that surround her. You are being hugged in the middle of a sea of pictures of violent crime scenes. At this point, you shut your eyes tight and press your face into Nepeta’s shoulder.
You wish John would call.
Your name is John Egbert and you should have stayed home tonight.
Not because the snow began to fall upon an already caked, slushy road, concealing the black ice as a nasty surprise for unwary pedestrians. Not because it was already dark by the time your father asked you to run to the store to refill his prescription of allergy medicine (a flimsy excuse to expel his only biological son into the snow, but he insisted), or even because the trip was going to take some time to be finished with, possibly until the kind of late hour that you’re not technically supposed to be up to on a school night.
But because of the man behind you. Or really, just because you knew something like him was going to happen.
There’s a man behind you. You came close enough to the man to smell him, and have determined that he is not the smoker. It’s relieving and frightening at the same time to realise that the man under your window is not the same person as this hulking, looming giant. Assuming you survive this, you can at least comfort yourself every time there’s a flare of the lighter under your window by thinking ‘it ain’t him’, it ain’t that giant man’. But now that you have seen what one of them looks like, you’ll be stuck wondering: what do the rest look like?
Can they get any worse?
Can they get any bigger and meaner looking? There must be some kind of ring-leader, you guess. Having seen the man and had him talk to you, you can’t imagine he’s the kind of man for whom plotting and stalking come as second nature. If this guy were operating on his own, he would have undoubtedly busted your door down and carried you off into the woods weeks ago for a quick, brutal murder. Where would their leader- who must be the smoker, you have decided- collect these kinds of people?
Is there some kind of thug-pound, like a pound for dogs except that cells line the walls and the occupants are all muscle-swollen, bug-eyed creepers that try to snatch your scalp bald instead of licking your hand when you come close to the bars?
If there is, if you can knock this guy out, you’re finding the number to the thug-pound and giving them an earful. They need to find more responsible owners for these people. Did the smoker even have the proper papers and licences to handle them? They can witter on all they want about there being no inherently bad kinds of people (like breeds of dog), only owners, but you’re going to tell them that the fact remains that some people are just made to watch the world burn.
Pleased with yourself for working in a Batman reference, you let out a little giggle. It’s a frantic, hysterical noise, thanks to the situation you’ve found yourself in.
The streets are dark. Home is nowhere near close enough that you’ll reach it or any kind of help before this man catches up to you, so you have already resigned yourself to fighting for your life. Now that you know you’re going to have to fight this out, it’s kind of a relief.
The fear of violence is a horrible anticipation. But the confirmation of it, the acceptance of the violence coming your way is kind of easier to weather, because your mind is designed to deal with it on some level. The fight response. Its good friend, the flight response, has dragged you towards this
dark park. When you initially came here you were just looking for help. Somebody a little more or less sketchy than the man tailing you might realise what was going on and would come over to help, right? Wrong.

The park was totally empty. On almost any other given night there would be some of the scarier of the homeless populations dozing in the bushes and a handful of teenagers, determined to prove their masculinity to each other and to themselves. But the cold has driven the homeless to doorways and burning trash-cans in the city. The teenagers must be inside too, having a fight club meeting or something else as masculine and hard-ass within the warmth of a parent’s garage.

So you’re stuck in this weird chase. The man doesn’t want to admit that he is behind you, chasing you. Because you have been very subtle about looking back over your shoulder, he seems to think you have yet to notice him. So he follows at a distance. He does nothing to attract attention to himself, except every now and then he will slip on a patch of ice and curse. Earlier, you were only able to smell that he was not the smoker and judge that he didn’t really look cunning enough to be tormenting you alone because the crowd had pushed you together for a few, brief moments at a cross-walk. You think he must have been willing to get right up in your grille to avoid losing sight of you.

You maintain a lead of about 30 feet while the man trails behind, slipping and cursing. Your hands are in your pocket. In one, you have made a fist around your dead phone. In the other is your father’s allergy medicine. Nothing that can be used as a weapon. Not even if you’re Saw level creative. Just your fists. Right now, you have no plan. Would it really be so bad to lead the man back to your house? He knows where you live already. Sure, there are a few lonely wooded paths on the way home, but if he was going to kill you he would have already done it, right? Or maybe he’s waiting until you’re in a more remote area to finish you off. Comforting thought.

God, why aren’t you more careful?

Over the past few days you have barely had a moment alone, thanks to Kanaya and Eridan’s meddlesome sense of responsibility. If they’re not clinging to you, then someone else is. They won’t let you be alone at school or walk home with just Dave. In fact, every day this week you’ve had a ride home from one of the two. Your father might be getting suspicious (seeing as Eridan is driving miles out of his way and Kanaya lives on the other side of the city) if he took the time to notice what’s going on with you these days. You’re not sure what’s wrong with him. He’s had a whole week of late shifts that mean he plods into the house at odd hours or leaves very early. You don’t see much of him anymore, except when he has the time to eat with you and Dave. He hasn’t even noticed that you and Dave are getting ferried to school.

Dave complains. He doesn’t know what’s going on and God forbid that he should ever be in a situation where he is 100% up to speed on everything, so you have had to play the ‘just trust me you asshole’ card a few times to get him to shut up.

Behind you, the man stumbles and slips again. This time, you hear a marked thud. Risking a glance over your shoulder, you see the man has tripped into a thick, pillowy drift at the side of the road. Snow has exploded out in every direction and obscures him from view for a moment.

This could be your chance.

“This is our chance.” whispers a cracked voice in your ear, as a little calloused hand closes around your wrist.

You whirl around, intending to punch your would-be saviour’s lights out, but stop when you see it’s a girl. It’s not sexist. You just don’t want to hit a girl because the girls you’re close to are all bad-ass, no mercy kinds of ladies. Provoking them is not a good idea. By extension, provoking the rest of the female sex is not a good idea.

So you just kind of go with it. She leads you into the snow, not caring about the clear footprints you’re leaving.

You can’t see very much of her, with the street-lights muffled in the snow and the trees casting deep shadows. All you can make out is a swishing, short black ponytail and a thin, strong frame about the same size as you are. Her hand is bare in the snow, like a freezing manacle around your wrist.
You start to protest “What the-”
A cry of frustration and anger comes from the street. Soon after, there’s the sound of heavy footsteps crashing after you.
“Hey kid, how much do you weigh?” rasps the girl.
“Ex-fucking-scuse me?” you snap.
“Like, 140 pounds or something? I can work with that.”
Before you can begin to tell her how many things are wrong with that question, she’s turned around and tossed you over her shoulder. You catch a flash of bright red eyes, completely red, without an iris or a sclera, which is enough to make your stomach drop. And that’s before you’re upside-down, looking underneath her arm at the charging man. She jumps. Further than it should be possible to jump.
You let out a strangled yelp and close your eyes. There is the sensation of being hefted up in the air, hanging limp and heavy in the air, then your back is cracked straight up against a tree trunk. A wide bough is beneath you. The girl turns you to face the trunk, having you hug it tight.
“Stay here,” she orders “If you try to get down by yourself, you’ll break your neck.”
You force your eyes open in time to see the girl jumping from the wide, snowy bough she has left you on. She lands lightly in the snow, her jacket flapping open. The man stops in front of her. He rears back, as if horrified or afraid of what he is seeing.
Their voices are faint from this height, but you can just about make out their conversation.
“You’re dead.” rumbles the man “You should have expired last year.”
“Looks like your expiration dates aren’t as accurate as you people think they are.”
“Get out of my way.”
“What are you gonna do to the kid?”
“I don’t have to tell you that.”
The girl draws something from her pocket that makes the man flinch a little bit “I think you do. I think you should tell me absolutely everything you can think of, and maybe I’ll be a little bit more nice about what I’m gonna do next. Maybe you don’t have to stay conscious for all of it, Mr Eggs.”
You were almost killed by a man called Eggs. Somehow, this is the most disturbing notion of the entire night.
“What happened to your eyes, kid?” the man seems to be trying to intimidate her “They didn’t last past the date, did they?”
She shrugs “I don’t know what you folks did to my body, but some of it actually worked.”
Behind her back, something stirs in the back of her coat. You can only watch in a faint horror and even amusement (this is just too weird to be happening for reals) as a long, slim tail shaped like a whip snakes out of the back of her jeans. In the dim light, you can just about make out the scaly texture and the wicked, curved claw at the very end of it.
You hear the girl snort. Smoke plumes out from either side of her face. A strange glow issues from the front of her, so you assume her eyes are glowing or something equally as strange.
The man opens his mouth to scream.
The girl lunges forward. She is at the very most a third of his size, but knocks him over with little trouble. Her tail wraps around one thick wrist and she pins the other behind his head with little trouble. She lifts the knife over her head, letting it catch the dim moonlight.
“Say you’re sorry!” she orders.
The man squirms weakly “It’s you! You’re doing this to us!”
“Yeah, it’s me! Now say you’re sorry! Make me believe it, too!”
You can hear the sneer in the man’s voice “I’m not gonna apologise to the bitch that killed my-”
Once she has heard this, she strikes without mercy. She stabs the man’s hand, the blade punching right through the palm and into the dirt. The man roars in pain.
Now that her hands are free, the girl holds them out on either side of her. As you watch, her fingernails are sucked back into her fingers, quickly replaced by straight claws almost as long as her fingers are. She draws her forefinger across the man’s neck, leaving a shallow cut where the carotid artery would be.
“Say sorry.”
“F*ck you.” spits the man.
“Say sorry.” she insists “Maybe you’ll melt my heart. What little heart your people left in my chest.”
The man seems to have lost the plot. He starts to rave, even as she cuts him again across the cheek
“You were the worst! You were the nastiest! You had teeth like a spider and a face your mother
woulda hated! You spat and bit and put fire on everyone! We wanted to kill you so many times, but
you were the only lizard we had! I wanted to kill you! I used to put extra sedatives in your food to
make you sick!”
“I know,” laughs the girl, almost as hysterical “You think I didn’t know that? I know everything! I
know you, I know you used to take Dirk out of his room and do things to him! I know you used to
tie up Rus and just hit him again and again until he bled fire! You people may have blinded me, but I
saw everything in that facility.” she leans forward, so close you’re afraid she’s about to kiss him
“And I remember every single thing.”
In one swift motion, she wrenches the knife from the man’s palm. She flicks it across his wrist. You
think she has cut his veins open, but then you see something dark and weeping sail into the gloom
around them. Then you notice the red streak that fell behind it and realise what she has done. Feeling
sick, you turn your face to the trunk. You try to block out the screaming that starts up. A second
later, she muffles the screams, with her tail, you think, choking the man.
“One more time!” she barks “What do you want with my friend there in the tree?”
The man gurgles “We…the red bird…he lives with the basilisk…we needed the….the bait.”
Your blood runs cold. How do they know about Basilisk? Do they mean Basilisk specifically, or
Dave too.
“You wanna say that a little louder, so the guy can hear?” she calls out to you “Hey kid, listen to
this!”
She must have hit the man, because he whimpers a little bit before saying loudly “We wanted the…the basilisk!”
“Why do you want the basilisk?” presses the girl “Tell him! He deserves to know what’s so good
and precious and rare about the basilisk!”
“It’s the….it’s powerful. Rare. That’s it.”
“What do you want to do to the basilisk?”
“We don’t…we got all we need.”
This surprises the girl “What, really? You’re not trying to put the old team back together?”
The man lets out a broken, little sob that makes you want to throw up “Old team…you killed them
all.”
“Nah, not all. Not yet. But wait, I’m curious. Tell me, what are you doing?”
“Clean-up.”
The girl seems satisfied “Well fuck me. This changes everything, doesn’t it?”
Finally, you summon the courage to speak “Wait. I want to know about it.”
The man has begun to sob in earnest, so at first the girl either doesn’t hear you over him or doesn’t
care. So you have to shout.
“Wait! Don’t kill him! I need to know about…about it all!!”
The girl looks up at you, turning slowly. She is silhouetted in a sudden flare from the street as one of
the street-lights shorts out and bursts in a shower of sparks. Your eyes may be playing tricks on you,
but you’re certain that you see horns.
“No. That’s enough for one night. I’m tired.”
She turns back to the man and cuts his other hand off. You can’t look. You try not to hear either, as
she cuts his throat open and the wet gasps of the man’s last minutes fill the air, but the snow has
silenced everything. There is nothing else to hear.
He takes a lot longer to die than you thought was possible. Maybe it’s only half a minute, but the
sound of him thrashing and gurgling seems to last for years. When it is finally done, the girl gets up.
“I’m coming up.”
“Don’t touch me.”
“What, you want me to leave you up there all night? I’ll wash my hands in the snow. How does that sound?”

The thought of her clawed, bloody hands grabbing you makes you want to be sick again. But what else can you do?

She has the answers. You have to let her do whatever it is she wants to do to you. Whatever it takes, to get the answers.

“Fine.”

In less than a minute, she has you back on the ground. She takes care to plant you on some clean snow. The floor of the woods is caked with blood. You comfort yourself with the ridiculous thought that it looks like a slushy machine had a fit and spewed strawberry flavour in every direction. However, that doesn’t get you very far. The smell of blood is thick in the air. The smell of meat too, like the organic smells of a farm combined with that over-powering smell of blood you get whenever you pass a butcher. Also, the man apparently emptied his bowels a few seconds after the girl opens her throat.

She steps carefully around the man’s soiled lower-half as she stoops, snatching up the hands she severed. Once she has wrapped them in a cloth and stowed them in her pockets, she sticks her gorey hand out at you with a smile.

“My name is Terezi.”

You shake her hand “John.”

Then you pass out.

You come to what might be about fifteen minutes later, propped up on a bench. Terezi’s sharp shoulder serves as a pillow. Through her thin jacket (too thin for this weather, but she’s not shivering), you can feel too much of her. Her wiry muscles, an arm corded with muscle. A slim waist you could probably fit your hands around. She isn’t wearing a bra either. Not that there’s much to conceal or hold down.

That throws you for a minute, when you realise that having a girl, essentially bare under a thin jacket and T-shirt in the snow, against you does absolutely nothing for you. Granted, she did just kill a man. Granted, it’s so cold your balls have shrunk. And granted, you already have a girlfriend. But still, a boob is a boob, right? There are certain, inherent biological reactions that should be programmed into you, when it comes to a boob. You need to be embarrassed. You need to be a little bit turned on. You need to be torn between the desire for the boob and the disgust at the idea of touching a murderer, and another girl who is not your girlfriend.

This boob should be doing something for you. But it’s not.

Maybe your problems extend a little bit further than just liking Dave. Maybe you’re not just a Strider-sexual, the way you originally diagnosed it.

“You awake?”

“What time is it?” your mouth feels full of cotton.

“You’re awake.” confirms Terezi “So…”

She clears her throat awkwardly as you straighten up, scooting away from her. The two of you are sitting on a bench, in the same damned park she just killed a man.

“You’ve never seen someone die before, huh kid?”

You swallow hard “No.”

“Well ‘scuse the cluster-fuck you just saw, then. Try to forget about it.”

She stares at the ground, not speaking. She’s not bad-looking, either. Not pretty, not in the way Vriska and Kanaya are pretty, and not in the grown-up way Roxy and Nepeta are pretty (well Roxy’s just down-right beautiful, actually). More like she’s pretty like a tiger is, for being something fierce and powerful and a part of the natural world. She may be able to pass as a normal girl, in her baggy jeans and MCR T-shirt and the little black hoodie, ill-suited to keep out the cold, but she does not pass for one very well. You get the feeling that this is what it looks like when a wolf puts on a sheep-skin.

Her hair is wild and black, barely tamed into the ponytail you saw earlier. Strands of curly black hair
fall over a face so sharp you wonder if you could cut herself on her cheekbones. And those eyes-
they are all red. A hot, brutal red like a coal that is hard to look at for a long time.
“I thought you were someone else. Someone I knew from before.”
“Can you even see me?”
She snorts, and a small trail of smoke of smoke issues from one flared nostril “No. Don’t need eyes,
do I?”
“I guess not. If you say so. You don’t need eyes.”
“I really scared you, didn’t I?”
Suddenly, she punches you in the shoulder and laughs. The solemnity falls away like she’s changing
clothes.
“Get over it, kid! You live in a fucking horrible world full of fucking horrible people! You’re gonna see more stuff like this before the year is out, believe me.”
She grows silent once more. You tilt your head back to the dark sky, watching as snow-flakes drift
down in the winds and breezes.
“Do you know him?”
“Who?”
“The one they were calling the basilisk.”
Terezi nods “Dave Strider. Old friend of mine. You live with him, huh?”
Dave Strider.
So he did remember at least one thing about himself, even if he doesn’t know that he did. Either that or he’s been lying to you from the moment you brought him home.
You turn to her “Tell me everything.”
“Everything about what?”
“About the place Dave was before he was here. About who those people are. Everything about
everything.”
She grins “Not a pretty story, kid. I hope you have a strong stomach. How long you got?”
“All night, if I need it.”
“Good. This is gonna take some time to tell, anyway. There are a lot of things to talk about and I
don’t want to repeat myself.”

Chapter End Notes

Also, a short note on the word 'diagnosis'. The context I used it in was when John was pressed to a boob and wondering why the boob did nothing for him, so obviously it relates to his sexuality. I in no way mean to say that having a non-hetero sexual...sexuality (i could have phrased that better) is the only thing that's normal that's kind of a dumb thing. I mean, come on. If there's one thing that Homestuck has taught us, it's that there are no polar opposites. There's always a spectrum in between.
(FORWARD THE RAINBOW. EQUALITY FOR ALL. YOOOO)
Your name is Terezi Pyrope, and you told the nerdy kid everything. He also listened to everything, which was a surprise. You may never have had the need, the chance or the desire to tell your story to anyone, the full version or the abridged, but you are aware of how crack-pot it may sound to somebody who hasn’t lived through it. In your experience, people need to have their noses ground into the evidence before they’ll believe something. And you’re not above that. In fact, that suits you just fine.
The course of true justice never did run smooth. Or maybe that was true love? Eh, who cares. Same thing to you, since your one true love is justice. The one thing that has yet to let you down in life. That’s probably because you’re the one enforcing your own personal brand of justice, but whatever. You don’t care.
When you were done talking, the nerdy kid actually thanked you. You got the feeling he would have rather spat on you for making him watch a man die- even if you were saving his nerdy butt in the process. Honestly, some people with their skewed sense of morality. Why did you kill the man, Terezi? Well, nerdy kid, because he was gonna do much worse to you than kill. But- but, but you’re a murderer!
You fully anticipated this kind of stupid, repetitive exchange that would culminate in nerdy kid running off in tears and tripping into a snow-drift if you were lucky, so having him thank you threw you off for a moment. Not knowing how to respond while clinging stubbornly to the upper-hand, you just stuck your long, forked tongue out in the air and flicked it up and down. What you wouldn’t give to know how his face looked when you did that. The nerdy kid went onto say that he would do his best to protect Dave, but that if you were gonna keep causing trouble then you should probably stay away.
You told him you liked how he thought he was in charge. He told you that he didn’t think he was in charge, that he just happened to know some scary people who would take charge if you came by and started threatening the new life Dave had somehow wrangled into existence. Now, you’re not the best judge of this kind of thing by any means, but you’re pretty sure that nerdy kid is in love with Dave. Close, personal relationships are not your penchant. They’re difficult and obtuse and governed by rules that no court of justice in the real world would ever be dumb enough to approve or enforce. Having said that, you yourself are obtuse and difficult, so you are in a good position to understand things like that. Power plays.
You’re rambling again. Having a captive audience is fun, isn’t it?
Well, to make a long monologue short, you just smelled it on him. You’re good at that. You can smell death and sickness, being the animal you are, and in turn you can also smell things like love. People who are in love smell a certain way. Nerdy kid smelled of old, stale pain that kept coming back to torment him and of a fierce desire to protect someone. In fact, you’re kind of surprised to find such a concentrated desire to protect somebody in a kid his age, with his kind of easy life.
What the hell kind of suffering could he have known?
You wished him well anyway, telling him you’d be in touch. He didn’t like that, but he didn’t retort either.
So he crunched off down the street, on his way home. You sat in the pleasant, mingling scents of snow and blood for a few moments longer before you gathered your courage and got up to head to the place where you sleep these days. You don’t like it there very much. It’s quiet and sheltered, which suits your particular disability. Therein lies the problem. Utter silence, thick and heavy, and nothing but time to think about what you’ve done and what you’re doing. Worse, what’s been done to you.
The nerdy kid...he listened to all of it without commenting. He only spoke to ask a question about Dave or Dirk, who he hadn’t even known was a thing until you told him about him.

Dave really has lost his memories. Lucky fucking bastard. He always was the lucky one, wasn’t he?

Now, walking home, you’re compelled to kick at a snow-drift in frustration. Dave was always lucky. He gets to be inside tonight, with a parent and another kid that is literally so in love with him it makes you want to puke. He gets to be safe and fed and cared for all the time, which doesn’t strike you as fair. What did Dave do to earn his safety, except for do what Dirk told him when they staged their miraculous escape? Maybe you don’t know what he’s had to do to survive. Maybe he’s had to do his own killing-spree to stay alive, like you, and you just don’t know about it yet. But somehow you doubt the last seven years have been anything but glossy and perfect for Mr Strawberry eyes.

He’s probably grown up beautiful too.

You may not be able to appreciate physical beauty as much as the next person because of your dumb, crapped-out eyes, but you do become acutely aware of it when you realise you’re around someone the rest of the world finds really fucking attractive. It becomes like a shield they wear. Means you can’t get too close or really hurt them, because they’ll always have that shallow, stupid advantage over you.

You kind of hate Dave right now.

You’re not sure at what point you made the decision to follow nerdy kid home, but you seem to have made it. Presently you find yourself on his trail. Smelling the love on him and the irony tang of blood he’ll have to wash his hair to get rid of. It is an easy matter to follow him, though he has grown paranoid from the earlier encounter. You sense him look over his shoulder frequently, but he never sees you. Your kind have a way of not being seen when you do not want to be seen.

The nerdy kid takes a few short-cuts through the woods on his way home. That seems kinda dumb to you, since he almost was just killed in the woods by a crazy man. If you were in his position (in some weird, parallel dimension where you’d ever allow yourself to be in such a weak place), you certainly wouldn’t be taking short-cuts through dark woods as snow piles up and the winds howl overhead.

The nerdy kid doesn’t have to open the door, because there is already someone waiting there. You can feel them. Standing in a warm bar of light that stretches across the street, with their arms folded. When Dave exhales, you see it as a red steam. All of him is bright red and almost too much for your eyes to register. You have to squint them, to close your perceptions, and trust in your quick reflexes to keep you from tripping.

“John!” he calls “What the hell, man? Is this a sport with you Egbert men now? The ‘let’s see how long we can keep Dave up worrying that we’re dead in a snow-drift’ game?”

The nerdy kid, John, doesn’t say a word. He just sweeps Dave up into his arms and backs him into the house. You hear the door slam. You hear a noise that suggests they have fallen on top of each other in the hall.

Then you creep closer for a better view.

Dave Strider: get this cold nerd off of you ===============>

You’re trying, but the sucker has a grip like a dead man.

“John!” you protest “John, get off me! You’re freezing!”

Struggling into a sitting position, you push John off of you and are about to start to really lay into him, until you notice his eyes are wet.

“What happened?”

Then you notice the smell. Oh God, the smell. The smell of death and so, so much blood it makes your stomach churn and your claws ache to come out. When John doesn’t respond, you force his limp limbs out of his jacket, expecting to find him split open underneath there, with his organs sitting in the sling of his shirt. But he is unmarked.

“John? Talk to me.”

The smile that curves his mouth now is easily the scariest thing he has ever done with his face “I’ve
got one fucker of a story to tell you Dave.”

Green wolf: wander =============>

The man with the fire under his skin doesn’t want to let you leave the cave, but you insists. You scream and howl and try to tear things up, so he’ll give you what you want. But he can pin you down really easily. Not hard and painful like the white-skin-coats, the doctors, that put the metal stingers in you to put Bad fire under your skin, but gentle. He spent a lot of the Time getting you better and he wants you to stay that way.

You say, but I don’t have the Time to wait, because REDBIRD is in trouble.

And he says, REDBIRD? Oh, I understand. No, he is not. He is perfectly safe.

And you say, it is the Bad Dangerous with him. He hurts him. You have to let me go.

And he says, don’t be ridiculous you foolish young pup. Nothing can hurt him where he is, and I’ll thank you to stop biting me.

But you didn’t because you were a LOTLOT mad- absolutely livid, in fact, so you took two legs down and bit and bit until his skin broke, then his blood spilled out and it was so hot it burnt your tongue. You let go.

He said, oh look at what you’ve done now. Could you please make it a personal mission not to inflict anymore damage on yourself, please? I do worry about leaving you alone, you know, that you might kill yourself if I am not here to monitor every movement.

Then you put two legs away and cried because the pain was Bad and your head had hurt. More of the things you missed were coming back- are, coming back.

Making your head hurt. A headache. But it is good to have them back. Some of the stuff that you missed. Others are just Bad Dangerous and a LOTLOT painful to think of ever happening to you.

When the man with the fire under his skin (what was his name?) put the stuff on your tongue to make it better, you started to feel better. You started to feel a lot of things you hadn’t felt in a long time.

And you thought about how much you wanted REDBIRD to feel like this too- all that happened when you fought was crying, so he must be really unhappy, right? You remember now that you don’t like it when people are too deep in Bad stuff to feel like themselves. Or happiness. And in a way, it’s because of REDBIRD that you have the chance to get all the gone stuff back and figure out what you want to do from here.

So, you need to help him.

So, you stood up and said, I’m going now and the only way you can stop me is by killing me.

And he looked at you. There was fire in his eyes and you smelled that he was angry, like ash, but he didn’t do anything.

Then his voice was very cold for all the fire under his skin as he said, very well then, I will not stop you now, but I am obliged to protect that boy with extreme prejudice now and do not make the mistake of thinking that I will go easy on you, if you threaten his safety.

Was he talking about REDBIRD? You don’t know or care at the moment.

You are out in the snow again. You have taken down two legs and are enjoying the cold, kind of, after being inside for so long. It is nice to have winds in your fur. To smell smells that are not the sweet, burning-things in the cave. You smell the cave now, faintly, and it makes you feel good to know you have a place to go back to. In the snow, there are lots of little things hiding. Little animals that are hiding, now, too cold to go outside. Little plants that are dead and frozen under the snow. Little things that you don’t have words for that rustle in the undergrowth and make you want to push your muzzle into the snow to investigate. You may not know what they are, but you know better than to look.

You are going to the path. Where you killed the people that put their hands all over you. Looking back, the people was trying to help. You had put two legs away so it thought you were a people too, but you aren’t and you don’t pretend that you are. So you bit their throat out and it felt good. It feels good to remember the blood between your teeth. Even though you had put two legs away, your teeth
were still good and sharp and it was easy to take their throat away. The trip to the path is nice. What hurts has stopped hurting too much to run, so you run. You missed running. Running feels very nice.

And when you get to the path, you see the people is gone. Taken by the small things that are like you - the other wolves, maybe?

Then no, you realise, that’s not true. You see the place has a few peoples there. There is some weird, yellow stuff in a square around the place where you killed the people. You can still smell the people’s blood. The peoples that are around are all dressed in the same black-skin-coat thing. It is dark, so they can’t see you. You were too excited to be outside to notice them.

They are Bad, but not Dangerous.
In fact, they will not be Dangerous at all. You lick your chops. You’re hungry. The man with fire under his skin feeds you well enough, but you want this food. You want more blood between your teeth. You want to feel good again.

You creep out of the trees. There are three peoples around. They all have the same skin-coat and one of them is talking into a little box that talks back, but not the way the fire talked back to you.

“Shit!” cries one of the peoples, seeing you.

They reach for something. That was a gone thing until a little while ago. Now you know it’s called a gun.

They put fire under your skin. Blast your skin away, if they hit you the right way. Kill you, maybe. But you’re too big to be killed. Probably the little things the guns shoot can’t even hurt you either, because you’re different. Stronger.

You bound over to the people in one clean movement and land with one paw on their chest. You push them down. You press down. The people coughs a lot of red, red blood up that reminds you of the REDBIRD and makes you work a little faster. You crush the people’s head. The other two peoples are shooting at you now. Their guns are LOTLOT loud with the snow on everything. Even the man with the fire under his skin probably heard it all the way on the top of the mountain.

Turning around, you bite the closest people. You take their arm off and swallow it. The blood is nice. The people falls away and now all that’s left is the other people, still firing. Then they stop and their gun click, click, clicks, trying to shoot but there are no more pellets.

You growl at them. The people throws their gun. It bounces off your head, and that makes you blink. By the time you’re done blinking the people has turned around and started to run. But the path is full of snow and it’s hard to get through the snow and they’re a people, so they’re a LOTLOT slower than you.

So you catch up quick and bite their arm, to turn them around and go for the throat. You came here for the throat, so that’s what you’ll take out. You take out the throat in one move and the blood is between your teeth.

The blood is nice.

Now, you’re not hungry anymore. You don’t know if you were hungry at all or if you just wanted to do that again for the feeling of it. But still, you feel as if you should put some of this blood to use. You’ve made a big mess getting it out. So you roll around in the reddened snow all over the path for a little while. A fine powder of red slush gets on your fur. You don’t mind. It feels nice.

When you are done, you leave the path. You’re heading back down the mountain, to see what you can do for REDBIRD.

You’ve already killed three peoples tonight, so the John shouldn’t present much of a problem.

**Equius Zahhak: throw up in the snow drift ===========>

Your name is, finally, Equius Zahhak and you are about to throw up.

Nepeta holds up the corner of the already blood-stained blanket “Is this him?”

The gag-reflex kicked in the moment you saw him. His face is associated with pain, and of course, the terror you often felt in the dark when this particular man slipped into the room you and Dirk sometimes shared, to take your room-mate away.
You have to swallow hard to clear your mouth to speak “Yes. It’s him.
Standing up too suddenly, you have to lean on Nepeta’s shoulder to prevent yourself from falling over. She grips your arm and holds you up.
“You ok?”
“I’m going to faint.” you threaten.
“Don’t faint. It’s freezing and late and I need you to be together right now.” she squeezes your face between her cold, slightly red gloves “Hang in there. I promise, you can break down when we get back to my house.”
“Why am I going to your house?”
Nepeta nods towards the corpse “You’re not staying home alone with these guys around.”
You don’t try to argue with her. In your earlier years, back in the good old days when you were convinced that your physical superiority granted you mental superiority as well, you would have argued fiercely to be allowed to be left to your own devices, even though you have very little interest in doing so.
The face may be nearly destroyed by neat, almost surgical cuts up and down its cheeks and jaws, but you know who it is. All you needed was the eyes to know who it was that was staring up at you, glassy, drooling blood, lying in a pool of his own blood. Additionally, his bowels released a few moments after the death, so there’s a particularly ripe smell surrounding the corpse as well as the red snow-tinged with brown in certain places, on closer inspection. You have spent much time imagining far more creative deaths, generally preceded by torture drawn out by a few weeks and a lot of time to think about what he has done, but…hey, this works too.
The corpse is hastily covered up underneath a tarp, fetched from the ambulance that is required to come along when someone reports a body and is unsure if they are dead yet. The jogger that discovered this particular corpse early this morning is the only one currently using the ambulance. She managed to make a stuttering, sobbing call to 911 before passing out in the snow. Now, she is wrapped in a shock blanket and being treated for a nasty conk on the head. Frankly, you think anyone with the notion that this morning has both the appropriate light quality and temperature for jogging has brought this sort of nasty thing upon themselves.
Briefly, you and Nepeta talked to her to see if she might have some inkling of who (what) the culprit was. She introduced herself between hiccups as Hine Snow, and said that she knew absolutely nothing about what was going except that, oh God, a man is dead and I found his body, and he was frozen and…
Shortly after this began, she dissolved into sobs and the paramedic shooed you away.
The rest of the offices are still in a flurry. There are about 20 of you, swarming the park with sniffer dogs and flashlights and a whole lot of rage, in search of the culprit or more bodies. Three of your own were discovered savaged on the mountain path this morning, near to your brother’s cave. Far too near, in fact. You’re going to have to have some strong words with him, and hang what he says about respecting your elders.
You liked those officers. Ramirez, Jones and Hammarskjold. Maybe the trio didn’t have the catchiest names in the business when threaded into a team, but they certainly were a good team. Earnest, hard-working and unprejudiced, which is difficult to find in this profession lately. For Allah’s sake, Hammarskjold had three kids and Jones was getting married in the spring. While Ramirez may have had no current romantic or familiar attachments to give the loss of her life that special, dramatic weight, no one in the department made coffee as good as her.
You and Nepeta are the primary go-to’s for this case. In a medium-sized town like this one, certain business can be conducted in a certain level of privacy. Whenever something weird or extravedantly and impossibly violent like this happens, you and Nepeta are given permission by a sort of unspoken, collective consent by the whole faculty to stand off by yourselves and whisper suspiciously until you can come to a conclusion, and execute a furtive revenge if it would be better not to involve the rest of the department. Many times in the past, the two of you have proved yourselves and your team-work is air-tight and produces results. You suspect some of your colleagues think you have terrorist links-you in particular, but that’s probably just down to your ethnicity. The important part is that they
know not to get in your way when you and Nepeta start to whisper. So the two of you are free to stand over the body- but far enough away so that you only get a faint whiff of sewage- and mutter to each other.

Nepeta loops her arm through yours and rests her head on your shoulder thoughtfully. She tends to gather herself up to you in the heat, seeing as your blood is quite literally fire and you can throw off heat like a radiator.

“We’re dealing with different killers.” she says “Different methods. What do you think?”

“Must be the Lycan Dave was attacked by,” you crack your knuckles in the anticipation of finding the thing and turning its bones to a fine powder “And I’m going to assume that this body was not the work of the Lycan?”

Nepeta hums “That’s what I was thinking. The Lycan’s murders- when it killed the Three Stooges, bless their souls-”

“Jones was atheist.”

“Bless his consciousness and the endless void that has claimed Jones…it just wasn’t an intelligent killing. Remember when I used to get my claws out and just hack up anything that challenged me?”

“So, we’re dealing with a supernatural being then?”

“Of course.”

Nepeta shrugs “I’d know if there was one in my territory. I’d smell their hunger. And then we’d be getting homeless folks and late-night partiers turning up dead with no brain fluid too. No, it’s not a kitsune, but whatever it was that got this one used claws too…which one of them is that guy anyway? All of them look like the same thug to me, photo-copied a couple times with some bonus ugly.”

“That was Eggs, if memory serves. I believe the other one was called Sawbuck.”

Over the last few weeks, your quiet little town has turned into something of a battlefield. First, a few hikers were turning up dead. The first one the police department wrote off as an attack by a pack of wolves- quite accurately, as you now know. A little while after that, there was one death that went unreported to the larger media because it was a police officer that stumbled across the corpse and decided to keep the murder hushed up. That is to say, you were walking home after a long day, nearly broke your leg tripping over the corpse of a truly huge man that lay half in the bushes. Enlisting Nepeta and Roxy, you dragged the corpse out to their garden shed and examined him in the basement laboratory. Roxy has never seen you cry before (up to that point, you believe she was of the opinion that you sold your tear-ducts to the devil for your long, glossy hair), but Nepeta had and she knew that the only cause you would have to cry would be from a sudden rush of terrible memories that is sometimes triggered by the strangest things.

It was not so strange that the face of this man, once cleaned off blood, set you off. It was the face of a man you had hoped was long dead and liquidated, with the experiment in which he participated.

“Two of them dead in the same month. That’s not a coincidence. Someone’s doing this.”

“Duh,” Nepeta elbows you in the side “Didn’t you see his hands were gone too?”

“No. I didn’t think to look.”

“Think about it, Eq. What those guys did…that deserves the worst kind of punishment out there. And what’s this murderer doing? Cutting their hands off.”

This notion settles on you like a fine layer of filth and dust. Suddenly, your every limb feels leaden, your nerves, full of jumbled information that you can hardly form into a proper sensation of panic or fear.

You reach into your pocket “I’m going to need to talk to Jamie about this.”

Before you can even get into your contacts, your phone surprises you by buzzing to life. Dave is
calling at five in the morning.
“Dave?”
When he does speak, after a long pause, his voice is husky and trembling with barely supressed
anger “Can you come over?”
“Are you alright?”
Concerned, Nepeta leans in close.
“You guys have some explaining to do.”

Chapter End Notes

A side note on the name of our wailing jogger.
The name is pronounced 'hin-nay' and it's one of the more popular Maori names. It
translates to 'girl'.
Hine Snow.
Muse over that at your leisure.
And the plot inches on

Dave Strider: what were you doing before you called Equius? =========>

Your name is Dave Strider and you don’t know how to absorb what John has just told you. So, you chose not to. Instead, you grab him by the collar and growl “That’s a fucking lie.”

He just sort of lets you hold him, going limp. When he began the story, he was on the verge of tears. Now that you’re man-handling him, the need for tears seems to have abated. He just stares at you with those stupid, clear blue eyes, all hooded and sad, but still as clear as they were on the first day. You know that look. You know that he believes what he’s telling you is all true.

John would never lie like this anyway.

“Oh, God.”

You don’t let him go. You sort of slump against him, letting your forehead drop to his collarbone. Your skin feels as if it is covered in filth or fingerprints. Those scars- they were innocent before, but they are now malignant and almost feel as if they are burning into you. It hurts, doesn’t it? You can’t tell. You can’t feel anything. You’re not attached to your body- you’re floating somewhere else while John holds your flesh-suit and you’re just trying to get away from that disgusting, heavy thing that your creators, your abusers, tormented all those years ago, but you can’t because it’s still you no matter what you do and all you can do is clutch at John’s collar and try to remember how to breathe.

“I’m sorry.”

Your mouth moves like it’s full of cotton wool “Not like you had the fucking scalpel.”

John wraps an arm around your back. His hand settles right between your shoulder-blades and wings. He’s still not afraid of you, is he? Even when he knows where you have come from, now. Even though it all just came out of his mouth.

What John told you is something you would not believe, if it were anyone but John saying it. Too stupid. Too far-fetched. What the hell kind of government would green-light what he insists they funded? How could anyone reach the right combination of balls-to-the-walls-insane and sadism to think this is an ok programme run, let alone join in and participate in?

Now that he’s said it all, you can feel just over a decade of dark, dangerous memories clamouring at the back of your mind for your attention. Your affection, your horror. Your nostalgia and a slot in your nightmares. You can’t handle this.

It hasn’t come back to you in the slide-show of carnival horror the way you always figured your past would, but as a series of flickers of colour, tastes like iron and sterile air, sensations of cold and pain and this one fucking face that just keeps repeating itself in your head.

You had a brother.

Key word being, HAD.

Where is he?

You don’t want to know, but John told you. He and you- you ran. Ran like hell, with Equius. It almost doesn’t surprise you to know that Equius has always been there, holding your hand as hard as he could from the start. But a brother? No, that wasn’t on the cards. You were prepared to maybe find out that your parents threw you away or donated you to science or gave you up when you popped out with a genetic mutation just so straight up, straight down, all-around mutated that they couldn’t write it off with ‘special’.
But you can’t handle this. Knowing that there was another person there, all the way from the beginning who literally gave up everything to give it all to you. Someone whose hard work and sacrifice is being undone by the men who are staling John. Why John? They probably want to scare him off. Everyone, off and away so you’re going to be all alone.

“Come on, Dave. Let’s get upstairs.”
John has to coax you up the stairs. Surprisingly, your legs and arms don’t really want to respond. Your body seems to want to just flop flat where it is and stay there forever. It would be better than putting this disgusting, defiled vessel to use.

But John’s not having any of that. He tightens his arm around your shoulder and props you upright, moving slowly to accommodate your sluggish pace.

“It’s gonna be ok. Kanaya and Eridan know about the stalking thing. I mean, I didn’t tell them about anything else, but I know they just want to help. So do Gamzee and Karkat. Listen, we’ve got a really good group of friends here. They just want to help us.”

“Vriska.” you say simply.
John pauses “I won’t let her. I won’t let her use this against you or anything like that. Neither will Kanaya or Aradia. She’s got handlers, you know.”

“Vriska’s gonna do what Vriska wants to do, and Vriska wants to destroy me. She hates me.”
John doesn’t argue. He just takes you upstairs. He doesn’t want to brave the wreck of your room, so he takes you into his own instead and perches you on the edge of the bed. Immediately, you sag and curl up on your side. John folds a few blankets over you and goes to the window, drawing the curtains shut over the snowstorm. For a moment, you are almost certain you can see the flare of a cigarette from the street. But John doesn’t say anything, so it must just be a trick of the light. A trick of your mind.

John doesn’t ask stupid things like ‘are you gonna be ok’. He just moves you over and lays down next to you, sharing the pillow. For a moment, the two of you stare at each other.

It occurs to you that this isn’t how you should behave around your pseudo-brother, and that this whole thing is not entirely platonic. But at the moment, you cannot bring yourself to care either.

“What can I do to make this easier?” asks John softly.
You shrug “I don’t think you can.”
Frowning, he slings an arm over your waist “Are you sure?”
You shut your eyes “Yeah.”
“Ok. I’m gonna be here.”
“Always are.”

“Let’s call Equius in a little while. I want him over here before the snow gets too thick.”
Good idea. Now that you know what Equius has really done for you, you feel confident that calling him out on his bullshit and lies won’t change that much about the way he treats you. He’s done an awful lot to keep this secret. Not that you’re pleased that he did. This secret, what it means for you, it could have changed a lot of things for you. You feel like no matter how bad and deep this thing really goes, you deserve to know about it. This is your birth-right, after all.
With these thoughts in mind, you push a pillow over your head and try to drift into sleep, if only for a few fitful hours.

John Egbert: what did she tell you? ================>

The girl, Terezi, told you plenty of things. Because she was blind as a bat, she didn’t have to look you in the eye as she said a single thing either. Her coal-bright eyes were trained on the icy ground for most of the conversation and you were surprised the weight of them didn’t make a little hole in the ice. Still, after years of fielding Dave’s excuses for the days when he disappears for a little while as Basilisk, you know how to tell when someone is lying or embellishing the truth. You know how to pretend that you don’t really know what’s going on.
It was already becoming pretty clear in your head, when they began to talk of expiration dates and after Terezi went to the trouble of cutting away her quarry’s hands.

Science. Some kind of warped, carnivorous science that collected small children as victims and test subjects, and after the project had been liquidated, presumably shortly after Dave and his brother Dietrich escaped, the few test subjects that escaped made it a personal mission of vendetta to give back as good as they had got.

Well, you sure are a lot smarter than your normally give yourself credit for, because this is almost word-for-word what Terezi told you.

This is what you know.

She is seventeen years old, which makes her a little under two years your senior. Her name is Terezi Pyrope, which she came into the project knowing. Her accent, which you had missed up until she pointed it out to apologise for the way it was probably going to butcher her words, was Spanish. Now you never pegged Spain to be one of those places where the countryside is stuffed with roaming dragons, but apparently it’s true. The way she tells it, Andalusia and the Basque provinces are basically infested with dragons and it’s a fight for survival for the locals from the second they step out the door. You’re going to take this with a grain of salt. You know about as much about Spain as you know about Antarctica, but you’re sure it would be in the news a little more if the little Basque children had to walk to school with swords to stop themselves from being carried off in dragon claws before they made it to the gates.

She didn’t come willingly. She spoke briefly of a wide, dank cave where she lived most of her life and knew well, and of the war that she had watched from its walls. You wondered if you should ask how, if she was claiming only seventeen years, she managed to watch the fall of the Spanish Republic and the rise of Fascist Spain, but you were barely interested in thinking your own thoughts with all these new ideas being thrown at you, so you didn’t bother.

When she spoke of the men who came for her, she talked of their weapons, mostly. There are apparently appropriate ways to subdue dragons and cart them away without much fuss, and they knew what they were doing. She was attacked, defeated and stuffed into a human form for easier transport, which they then packed into a small crate for the duration of the trip overseas, trusting that she would survive. This was apparently during the 60’s. Again, her concept of chronology and age don’t quite do it for you, but fuck it. Whatever.

What she told you next made your stomach drop. She told you of the facility and where it was built. Dietrich, when he made his escape, didn’t actually get that far before he died. Terezi could actually point to it from where you were standing. She pointed to the top of the mountain and made a gesture that suggested it was only a little further into the mountain range. All of this time, the facility has been only miles away from your home.

She saw your expression, somehow, and it brought a wicked smile to her mouth “It’s disgusting, isn’t it? You get lulled into this lovely sense of false security. You trust that justice will see to itself if you only give it enough time to act. But you know what? Justice always needs some enforcers. Those fuckers that took me up into the mountains –they won’t go away on their own. The only reason they’ve left you and your buddy alone this long is because there is a hierarchy, and thank the gods that some bigwig way the fuck up there decided that a clean-up wasn’t necessary. Or they were too scared that chasing all of us down after they just sorta…turfed us out, was gonna attract all the wrong kinds of attention. Whatever the hell it is that gave me all this extra time, just be glad that it happened!”

You sat in silence while she talked and made little move to respond at all. She didn’t seem to mind, though. In fact she seemed kind of giddy to have someone to talk to at all, as if no one has ever just sat there and listened to her life story before. You expect you’re right.

“You better have a notepad for this. Lots to remember. So, the folks I’m killing? Two of ‘em are dead by now. The prince charming that was gonna abduct you and kill you or whatever- he’s called Eggs. I killed another guy called Sawbuck a little ways back. You must have heard about his murder?”

You shrugged at this point, feeling a thrill of fear on the inside “I know there are hikers dying on the
trails on our mountain.”
Terezi wrinkled her nose “Not me. That’s someone else.”
“I know who that is, I think. There’s a…a Lycan around here.”

Her eyes widened in shock. Seemed weird to you that she still used her eyes to react to stuff, even
though she can’t see anything out of them and their surfaces are crowded with milky cataracts “Who
told you about Lycans?”
“I’m not sure I want to tell you his name. In case you want to track him down and kill him.”
Terezi scoffed “Well that’s fine by me. I’ll know soon anyway. I remember everyone from the labs.”

At that moment, you wanted to punch her square in her jagged mouth and run screaming to Equius
to warn him, but that didn’t seem like smart choice. It was better to wait there, to let her talk while
she still felt secure or smug enough to dump all this vital information on you. Then you could weep,
wail and run for Equius.

Terezi went on “I was one of the first guys they collected. The next one I remember is this big, blue
guy, except he was parading around as a kid of about fourteen. He must have been ancient, though,
as old as the Crusades. Anyway, they brought him in and he was quiet as a mouse. Didn’t say
anything, didn’t cause anyone problems. But every single one of his guards committed suicide a
month after they got assigned to him, you know? It got to the point that no one would go near him,
so he could go around unescorted, and that was fine by the rest of the facility because he wasn’t
gonna try to escape. Me and Equius, we were good friends, when I could get him to talk to me.’

It should have shocked you to hear that. But you had filled your quota of shocked for that night, so
you only tightened your hands to fists inside your pockets and remained silent as Terezi listed a few
more.

The running theme is the fact that these people were all very young, or at least, took on the
appearance of the young. Terezi recognises this as a strategy to make themselves appear less
threatening. Apparently, each one of them identified the difficulty of the situation in which they had
been thrust into, so rather than kick up a big stinking fuss until they were freed or killed for
protesting, they submitted, for the moment. Waiting for an opportunity to escape or rebel or revenge
themselves. Every now and then, a guard died, but not at the earlier rate since they let Equius go
unguarded.

Each time she talked about him, you got one more piece of the jigsaw. He was young. He was
scared, but not for his own safety. As far as you can tell, hearing what she has to say and knowing
the Equius you know, he was hanging around to get a gist of what was going on.

“I think this part will be your favourite. So, about nineteen years ago, they bring in this kid. Adorable
little boy, fresh out of the woods. The thing with people like him, the Quetze, feathered-serpent

group, they just can’t disguise their ageing process. So we all had the wonder of knowing that this
little kid really was a little kid and the reason he was so good at the little kid impressions, when he
was put in pain and all that, is because he was just a kid. Gods know he would have grown up to be
the most twisted-ass, sadistic bastard in existence, except Equius and me step in and kinda…not raise
the kid, not me anyway, but let him know there’s another way to be. That’s your friend’s big brother
Dietrich. He couldn’t actually get his name right, so he called himself Dirk and that just stuck.”

“Wait a minute…how did you know his name if he couldn’t say it?”
She looked you right in the eye and smiled “Because his father brought him to us. Brought him the
junior too. Dave. He just couldn’t handle having a family of freaks, I guess. I heard the guards
talking about how he had one normal daughter, but the rest of his family was just a mess.”

Dave. Dietrich. Ok, you decided you could handle this. Two of them. Dave had a big brother. You
understood just from the way that she looked at you that she was confiding this in you – that she
expected you to be the bearer of bad news. You get the feeling this is very typical of her.

“You didn’t know he had a brother?” she asks innocently “I’m sorry.”
You are quite tempted to make her sorry, but lashing out against a woman- a dragon woman- is a bad
idea. You’ve also had more than your fill of violence for the night.

“I don’t know anything about him. His memory is shot.”
Terezi nods sagely “That’s part of a design, I’d guess. Dirk made it that way.”
“What happened to Dirk?” you venture.
Terezi frowns “Listen here, kid, I have two stories to tell. One of them is about life in the lab and what a nightmare it all was. The other one is daring and full of romance and all that good shit. Which one do you want?”
You mull it over “I just want to know what happened to Dave? So, the romance I guess.”
She mutters something about betting that you would want the romance under her breath “To make a long, long, horrible story short, Dirk got sick of having his kid brother tortured on a daily basis. Equius was sick of it too. I was sick of being tormented- I’d been in nearly constant pain for close to, what, let me think, it was the 60’s to the…yeah, about 50 years. Half a decade of constant pain. Do you know what that’s like? I bet you don’t even know what a little bit of constant pain is like.”
She paused here, so to get her to move on you had to shake your head. No, you had never experienced constant pain. This seemed to delight her.
“I could show you. You might understand Dave a little better. He’s shy, isn’t he? But he won’t admit it. That’s his lab mentality. See, the technicians were bored as all get out. Anything to alleviate the boredom, and they didn’t let them bring in cards or anything like that. So they took us out of our cells and called it experimentation when they threw darts at our back.”
She must have heard you swallowing hard, because she let loose a short, horrible rasp of a laugh that made you want to offer her some water “Not literally. Just a figure of speech. But I could show you how it felt, if you want. I’ve got this wild venom. Didn’t know dragons had venom? Sure, we got scads of it. Oceans of it. How the hell else are we gonna hunt? These claws are for taking down our own people. So, if I bite you right around here…”
She tapped your throat.
“The venom’ll get to your heart sharpish. Once it gets there, every beat of your heart will be painful. Not that shooting pain you get when you cut yourself open, or that aching stuff you get with a bruise. This is worse, ‘cos it’s a little heart attack every time that faithful ol’ muscle contracts. Whaddya say? Might be easier to understand Dave’s pain if you were in as much as he used to be in. I’ll go easy on you too.”
At this point, you stood up “If you’re just gonna play around with me like this, I’m going home.”
You are guessing that because she is not really aware of what expressions look like, with her vision gone, she must have fallen out of the practice of hiding hers. You remember watching a clear flicker of panic chase fear across her face before she settled back into that languid, toothy smile and jumped up to follow you.
“I thought you were interested.” she grinned.
“I am, but you’re only interested in poisoning me. I know this sounds awful, but I don’t really care about what happened to you or your friends. I don’t know them, (you figured you could beseech Equius for some more reliable information after you were done crying on him) so I don’t really care about them. If you’re not interested in talking about Dave, then I’m not interested in talking to you. Good luck with your murder spree.”
“Fine, I’ll make it short.”
Terezi began to follow you at a close, but respectful distance. She was not quite ready to lose her audience “By the way, I resent the notion that I’m killing for no reason. This is justice.”
You walked a little faster “Sure.”
“And I’m not taking souvenirs.” she patted her pockets, producing a squishy noise “I need these hands.”
Up until that point you had forgotten that she had taken the man’s hands. Your throat burned with a quick rise of acid, but you swallowed it down.
“I’m getting back into that lab.”
You filed away that piece of information for later use. At that moment, you were just too tired to make sense of it. While you were thinking about the best way to get away from her so she didn’t see where you and Dave lived, your foot slid on a piece of ice and you nearly fell, except that Terezi caught you under the arms. She had you trapped now, with an excuse to hold your arm as she righted you and guided you around the ice. She didn’t let go of your arm.
“Dave and Dirk escaped, like I was saying. They made it out without me, but they took Eq. I made ‘em. I didn’t much care to stay, but it was either me or Eq and he had this annoying way of thinking he was always right, you know? He was so certain that I was going to get out. So I pulled the rug out from under him at the last moment.”

Personally, you could not imagine Equius being anything but accommodating and protective, but maybe that’s a result of a trauma you cannot begin to understand.

“They got away,” she continues “And I can’t tell you much more. I just got out, you know, when the programme got liquidated. The second I heard it was over I was out of my cell and dancing in the halls. And burning shit, of course. The only thing I know is that Dirk Strider is dead.”

“What? How- how do you know if you don’t know anything else?”

She smiled her widest “Because I saw his grave, duh.”

Your name is John Egbert. His name is Equius Zahhak.

He’s not happy about being here. You can tell just from the way he’s knocking on the door. It is still very early in the morning and you get the feeling Dave pulled him away from something very important.

Fine by you. There is nothing more important, you think, than the conversation that is about to happen in your living room.

You are gathered. Your father, you, Dave, Godcat in attendance on your lap, and Nepeta and Equius are at the door while Roxy is en route.

This morning will be a morning of answers.
Your name is Dirk Strider. Well, no, it’s not really Dirk Strider, because it’s not really you telling the story- this is a story spun from several experiences, and only one of them is first-hand. But for the sake of the audience, for the sake of the already emotionally exhausted little kid you loved, and the true teller of this story loves almost as fiercely, we will address you as Dirk. Your little brother, Dave, he needs to hear this from your perspective. He needs to get to know you. So, for the purposes of the following recounting, your name is Dirk Strider.

Are we ready?

More importantly, are you ready?

Yes, you are. You already ensured that everything would be in place earlier last night. In preparation for this day, you didn’t sleep in the night. Instead, you were busy sneaking through the complex, around the security (growing fat and relaxed, once again confident that they have sufficiently crushed the newest generation of test subjects), getting into contact with your folks and making sure the concealed weapons were in the right hiding spots.

You took the paths of the pipes through the ceilings, last night, and encountered Equius tampering with a steam vent in front of an entrance (the entrance Snowman would use to get in the next morning – now this morning), using a screw-driver he must have filched from security or maintenance and his bare finger-nails, which he can grow out into knife-sized weapons at will.

You whispered a greeting and held another pipe steady for him while you worked.

“Ready?”

“Sure. Got all the shit together.”

“That’s not what I mean, Dietrich. I mean are you ready for the outside world?”

You shrugged “Are you? Are any of us? Who the fuck cares, as long as we’re outta here.”

He laughed a little, and that set you off too. In a mixture of nerves and giddiness, the two of you were soon muffling giggles desperately in the crooks of your elbows while a security patrol passed, cussing and laughing, beneath you.

(“He laughed through his nose to start with,” says Equius “But if you really got him going he would clutch at his ribs and cackle like a witch.”)

“Oh fuck this, I’m not ready,” you said playfully “I think I’d rather sleep in tomorrow than break out.”

You and Equius talked for a little while longer, then you climbed over him (“He had little to no concept of personal space. You’d think someone who spent a life-time being tortured would be a tad more wary of letting people touch him, but if he knew and liked you, then God help you.”

“Didn’t he used to get into the shower with you?” asks Nepeta playfully.

“Yes, but it was completely innocent…until he saw the ‘Shawshank Redemption’. Gods, the joke he’d crack. I almost stopped using soap entirely out of fear of what he’d do to me if I bent over.”) and were on your way, deeper into the complex.

You can only assume that you went on in relative peace and encountered no trouble in the pipes, because by the time you had removed the loose tile from the ceiling and slipped into Terezi’s room through the ceiling, you looked fine. Perhaps you looked a little daunted by what you were about to under-take, but that was natural.

Terezi moved over so you could sit on the edge of her bed.
“Well, I’m sick,” she announced, her voice unusually raspy from the sudden sickness “So I can’t promise I’m gonna be good to go tomorrow.”

“We’ll watch your back,” you promised “It’s either we’re all getting out of here or we’re waiting and starting from square one.”

“You’re a moron. No, don’t do that, Dirk. You have Dave to think about.”

“Dave’s not just my responsibility. He’s just as much yours and Eq’s as he is mine.”

“You say that now, but you know you’re the first person he’s gonna reach for when shit hits the fan tomorrow.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So you’re his big brother. We’re just his extended family. If it looks like only you two are gonna get away, then you take your ward and get the fuck outta Dodge. No looking back. No dramatic pauses. Just go and we’ll find each other again someday.”

You sighed “We’ll see.”

“You’ll see. I’m blind. It’s official.”

You turned over and hung over her, presumably looking into her eyes to see if it was really true.

(Roxy asks something “So how long had they been fucking around with her sight?”

“I can only assume it was from the moment she got into the facility. They…they were trying to adapt some kind of special contacts for the military from the configuration of her lens, but they weren’t familiar with her anatomy when they started. The damage incurred in the early days finally caught up to her in the last few days…wherever she may be, I can only assume she’s been living as a completely blind person for years now.”

At this, John shrinks into his spot on the couch next to Dave, as if trying to melt into the upholstery.)

“Does it hurt?”

“Nah. Only when I bump into stuff. Dragons- we’re built to deal with this shit. I’ll adapt as quick as a flash. You just wait, Dirk, it’ll be like I never needed eyes in the first place.”

You left her too, after saying a little more that Terezi has declined to share.

(“She probably tried to kiss him,” suggests Nepeta “Terezi liked kissing things, right?”

“Licking,” Equius corrects her grimly “Her ‘thing’…it was licking.”)

What you did in between the hours before the insurgency are anyone’s guess. If your little brother still had his wits about him, then he might be able to say. The two of you shared a room. You weren’t supposed to be sharing a room, but you insisted on moving into his. You insisted with a scalpel, filched from the medical staff, and a crazed look in your eye that suggested you would defend your suggestion with teeth and claws and your Basilisk even if they managed to get the scalpel away.

(John suddenly sits upright, around the same time that Dave’s face turns completely white around his shades.

“Basilisk?” they say in unison, both choked and nervous, and even more so as they discover the other is just as shocked.

“Basilisk. Dave…listen, there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“With being an eighteen foot long snake monster with wings,” adds Roxy, in case anyone was on a different page “It’s totally natural for you, honey.”

Dave is looking at John “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Well I do,” says John sternly “And I agree. Nothing weird about it. It’s just…it’s just you, Dave.”

“It doesn’t feel like me.”

Equius nodded sympathetically “Well I would imagine it would take some time to become accustomed to being a giant snake monster and having a giant snake monster’s urges, with the way your normally live. Give it time. Give it patience. You’ll get the hang of your Basilisk.”

For a moment, John looks triumphant “I actually got the name right.”

So, for the purposes of this story, we will say that you crawled into bed beside your little brother, and wrestled away some of the covers that even then, he insisted on tangling himself up in, into hopeless knots, refusing to share. We will say that you did not sleep, because it is obvious to all parties that had the privilege of observing you on the next day that you had not slept, with the deep bags under
your eyes.
We will assume that you spent the night on your side, so as not to cramp your wings, listening to the little knot of thieved covers breathing peacefully. Thinking about what life would be like for him, once on the outside. Hoping against hope that he might find safety and love, the way he almost had it within these walls. And above all, praying that if they managed to catch the two of you before you escaped, you would have the chance to get your hands around his neck and send him away before the facility did it for you.

(“What would…what the hell were they gonna do to us?”
“The project was being liquidated around us. Some do-gooder in the upper echelons of government conspiracies had decided it was best to shut down the programme, either for our sake, or because they were getting a higher volume of angry paranormal families looking for their stolen children.
You and Dirk…well they just couldn’t figure you out, kid. Your bodies were full of secrets and they weren’t going to wrest any of them from you. As I understand it, the genetic codes were too confusing. Data came out scrambled. When they sedated you, you became your Basilisk. When they sedated that, nothing happened. You don’t remember this, Dave, but you were famous in the project for biting off fingers.”

“Yeah…ok…but what were they gonna do to us?”
“Use the excuse to kill you brutally. Dirk liked to listen in the eaves. He already knew that you two were listed for termination. Being caught in the act of escaping was just the excuse they needed.”
“Jesus, Equius, where’s your bedside manner?”
“Sorry.”)

The next morning, all hell broke loose. But not before breakfast, when Snowman arrived. She enjoyed catching her subjects off-guard, to show off or gauge the level of degradation that had occurred since she last cast her shadow over the facility. She approached you while you sat at one of the tables, picking at your rations- eating them was out of the question, because everything was laced with a drug designed to keep you docile.

(“We eventually developed such a powerful resistance to that that no amount of sedatives could knock us out without also killing us.”

“Eq can’t take sleeping pills now.” adds Nepeta “It’s like eating candy, isn’t it? Just gets you a little het up and makes you want to take a jog.”)

She asked “And how do we feel today, Mr Strider?”

Dave was underneath the table. He had been tying your shoelaces together, but now he was still. Gripping your leg. Waiting with bated breath to see what you would do.
In other circumstances, you may have made a swing for her. Cussed her out. Let her know exactly what you thought of her. But today was not a day to be attempting to exercise your freedom of speech. If there were ever a time where you should keep your head down, it was now.
So you said, pleasantly enough “I can’t sleep. The new doses are really something else.”
She smiled.

(“She never really smiled, you understand. She could no more smile than a domestic cat can talk. It looks the same, it sounds the same, but it is only an animal mimicry.” says Equius.
His eyes are distant. For a moment, he is addressing another clutch of people, in a darker, more fearful time.)

“Glad to hear something is actually working on you for once,” she took you by the chin, her skin like cold leather, and turned you from side to side to inspect the bags “Working beautifully.”
Then she stooped slightly “And how are you, Junior?”

Dave said nothing. He never spoke to Snowman.

(“You were bloody terrified of the woman. We never did figure out if that was just a child’s impeccable intuition, or if she…she got to you while we weren’t looking. Rare were the days when one of us wasn’t looking, but sometimes…something got by us.”)

“Do you sleep?”

You come to your brother’s rescue “He doesn’t sleep either, sir. None of us are getting much sleep.”

“Now I have to wonder- is that from your shiny new drugs, or because of the change in the winds?”
At this, most of the mess hall perked up. Ugly, deformed faces turned her way along with human faces. Most had been disfigured by the tests and the trials, but a few were always fantastically ugly. You glanced over at them quickly, searching for a comforting face, and you found Equius and Terezi sandwiched together between a pillar of troll-muscle and the soft oozing form of one of those glob things that have no name. Equius whispered.

(“I pointed Dirk out to her. She had almost no idea of what was going on around her, at that point-she just wasn’t used to functioning without her eyes.”)

Terezi flashed you a grin of steak knives and a thumbs-up, in the wrong direction. Equius guided her in the right direction so that she was actually gesturing to you, rather than the wall beyond your shoulder.

“I wouldn’t mind a little bit of change.” you said, feeling brave, but not foolish.

Snowman was satisfied by this. She went away and took the attention of the crowd with her, except for Equius and Terezi, who still needed some help figuring out where to look. You returned their gaze only long enough to confirm that you were thinking the same kinds of things-close one, but she didn’t know. Then you went back to picking at your rations while Dave made an impossible knot of your laces.

All hell broke loose. After breakfast.

It came in several stages. First, the work Equius had done on the pipes was demonstrated. Steam exploded out of the ceiling. Lengths of boiling hot steel fell through the thin ceiling tiles, onto guards and prisoners alike, but mostly guards, because most of the prisoners had a vague idea that they needed to be wary of weird shit happening that day and were prepared for it, somewhat. Snowman herself was enveloped in a shroud of steam. It did not burn her, as you had hoped.

(“We realised that day that she was like us. Inhuman. It is likely that most of the staff in the facility were inhuman too. After all, if you want to guard monsters under lock and key, to whom do you give the key? Even more frightening monsters.”)

“Wow. That was deep.” Nepeta takes a thoughtful sip of her coffee, then realises she has attracted some stern stares “What? I’m agreeing with him.”

“What is she?” ask Roxy and John in unison.

Equius shrugs “Haven’t the foggiest. Perhaps she’s Satan.”

After the steam came the chaos. You figured that would create itself, once the more mentally sound prisoners realised that their guards were scared and confused. They attacked. Their less-stable counterparts twigged and launched themselves into battle too. You didn’t actually do much in the way of fighting. For you and Equius and Terezi, it as a matter of dodging in and out and around the sheets of fog and the desperate scraps within them.

Into the ceiling it was. Because Equius was bigger, stronger, more intimidating at first glance and able to spew fire if he wanted to, you had him actually carrying Dave through the turmoil while you watched their back and made sure Terezi didn’t trip over dead or dying bodies.

(Dave seems touched by this “So…so you carried me out of the labs?”

Equius nods “I did. Part of the way. Until we fought our way to the roof…I had to give you back to Dirk and make him leave us.”)

Through sheer force of determined will, you and the others made it to the roof. The roof wasn’t so inacessible as it had been before. The facility is about twelve stories deep, but Equius had brought the roof to you by engineering an explosion that blasted a hole clean through the six layers, down to the one you lived and were tortured on. As luck would have it-bad, horrible, awful, despicable luck-you happened to reach the place where the hole was just a straight shot up, easy to use for three beings capable of flight (“Or in my case, turning myself into a living column of flame.”), you were surrounded by all manner of thugs.

It all kind of goes dark after that. A protective dome was closing over the top of the facility, far up above. How could you have predicted that? The dome was a new-ish installation and you hadn’t been outside in proper for years- certainly you had never had the chance to explore the facility, nor make a comprehensive mental note of its defences. You were kind of just planning to fly fast as fuck when you got up in the sky and hope for the best.
Equius noticed it and informed Terezi as she was removing the throat of one of the guards with her claws.

“You better go.” she said shortly, and that was to be the last thing she said to you. 
“Yes. Go on. We’ll be along in a moment.” said Equius, and that was to be the last thing he said to you for a very long time.
You said something then.
The person actually narrating the story doesn’t quite have the strength to repeat it for his audience-relishing this terrible day has been exhausting enough, and repeating what you said? Well, he’s just going to omit that. Dave is being told the important parts of the story, anyway. He doesn’t need to obsess over every little detail.
And you changed into your Basilisk and, with your brother secured in your claws, flew up, out and away with only a few seconds to spare before the facility went on a lock-down from which nothing else was likely to escape.
And that is the last anyone ever saw of you, save Equius, and of course, your brother.

Your name is Dave Strider.
The story has taken the better part of the morning and you’re not sure if you want to be awake for the rest of the day, with the things Equius has just given you to think about, crowding your mind.
“Is that enough?” asks Equius.
You nod mutely.
“Take him to his room,” suggests Roxy to John “He needs some sleep. And so do you. The adults have some stuff to talk about anyway.”
John cocks an eyebrow “Secret stuff?”
Roxy winks, then turns to Nepeta “Will you call Jamie? Someone needs to find out where the fuck he’s been all night.”
You move robotically as John sort of pushes you up the stairs. Nothing you want to think about, right now. Nothing you can think about without thinking about the rest of that stuff and you want to pretend that never happened.
You can’t remember it right now. But that may change. That will change. You can feel that it will change.
You lay down and miss the bed by a couple of feet. John pulls you upright and presses your back to the mattress, then flings the covers over you. He glances out the window. You cannot help but look with him, looking for something to distract you. You catch a brief glimpse of a pile ashes and cigarette butts collected on the street, almost underneath your window, before John pulls the curtains shut.
“Move over.”
You move over.
“Now go to sleep.”
“I’m an experiment.”
“No, Dave, you’re a natural wonder. Now go to sleep.”
Can’t argue with that.

Your name is Dirk Strider and there’s nothing you can do for them, now. Terezi was right. When push comes to shove, it’s you that Dave reaches for first. And vice versa.
You spread your wings “I swear to the gods, we’re going to see each other again. It’s gonna be different. We’re gonna be safe and healthy and they won’t be able to touch us ever again. Just wait for me, and I’ll wait for you.”
Then you took off for the sky, never once doubting the truth of your words.
Your name is Dave Strider, and you’re at the fort.

It has been a long time since you felt the need to come here. The fort’s a place to run when you need to think about the way you came into John’s life. Or at least, that is what it became, as your mind and opinions matured and you realised the events of that long-ago stormy afternoon had soaked into the soil and the trees just as much as the rain that fell that day. Absorbed into the soil. Sucked up into the stems of the plants, dispersed in the leaves and the flowers, but not bled away in diffusion. It has stayed in the plants, so that the trees bowing over your head and the flowers bobbing on their stalks are still flush with it in their veins. The river is still thick with that afternoon. The air is still heavy and damp from it, even though this particular afternoon is a welcome break from the constant snow that has been plauging the mountain, and it should be pleasantly dry.

Having other people at the fort is good.
It makes a theorem of your theory. A fact of what you might have limited to being just a skewed, personal truth. A weird thing in your head to a weird thing in other peoples’ heads. You love it when you realise you’re not nuts.

There are four people here but you and John.
In your corner, there is Karkat and Gamzee. They are sitting well within each other’s personal space bubbles and fiddling self-consciously with the hems of their jackets, or with their sleeves. Gamzee had been keeping his hands busy by making a flower chain until a few moments ago, when he ran out of daisies. The fruits of his labours are now slung over Karkat’s curly hair, who either has yet to notice it is there or to care about it.

In John’s corner, there is Eridan and Kanaya. They aren’t even sitting next to each other. Eridan is sitting on top of what remains of the cement foundations of the fort, which isn’t much, and which is short enough that he can straddle it and have his legs reach the floor on either side. Kanaya is standing on a stone in the middle of the stream, which is still shallow despite the extra volume it must be getting from snow-melt. Her balance is perfect, despite the ice eagerly waiting to trip her up all over the place. The stream has been only partially frozen.

You don’t know why Kanaya wants to stand in the middle of the stream. She’s perfectly happy to discuss the problem from over, though, and is contributing some insightful stuff, so you’re not about to complain about it.

Karkat is finishing a thought “…and if society isn’t ready for bird people, then I say the drooling masses don’t deserve to know.”

“Yes, Karkat,” says Kanaya with an air of pained patience “But we are not the drooling masses. We are Dave’s friends and family.”

“Some of us are more drooling-masses than they are friends!” he counters, smacking his fist on his knee to make the point- except it’s actually Gamzee’s knee, who doesn’t seem to notice he’s even been touched “Think about what Vriska would do- sorry John- she’s not even part of the drooling masses, more like the seething masses- sorry John.”

John shrugs “It’s true. She’s dangerous. She’s mad at Dave too, since he accused her of rifling through his desk.”
“An’ w-we all know-w that was the men in the van, which is so much more fuckin’ comfortin’.”
Eridan mutters with a nervous glance over his shoulder “I reckon that if w-we’re gonna tell the
others, then we can’t not tell her. She’d figure out somethin’ was up.”

“Of course she would. It would be glaringly obvious.”
“Yeah, an’ then she’d torture it outta one ‘a us. An’ if we make her feel like she ain’t in the loop in
the first place-”

“She’s gonna take it personally.” John finishes grimly.
Eridan glowers at him “Don’t finish my sentences. We ain’t datin’.”

“Sol doesn’t finish your sentences.”

“’Cos he ain’t allowed ta.”
Kanaya clears her throat “Back on subject, please. We’re holding this conference to figure out what
to do about the fact that Dave may or may not be a highly prized specimen that is going to be hunted
down eventually by forces that smack of government conspiracies, are we not? Let us focus on that
and worry about Vriska later.”

“Where are all these fuckin’ daisies comin’ from?”
Everyone looks at Gamzee, who has found another clutch of daisies under the thin snow. He brushes
the frost from their petals with a look of wonder, like a child discovering them for the first time.
Karkat finally notices the flower crown and discards it with a marked disgust. It whips past Kanaya
in the stream, but Gamzee doesn’t seem perturbed to have his work cast off.

“It’s dead winter.” he continues slowly, ponderously “An’ there’s fuckin’ daisies.”
Karkat jabs a finger at you “Let’s blame Dave and be done with it.”

“Hey, who died and made me Daisy master?” you retort.
His eyes flick up to the red wings which you are sunning, spread wide on either side of you like the
sails of a boat “You’ve got fucking wings, Dave. Anything paranormal that happens is obviously
your fault.”
At the word ‘paranormal’, Eridan perks up “That reminds me. Sol had a little episode again last
night.”
A groan passes through the group, and your heart sinks. Sol is known among your group for waking
up during movie marathons and sleep-overs with screaming nightmares, the details of which go
foggy after you jerk him out of the initial, sleepy panic of being awakened by fear. Sometimes those
nightmares bleed into the real world, when he’s half asleep, and he’ll stumble out of the bathroom in
the middle of the night claiming that the girl in the shower won’t stop staring at him. This, for some
reason, only happens at Eridan’s house. When he’s over at yours and John’s or anyone else’s, sleepy
Sol antics dwindle to practically nil, except for that one time when he swore up and down that there
was a man in the chimney, and it wasn’t Santa.

You still quote that when you’re feeling down, and John wants to report some strange noise.
Casting your mind back to the weird things that Sol has said, you ask “Was the sky on fire again?”

“Was he bleeding golden blood from his eyes?” suggests John brightly.
“Was there a dog the size of a male model heralding the end times with his fierce…fierce…fuck,
what was it?”

“I reckon he had him a sword.”

“Yeah, that. Thanks Gamzee- do not put those daisies in my hair I swear to God I will kill you.”
Gamzee pokes a daisy behind Karkat’s ear. Again, Kanaya clears her throat. The way she’s
standing, poised and prim on top of the peak of the rock, her hands folded and her hair caught nicely
in the light winter winds, she either looks like a wood nymph that’s about to claim someone’s heart
forever, or like a priestess of some obscure pagan goddess preparing to sacrifice herself. Or someone
else. You, probably, since you’re the one with the wings. Pagan religions liked to mock Christian
imagery, right? Angels die first, blood eagles and all that.

“Given the circumstances,” she says “I would suggest that we ensure Dave is not alone. I would
suggest that one of us, and not necessarily John, is with him at all times, until the police can be
fucked to get off their asses and do something about that mass murderer on the trail. Clearly, the two
are linked.”
You bust up into compulsive giggles, unable to hear Kanaya swearing and take her seriously. Normally she wouldn’t utter so much as a single, dainty ‘damn’, so of course you gotta live in the moment and laugh your ass off when there’s an F-bomb, no matter how serious she’s being. It takes a moment for her to regain control of her audience.

“On that note, should we even be in the woods?”

John scoffs “This is the fort! We’re safe here.”

Gamzee gestures towards your house “‘sides, civilization’s, like, two feet away.”

John corrects him “Half a mile.”

“Fuck that. I ran further’n that last time we needed milk.”

Kanaya interjects frostily, here “Alright, Gamzee, should we for some reason require a milk-run in the middle of what is essentially a war meeting, then you will be the one to make it.”

He takes his as a compliment “Gotcha.”

Now, it is your turn to clear your throat “I wasn’t done, talking about the labs when you guys started to talk about Vriska. Can we get back to that?”

As their eyes turn to you, an uncomfortable prickling sensation starts up under your skin. You’re not sure if it’s because there have never been so many eyes on your wings before, or of it’s because of the subject material. Shit’s traumatising stuff, right?

But at the same time, it still feels like someone else’s story. Even if you remembered your name from the other life to the extent that you actually gave it here, and even if you found out that that elusive, pale figure that has the run of your fever-dreams is a real-life, probably long-dead brother, it’s just not real. It’s more like a bunch of fragments of dreams that have been strung together by some, sympathetic and indulgent force, just to put your mind at ease. You’re not quite ready to believe that this many people worked to save you at one point. That this many people really did love you. That your insanity is not insanity- just an odd collection of repressed memories.

But, fuck it, your friends are here and you gotta quash the weirdness into something short and sweet for consumer consumption.

“Where was I in the story, anyway?”

“Something about Officer Zahhak,” says Eridan.

He tries not to be obvious about fanning himself, but you notice. Eridan has had a little thing for Equius for as long as he’s been out of the closet- in fact, you’re not even sure he ever was in the closet in the first place. Even now, when he’s allegedly perfectly happy with the boyfriend he sort of snitched from Fef, he still can’t mention the name without getting a little hot under the collar. This little ritual cheers you up and makes you feel a whole lot better about packaging up your troubles for popular consumption “Oh, yeah. Well Eq was in there with me.”

The four of them react in shock. Karkat lets out a hoot of derisive laughter and slaps Gamzee’s knee again- still aiming for his own- while Kanaya nearly slips off her rock.

“Has he got wings too?” she asks.

“No. I have no idea what his damage is, but apparently he’s fucking magical.”

“I think he’s a wraith?” ventures John “Something downright magical, but also, human-looking.”

“That’s…what even is that, John? What the fuck is a wraith?”

He shrug self-consciously “I was Googling things last night while you were asleep,” he points out the deep bags under his eyes, making the blue all the more vivid (to you, anyway) “And I made a list. I mean, I’m sure he would tell me if I asked, but I’d kinda like to guess on my own.”

“Officer Zahhak is magical?” Eridan blusters and undoes his scarf, flushing in the face “Oh my gosh. W-what is he? Does he breathe fire? Does he fly? Is he a w-werewolf?”

“I just said I don’t know, Ampora. Chill your tits.”

“Don’t tell me to chill out, Strider! This is a fuckin’ conspiracy, holy shit! Holy shit, how far does this run? Oh I bet you Officer Leijon is fuckin’ magical too! I bet you they’re all fuckin’ magical, an’ John’s dad is a wizard or somethin’!”

John is rankled “Hey, don’t stereotype. We’re Chinooks, not shamans. There’s a fucking difference.”

“Not because you’re Chinooks, you unbeliev-vable moron! Because ev-everyone else is fuckin’
magical!” suddenly, his face freezes “Oh my God, what if Sol’s psychic? What if there is some dead girl in my shower? Oh my God, I’m not showerin’ there. I’m usin’ yer house, Karkat!”

“Hey, keep your naked body out of my porcelain! Use Sol’s!”

“I’m not goin’ near his bathroom! If I got a dead kid in mine, he’s probably got a w-whole fuckin’ coven in his!”

You look up at John with a grim smile “See, this is why I said we should tell it through song or a puppet show. Uncensored information is a little bit too much for their feeble brains.”

Suddenly, Kanaya’s kneeling by your side and hugging you. Instinctively, you tense up. She may be your friend, but you still hate it when people touch you. Especially without any warning.

“This must be so confusing for you,” she says softly, her arm around your shoulders. She doesn’t seem scared or even in awe to be this close to your wings.

To her, they’re already a part of you. As normal and Dave-ish as your freakishly blonde hair and the glaring red eyes that she’s become accustomed to, even though she’s not seeing these extra appendages without the unprejudiced filter of childhood.

There’s a poem in that, somewhere. Or a rap.

“Yeah, well, what are you gonna do?”

She smiles “You’ll persevere. It’s what you do. I’m very proud of you, you know.”

“Gee, thanks Mom.”

Her smile only grows wider “You’re welcome, son.”

John has been staring at the two of you like he wants to squeeze in on the other side, but suddenly, he looks up at the other side of the stream.

Karkat has, for some reason, stopped and looked up at the same time “What the fuck was that?”

“What?” asks Eridan “I don’t- oh, wait…that green thing?”

Your blood runs cold at about the same time your spine prickles and the scent of what you now know to be Lycan hits your nose. Shrugging Kanaya off, you stand.

“Get back!”

The others haven’t quite picked up on your fear yet- they’re so frigging mesmerised by what looks like a green shark, passing between the waves of trees. In your head, you can even hear the ominous violin music that should always accompany a stalking killer.

Oh God, it’s gonna get to them. You couldn’t hold it off before, you can’t hold it off now.

It’s gonna kill them.

“Get back!” you repeat.

This time, they listen. Eridan and Kanaya reach for each other at the same time and retreat to the mouth of the clearing. A moment later, Gamzee and Karkat follow them. You see Gamzee’s having to haul Karkat back by the collar. He’s actually spoiling for a fight with this thing. Karkat all over.

Well, Gamzee better keep a firm hand on him, because if he gets in the way of this Lycan and you, he’s going to be snapped like a twig.

Only John remains and you know better than to tell him to run.

The Lycan peels itself out of the background and comes to rest on its scarred haunches, in front of the stream. You note with some vicious satisfaction how scarred and beaten it still is, from your last encounter almost a month and a half ago.

“John, stay out of my way,” you say out of the corner of your mouth.

The Lycan’s ears perk up. Its eyes shine.

“John.”

The voice is not what you would ever call a human voice. It sounds more like a bird trying to mimic its owners- the way that the other guy sounds like to you, except raspier, more out of practice, and a hundred times crueler.

You throw an arm out in front of John and flare your wings, so that he’s concealed from view

“Nope. He’s not interesting. I’m the one you want. I’m the fun one.”

The Lycan tilts its head. Emotions are hard to read from a face that is not designed to do anything but snarl and bark, but you can see something like confusion in its features.

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m protecting him. Me and John are tight.”
You hear Eridan hissing behind you “Why is he chattin’ ta it like they’re old friends?”
Gamzee makes one of those ‘I dunno’ noises he’s so practiced at making.
You keep your eyes on the Lycan. These things, as you learned from your last fight, will leap the moment they think you’re distracted. You cannot allow yourself to become distracted.
But staring it down isn’t an option either. It will attack you- even now, it advances across the bank.
In another moment, one of those massive, green paws will be splashing into the cold water, close to Kanaya’s rock. If it leaps over you, which is conceivable, it will shoot straight over-head and land on your friends. John must come to the same conclusion, because he grips your arm and squeezes it tight, before motioning to the others to run.
Gamzee takes the lead. Again, he has to haul Karkat off with a hand over his mouth- you don’t see it, but the sounds of Karkat being hauled off make up a clear enough image of what’s happening.
As for John, he stays where he is. One hand planted between the spot from which your wings sprout. The other, curled into a fist at his side. He’s not going anywhere, this time, and you’ll never be able to convince him he needs to do otherwise.
You can’t imagine what use he expects to be, except that he’s going to serve as your motivation not to die or be grievously injured this time.
The other guy is already howling and clawing at the sides of your chest. Demanding to be let out to protect his property. He knows better than you do what’s at stake, and how to protect it.
So you let him out.
Your shape doubles up, then doubles back and expands outwards all at once. The idea of being ‘Dave’ is replaced by a jumble of instincts and hungers and angers, all of which will still respond to that convenient catch-all, but not as happily. Not as willingly.
John is now somehow in your grip. He’s shielded among the coils of your thick tail, your wings spread out wide to make yourself appear bigger.
The Dave part of you thinks of a story- a nymph, or a princess, chained to a rock for a dragon. Andromeda. Perhaps this is what it would look like if Andromeda had been taken as a wife by the dragon, rather than had to be saved from its slavering jaws by one of the heroes that the ancient world was lousy with. You’re certain those heroes made a sport of your ancestors.
“Give me...” rasps the wolf, flicking its tail lazily.
It approaches as if you have nothing to fear. As if approaching a friend. Like, if it were a human, it would be crawling out onto the ledge beside you, full of reasons why life was just too good to give up on yet.
You don’t get it.
What does this Lycan think, that you’re holding meal? That you’ll share?
No, not with it. Not with anyone. John belongs to you.
“Basilisk,” he looks up at you, uncertain, afraid (but not of you, thank the gods, not of you) “She... she wants me for something.”
Instinctively, your tail curls around him. You have not been in many fights, so this must be some kind of inherent instinct in your kind- to curl around the one you’re protecting and use your wings to buffet the attacker away. You’ll do just that, if she comes closer (it smells like a she) and you’re already poised to start.
The Lycan tries again “Give me the John.”
That makes the Dave part of you want to laugh. A John, it thinks, with every Happy Meal- collect them all, kids!
“Why?” you rumble “He’s mine.”
“No...you are his.” manages the Lycan.
It doesn’t talk much. You can tell.
“No.” you insist “John doesn’t collect. He keeps. Strays.”
“Maybe we can help her-” he starts, but you quickly reach out with one of the thin hands that hide under your wings and cover his mouth.
He freaks out, not knowing what it is or why it’s attached to you (this form is still so confusing and alien to him), and this makes the Lycan mad.
It splashes to the mid-point of the stream before you let out a brittle hiss of warning. If she comes any closer, you’ll rip its head off with your beak. You’ll do it.

“Give him.” orders the Lycan “We leave.”

You’re beginning to understand what she wants out of you. A companion. A hunting partner. Hell, thinks Dave, I’m pretty damned irresistible, so she’s probably got a crush on me. But I don’t like girls. Not even badass wolf girls. Sorry, wolf-girl, but you’re picking from the wrong team. You don’t bother to relay this.

The Lycan wouldn’t understand the concept of romantic rejection. Not even when the object of your true affections is cradled in the coils of your tail, and you’re hissing the warning of just how far you will go to ensure that she doesn’t hurt him.

Hey, protests the Dave part, I don’t like him.

You don’t like arguing with the rational part of your mind- especially not in a life-or-death situation, so you decide to ignore him from now on. If the Dave part of you can’t accept how he feels, even with his instincts and desires exposed raw, like a bunch of live wires, then that’s his problem.

Your problem is the Lycan.

All at once, you disentangle John from your grasp. You push him behind you, carefully and gently, trusting him to hide while the fight is fought, if he has to stay. John moves back without complaint, but he rubs you between the wings again, craning to reach the height, and mutters some comfort you don’t catch.

Wait, you didn’t catch it, but the other guy did. The Dave part heard what he’s always listening for- searching for in every other word out of John’s mouth.

“I love you.”

You’ll worry about that when you are once again in the right mind-set, the right identity, to be concerned about it.

The Lycan sees you coming and realises a little too late that you’re not coming in for a hug. Your claws are out. Your teeth are bared. Both of them catch in her flesh before she can even brace herself, so you also manage to bowl her over completely. She cries out in anger and confusion. She attempts to retaliate by sinking her teeth into your shoulder, or ripping at your wings, but you have folded the sails away in preparation for tearing her to pieces.

She does find a purchase in your tail to rip your claws sideways, from her flank. Not splitting her sides as you had hoped, but leaving deep furrows. She howls, but her howl is muffled at the back of her throat by the mouthful of tail she has procured.

Your claws scrabble, trying to get into her again. Your teeth are slipping from her massive shoulders. She wrenches you away and flings you across the clearing, into the trees. You snap a few in half as you collide with them. The trunks bend back at dramatic angles and shed whatever dead leaves they have not already dropped. By the time you have sprung up again, she is already standing over John. He is pinned under one massive paw. One arm reaches towards the stream- towards you.

The Lycan’s bared teeth hover over his throat.

“No.”

“Yes. It’ll stop.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Please.”

This throws the Lycan off.

She repeats it “’please’?”

You repeat it “Please.”

The Lycan considers the word for a moment “Please what?”

You feel yourself shrinking into the form that can say this. It’s midway between you and the other guy.

It’s Dave Strider mounted on the thick tail of a monster, with the wings of one and the claws of one.
It’s what you think of as ‘the sprite’.
You try to keep your voice from shaking “Please don’t hurt him. He hasn’t done anything wrong.”
“He makes you cry.”
Desperately, you cast your mind back to the last time you scrapped with this thing. She must have heard you calling out to him in that moment where the pain became so great that you had to shrink to reduce the surface area. To gather your wits.
You hadn’t even realised properly that you were screaming for him, but you’re prepared to believe it “I was crying because I was sad. Because I thought I was never gonna see him again. Not because he hurts me…do you understand that?”
The Lycan doesn’t. Her snarl only grows fiercer.
“Listen, you…you’re from the labs, right? That’s why you think that humans just hurt people like us? It’s not true. John and his father are my family now. John and Jamie, they’re my boys. They look out for me. They let me sit on their roof and sun my wings. They let me turn into a giant monster and eat small rodents in the forest and they don’t care. They’re awesome people, and they do it because they want me safe…they don’t even worry about the shit they’ll be in if they get caught hiding me…they just don’t care about anything but me. You get it?”
John has closed his eyes, but you can feel his every nerve straining for you. You reach out too, like you might be able to reach all the way across the stream, to the fort, to grab his hand.
“We’re right where he found me. I was so little and broken when he found me…just there,” you point, and the Lycan’s eyes swivel in their sockets to follow your finger “When he found me, I was the little version of Basilisk, but he didn’t care. He just saw a little animal that was hurt and needed his help, so he took me home. Then he acted like a total fucking boss when I turned into a boy on his couch. Like, ‘this shit happens to me every day don’t even worry about it, welcome to the fucking family dude’, and he means it.”
“He keeps you.” says the Lycan “You need to go. We…we need to go. At the same time.”
“You- you want me to leave with you? Well I’ll think about it. Just let John get up and come over here.”
“No. You not leave him.”
“Hey, if you argue your case well, I might, but…but not if you hurt him.”
The Lycan flicks her ears in frustration. She leans down and picks up John in her teeth- not crushing him or even drawing blood, but it makes your breath freeze in your throat.
“Come and get him.”
Then she leaps, and as you guessed, she goes right over you with little trouble. John manages one scream, then he’s quiet. With her pelt, she quickly disappears into the snowy woods.
You’re growing again, into the other guy, and are ready to give the chase when you hear your name called from the opening of the fort.
“David, stop!”
It’s Gamzee.
The other three are with him. Eridan’s knuckles are white around his phone and he’s stuttering like a child, either to Sol or to Feferi. Kanaya’s got hers out and she’s holding it up so the person on the other end can hear you respond to him.
“Tina?” you growl.
Whatever’s on the other end of Kanaya’s phone yelps in shock “What the hell was that?”
She returns it to her ear “That was Dave.”
“I’m coming over right now,” says the tinny voice “Don’t move.”
Gamzee walks into the clearing and hops across the stream, barely stumbling on the slicks of ice that make his path treacherous. Karkat’s hands are clenched to fists at his sides and his eye are closed, as if he’s waiting for the crunch of bone and sinew.
Oh, they’re afraid of you.
Well, some of them are.
Gamzee stalks right up to you and opens his arms. Cautiously, he cups either side of your bloodied, sharp face and stares at you.
You stare back into his eyes.

“Dave,” he says slowly, curiously “Do you know who I am?”

“Yes. Gamzee.”

“Yeah, bro. an’ you know what I am?”

“…human.”

“Nah, I’m yer friend. Y’all know what friends do fer each other, right?”

Something tightens in your throat. It’s that feeling your human body gets when it’s about to cry.

“No.”

“We hunt down green wolves that take our other friends, that’s what we do. Now, last time, ya nearly motherfuckin’ died, bro. I know we ain’t nothin’ that…that,” he glances back at the other three, searching for an appropriate word “Impressive. Or useful. Or nothin’, but we ain’t useless either. And we ain’t gonna let ya charge off into the wood after the same motherfuckin’ monster that did this on yer own, ok? ‘Spesh since she got John too, now.”

“You want to help?”

“It ain’t a case ‘a wantin’ to. We’re gonna help an’ either yer gonna let us help, or…” he leans in close, bumping his nose against your beak “Or it ain’t gonna be an easy mission for y’all. Whaddya say?”

“Rose is picking up Tavros and Vriska,” reports Kanaya, her face bloodless “And I think Sol’s bringing the others.”

Eridan nods “He’s havin’ a helluv-va time gettin’ ‘em in the car, but I ain’t sendin’ a picture of this. The government. Those shits would be all over it.”

There’s no way you can argue against this. And, as afraid as you are of what she might do him, there’s no doubt in your mind that she’ll do worse to you if you go into this alone.

Even if it is a spongy, useless collection of humans, it’s nice to have back-up.

“No Equius. We do this alone. I have to do this…”

Gamzee nods pleasantly “Yer way, brother, all the way.”

Eridan pulls off his scarf and approaches hesitantly “W-wanna let me see that scratch? Abov-ve your eye? I can clean it up.”

You lay down on your side and prepare yourself to wait. To calm down. To think it out, this time. The snow begins to fall a little more heavily.
Why are you here, Sollux Captor?

Chapter Notes

A little break in the pace before the pace becomes a racing, pounding, screaming affair that has us all clinging to whatever we might be sitting in while reading the chapter. Cue surprise Sollux.

Your name is Sollux Captor. Now, why is that? You’re just a side character. What kind of interesting tale could you possibly have that would be important enough to divert us from the main story, what, with all the drama unfolding in the forest right now? There’s potential for Pepsicola becoming canon! There’s a big battle brewing - the audience just knows it! There’s some major plot points coming to a head over there and yet, for some reason, instead of listening to the horror and the onslaught that is about to stain the snow on the mountain, we’re in your car.

Well, Sollux Captor, what do you have to say for yourself? “It’s a big fuckin’ joke and that’s it.”

In your passenger seat, Rose clutches at her arm-rests, white-knuckled. She has no real idea of what is going on and that is completely disconcerting for her. She’s used to knowing most everything and everyone’s secrets. She is, after all, the unofficial agony aunt of the group, for her skills when it comes to psychological problem-solving. Therefore, it’s kind of alarmed her and pissed her off that she didn’t know from the start that Dave is apparently a monster.

“You heard the same noises that I did. Unless they had found a dragon with which to prank us…that wasn’t human. Not all the way, anyway. You heard him talking.” Kanaya had Rose on the phone and Eridan had you on Skype. He had just broken you out of a five-hour coding marathon, so you were already disorientated. The call didn’t help much. He had both you and Fef on, but he wouldn’t show any video to go with it.

He said “Can you come ov-ver to John’s house?” Fef said “Eridan, it’s freezing outside. Why are you guys out there in the first place?” You said “I’m kinda busy.”

Eridan said “Alright, I think you guys need some persuadin’.” In the next few moments, in which you and Fef lapsed into terrified and confused silences respectively, you heard a distinctly inhuman voice speaking. It spoke to Gamzee, whose ridiculous, twangy accent was easy to identify.

The other thing wasn’t anything that you could recognise. Its voice set the hairs on the back of your neck standing straight up. It made you drop the pencil you were spinning around your fingers. It put a heat of sickly fear under your skin, like a fever.

You understood it for a moment. All of your life, you’ve been looking at something a little bit different than the rest of the world saw. Your father claims it’s because your closer to a more primal part of the world, despite your desire to hide from anything and everything tangible in your coding and online life. You can’t disagree, when he says you’re closer to some ancient set of memories that date back to the ancestors of man.

So you understood pretty quickly, even if it was a short-lived clarity, that you were listening to a voice that had had language and culture and design long before humankind were upright on their feet. Something unspeakably old. Powerful and frightening. One of the monsters that lurks in the neural soup of human instinct and memory, at the back of the brain.
You had heard that voice before. The entire species of human had heard that voice before, howling in the distance, to put the howls of dire-wolves and the roars of sabre-tooth tigers to shame. And yet, for some reason, you’re in the car. You and Rose, en route to pick up Fef. You’re hoping she has a more intelligent take on the situation than you do. Right now, your current theory is that, despite the feeling you had when you first heard it, your boyfriend and friends are just fucking with you. You’re going to arrive there, flushed from the cold and fear, to find John and the rest of them languishing at what he and Dave call The Fort, ready to laugh their asses off at you. They said John is in trouble. Bad trouble- deadly trouble, and it’s better to call for your help than it is to call for the police. For Officer Zahhak, as you understand it. Whenever anything goes wrong in Dave’s life, Equius Zahhak is on the scene with band-aides and a pat on the head for the brave boy. If this is all true, which it isn’t, you can’t even begin to imagine what help they think you’re going to be. Rose is just a nerd, and you’re just a scrawnier nerd.

“Sollux.”

In your frustration, you make a sloppy turn and almost run up on the curb “What?” you hiss. Rose hangs on while the G-force from your sloppy driving faces, her face grim “We need to be thinking about long-term plans for what we will do if that thing that we heard really is Dave.”

“What do you mean plans? If it’s Dave, then fuck it. Dave can turn into what sounds like a giant monster when he wants to. Good for him. It’ll spic up his college application.”

She stares at you in a guarded kind of awe “Really?”

“If you’re asking me if that’s how I really feel, then don’t, because you know it is.”

“And why is that-”

Before she can really get into the meat of your subconscious fears of rejection or whatever it is she’s going to blame for your unconditional acceptance of whatever it is Dave turns out to be, your phone goes off in your pocket, with the same effect as if a bomb went off in it. You and Rose both jump and scream a little. Digging your phone out of your pocket, you pass it like a writhing snake to Rose, who holds it gingerly.

“Hello, Tavros? Yes, we’re on our way…how did you get there already? Hold on, I’m putting you on speaker.”

Tavros’s voice is made tinny by the phone, but you can still tell how freaked out he is “So, um, you guys, how far away are you? ’cos I just got the- the story, and it’s not a good story.”

You search for a street sign “We’re almost to Fef’s. Give us fifteen from there.”

You can imagine Tavros biting his lip at the news “Huh, that’s not good. Not good at all. John is…”

“Is Dave really- uh,” you have to think about a way of asking your question without giving it away to whatever concealed audience you might have what Dave has become “Is he really sick the way you guys said he was sick?”

“Sick? Oh- oh! Uh, yeah! He’s really, really sick. It’s really kind amazing, how sick he is. You gotta get here.”

You and Rose immediately join in.

No sooner than you have slowed down does Fef hurl herself into the car. You don’t even get a chance to stop all the way, but it means you can accelerate just that much faster once she’s in. Fef sees the phone and starts chattering in a panic.

“Oh my gosh, Tav, is he alright, is Dave alright, is John? What’s going on? Are you there yet? Oh my gosh, I can’t believe this is happening, like, holy shit, is John really in trouble? Was he wearing a good coat when he left?” she brandishes an extra coat, smacking Rose in the face with a sleeve “I brought one just in case he’s super cold and he needs it! I know how to fend of hypothermia, if he’s got it. How long has he been-” she pauses and gasps desperately for breath “Is Dave there? Tell him we love him!”

You and Rose immediately join in.
“Yeah, Dave, if you can hear me, it doesn’t fucking bother me. Full moon, whatever. You’re just you.”

Rose picks up where you have left off “In fact, I would say that I feel indifferent towards learning of your…anomalous way of being. As Sol said, ‘whatever’.”

“That was real sweet guys, but he’s not here,” snaps Vriska from out of nowhere.

You repress the urge to groan “Oh, you’re there too. Who is there, then?”

“Would you believe that Dave and Karkat went and did a ‘How to train your dragon’? They’re up there right now.”

“Dave has-” Feferi stops short, also wary that they might have a government-assigned eavesdropper

“Uh, flappy flappy?”

Vriska lets out a hoot of derisive laughter. There’s a rustle of fabric, presumably as Tavros shoves her off him.

“Yeah. He’s pretty…pretty something. I mean, he’s really something.”

“Are they coming back down? What’s our plan of attack? What the hell was it even that got John?” the more stressed out you get, the worse your lisp grows. You’re lucky you’re not showering Rose and the dashboard in spit at this point “How the hell are we supposed to do anything, anyway? We’re just stupid nerds!”

“I have a black belt,” counters Fef “And have you ever been put in a headlock by Rose? She can be a real bitch with that grip, I swear.”

Rose allows herself a small, prideful smile before committing herself to the plan of attack again “I am not sure what we’re facing at this point, because no one has told me-”

“Think full moons and fur and silver bullets,” suggests Tavros “It’s a big green version of that. It’s…it’s a big green dog that thinks it’s a person.”

If you were confused before, you’re just completely bewildered now “And…and what do we do against that?”

“I don’t know. Uh, Dave is just comforted, I think, to have some back-up. So, so if we’re just there to be comfort, then that’s ok with me.”

“Shell yeah,” says Fef, employing a favourite pun of her that she lifted from her favourite comic book franchise involving a lot of over-powered turtles “I’m fine with that too, but you better believe I’m grabbing the biggest-ass stick I see the second I get there.”

Everyone laughs, which does wonders to lighten the mood.

You’re just beginning to feel a little safer when you turn onto the rural road, and when the audience finally receives their justification for this quaint, but ultimately obnoxious venture into the POV of Sollux Captor.

There’s something completely wrong in the middle of the road. Just standing there, straddling the white-line, glorying in all its wrongness.

You slam on the brakes. Rose and Fef sway forward, and because she was not wearing her seat-belt, Fef is thrown roughly back into the seat. In the shock of what she has seen, she barely notices the pain she should be feeling

It’s just wrong. Physically wrong: wrong shapes, wrong bones, wrong angles, wrong dimensions. Not just for the human it must be trying to emulate, but for an animal. For anything that wants to move without experiencing staggering pain with each movement. Psychologically wrong, because you just don’t know how to process it, except as a groan of revulsion that bubbles out past your lips. The car stops bare ten feet short of hitting it. Gagging at the sight of it (but not the smell, there is no smell), ready to reverse the hell out of the way. But this is the way to John and Dave’s house. There is no quicker route. You need to get to them.

So you do the only thing you can think of.

Rolling down the window, you stick your head out and start to berate it in fluent, aggressive Japanese. You sound absolutely insane in your lisping Japanese. The creature may look like only the palest and rudest imitation of a human, but it draws back a few feet in alarm the way a human would. You’re saying anything that comes to mind. Insulting its mother. Suggesting its father was a cheating whore. Cursing its family farm and hoping that the crops never grow. These are all phrases you have
learned from your aunt’s periodical dramas, and they sound even more cuckoo and threatening when you’re shouting them.
The creature finally balks, when your throat has begun to get sore and your hands are shaking on the steering wheel. Just as it begins to retreat for the woods, Rose grabs your phone up and snaps a photo.
The prickly back of the creature disappears into the screen of foliage at the side of the road. Only then do you realise that Tavros has been trying to get your attention for the entire time.
“Sollux?” he’s not sure if he should be scared or amused “What was that, Sollux? Ok- uh, are you guys, that, right now?”
Fef is bone white. Rose’s hands are shaking almost as badly as yours are.
“We…there was something in the road.” you manage.
“What was it?” he presses.
Fef croaks “Looks like what would happen if Lizard man fucked Bigfoot and Bigfoot drank all the way through the pregnancy, and then the baby got covered in needles.”
“What?”
Fef sags into the back-seat “I’m gonna want more than a stick if I go in those fucking woods today.”
And that is why you are here, Sollux Captor.
That weirdo with the smoker's voice is back again

Chapter Notes

Basilisk is so hard to write. His attitudes and continuity is just all over the place, so sorry about him and his bull-shit. Bird shit. Basilisk shit.

Your name is still Dave, apparently, because it’s what they are calling you. They must have heard John calling you Basilisk. Still, they stick to Dave. They know Dave. They have never seen or met Basilisk before, and you’re terrifying because of it.

All of them are here, now. You should have said no. You should have scared them away. Attacking one of them would be a good way to make sure that they didn’t come back until you were Dave again, and full of empty apologies and explanations for the scar that you had left on one of them. But the thought of that scar- that’s what stopped you. You can’t hurt them. They may be Dave’s friends, but John is Dave’s too, and look at what you’re about to do for him.

Dave wants to take over. He wants to go crowd around Rose’s phone, to look at the picture of the thing which you should be able to smell, but haven’t smelled yet. He wants to smile and crack a joke with the others who have just come, who didn’t know about his wings yet. He wants to be relieved that Vriska is just happy as hell to be included in this, and she doesn’t seem mad enough about the mere fact of his, of your existence, to turn you into somebody.

But you’re not gonna let him. You’re gonna stay strong through this, all the way. Dave is not strong. Not like you are.

“Looks like Lizard Man and Bigfoot fucked.” announces Karkat.

“That’s exactly what I said,” says Fef “Ugh, it was so gross. The picture doesn’t do it justice. It was like, frigging, nasty, you know? Just nasty.”

They’re essentially gathered around the fort, with Rose standing in the centre. You don’t think they planned to be arranged like that, but it means that you can crane your neck and look over into the middle, and see the thing. You don’t know what it is. Even Dave doesn’t, with his ugly memories all coming back. You have some of your own memories and you don’t know either.

What you’re thinking about right now is the fact that Fef has an arm around your neck. You’re leaning over her, as a giant, clawed snake-bird and she’s just hanging onto your neck like she would be draped around Dave’s shoulders.

You don’t know if you like her for it or not.

Tavros is on the other side of you (Dave doesn’t think about him anymore, so you’re not that bothered by him) and he isn’t worried about leaning his shoulder up against your side either “It looks like- like, really, really wrong. Like, unnatural. The place they had you, Dave, do you know if they made things like that there?”

“I don’t know.” you rumble.

Karkat, still wind-swept from the short flight that he was not expecting and screamed all the way through, coughs conspicuously and looks over his shoulder “We’re in over our heads here, folks. Now I wish I wasn’t so damned determined about getting that fucking black belt, because I know you bastards are gonna shove me to the front line to roundhouse kick anything that’s not happy and sunny and tripping over itself to help us find John.”

Gamzee pats him on the shoulder “I’ll help ya, bro.”

“How are you going to help me?” he says incredulously “You’re a black belt in vapid stupidity.” “I got me a brother, a big one. That teaches y’all ta put up a fight.”

“Hear hear,” says Fef “Meenah beat me up all the time when we were kids, but like, now I can break
noses and ribs if I need to.”
Eridan furrows his brow “You broke Meenah’s ribs? You, the veg who can’t even go to an
aquarium, ‘cos yer so sad about the fish trapped there.”
“Well, no, it wasn’t Meenah’s ribs, but—”
“If we could please stay on target,” says Kanaya frostily “We haven’t got that much in the way of
time or daylight. Please keep in mind that tomorrow is a school day.”
Everyone groans and winces.
“Maybe it’ll be a snow day,” suggests Sol.
“Let’s assume the worst,” says Kanaya stiffly “In the worst case scenario, we are all suspended for
being late or missing school entirely tomorrow.”
You can’t fathom why she’s so worried about her human obligations when much weirder things are
demanding her attentions. It kind of makes you want to hurt her until she gets her priorities straight,
to bite her, the way you wanted to scare them away. But Dave says no. Dave’s in charge here, no
matter how much stronger you are than him physically.
When Dave says no, you listen.
“Losing the day,” you mutter.
As one, they all jump.
“That voice is the weirdest voice I have ever heard,” Vriska runs a hand through her hair nervously
“Can you give us some warning before you start rasping all over the backs of our necks?”
“He’s just talking, Vriska,” says Tavros shortly “Let him talk.”
She opens her mouth to snark at him, but you thump the tip of your tail on the ground to let her know
she should shut up. Dave says not to touch any of them, Vriska included, otherwise you would have
taken her in your claws and flown high. And dropped her. Already. The moment she came and she
started talking at the top of her voice about how she knew there was something off about Dave.
It has been, in human time, almost a half hour since John was taken. You have to at least hand it to
them for arriving quickly. Assembling, a haphazard herd, bound together by nothing but the ties of
an imagined kinship.
They can’t help you. Except, by being here. That makes Dave feel better. That makes you feel better,
because of that.
Now they’re all looking at you, like you have something to say.
“First, we find him.”
“The woods could be crawling with these things,” Rose brandishes her phone “Are you suggesting
that we wander among these things without anything to protect ourselves?”
Feferi hefts a giant stick “Oh, consider me protected.”
“I can…I can kick things.” volunteers Karkat sullenly.
Eridan grabs Sol’s arm and folds his around it “If I can keep the girls off him at the mall, then I can
keep w-what-ever’s out there off him now.”
Gamzee thumps Tavros on the back “I’m a keep an eye on him. We’ll be good, yeah?”
Tavros nods “Yeah.”
Kanaya offers Rose her hand “I’m sure you and I can work something out, in terms of protection.”
Vriska looks around the group. Her face falls a little. Then perks back up, quickly, and she starts to
bark orders “Ok! We can do this, group, and apparently we’re really going to give it a shot. I mean,
it’s not like I have a future that I’m risking on this dumb venture or anything.”
“Oh, I’m gonna tell John you said that,” sings Feferi “You’re being such a bad girl-friend right
now.”
She shrugs carelessly “It’s high-school. It’s not like I’m gonna marry him.”
Dave wants to say something to that. He really, really wants to contribute when she says that, with a
slew of words that Jamie would have his head for saying, so you don’t let him. You don’t want to
start a fight right now. If it occurs to you to do so and you’re alone with her later on, then maybe
you’ll just twist her neck and leave her under a bush.
“Fine. Don’t marry him, this is a rescue mission, not a proposal. Just make yourself useful.” Karkat
turns to you “We’ll spread out. We’ll use the special panicked cry for help if we find something that
looks promising, ok? And if you’re gonna be flying again, with anyone, can you not do that barrel role thing to them? I mean, we all know how hard-core I am and that nearly gave me a heart-attack, so…”

“No. Just in the trees. Clouds are thick enough, but I don’t…” you leave it hanging there, unwilling to say the next part.
So Gamzee finishes it for you “Y’all don’t wanna leave us on the ground, yeah? That’s fine, bro, jus’ see that yer gonna be fine ta help out if it does turn ugly.”

“Which it will,” confirms Karkat “I’m sure it’s gonna end up that there are two groups of us screaming and running around like headless chickens at the same time, so, you know, just pick your favourites.”

“I’ll think of something.” you say.
For some reason, this makes them all laugh nervously.

Your name is Karkat Vantas, and you’re nervous.
Of course you’re fucking nervous. You were still trying to process the idea that Dave is real and that the wrinkled old woman who you thought lived in your closet as a child might actually be a thing, like, with a biography and life-goals and all that shit, just the whole idea of monsters and all they entail being real, when this fucking happens. It looked like a piece of lush turf got up from the Home Depot Garden Centre, glued some wolf-ears on and started running around, but God, was it terrifying. It took John, too, so now this is all personal. Well, really, it became personal the second that you realised Dave was involved, because Dave is your friend, however grudgingly you acknowledge your affections for him.

Yep, you’re in the shit.
What’s worse, you’re not even in the shit with your main man, Gamzee. He doesn’t know that he’s your main man and he never will, if you get your way, because you’re not the type to vomit the explicit feelings all over someone when they could just as easily judge them implicitly from your actions. Like, God, use your brains, people, yes, I’m your friend, how needy are you that you need me to be patting your hair and whispering sweet platonic nothings all the time?
But yeah, no, you’re with Vriska instead. Fucking Vriska and fucking Fef. Actually, you haven’t got a problem with Fef, and you like that she brought a stick approximately the size of a dock-strut to protect herself and the rest of you. What you’ve got a problem with is Vriska.
As if the point needs to be proved for you, just how much of an ass Vriska is, you stumble in the snow and fall on your butt. Fef manages to catch your elbow just as ass meets snow, and cushions what would be a backwards face-plant into the snow with her chubby knees, which kind of spring you off of them so you rocket upright again. Vriska watches all this with thinly veiled amusement, then, like the little bitch that she is, she chuckles behind her hand.

Oh, it is so on. Or it would be on if you didn’t have bigger fish to fry than her.
“Laugh all you want, Vriska.” you say sullenly as Fef hefts you under the arms and puts you back on your feet “It’s hysterical, really, ‘cos Karkat fell over on his butt and got snow down his pants and nothing funnier has ever happened in the history of things happening. But guess what? There’s gonna be a sequel. There’s a part two, and it ain’t an epilogue, it’s the start of a fucking epic. You’re gonna fall ass-first into the snow and I will laugh. I will laugh so hard that my lungs come out of my mouth and inflate like giant balloons and they will carry me away and it won’t be just Dave that dominates the sky, oh no.”
Fef dusts you off, getting a little too friendly around the butt area “There, you’re fine.”
“Are you finished?” asks Vriska lazily “Or have you got a little more sass you’d like to share with the group?”
“I’m a raging ball of sass. But now is not the appropriate time. I’ll emotionally wreck what little you haven’t wrecked yourself later. We need to keep moving.”
The three of you are going up the mountain. The north-ish face, you think, but then, you’ve never
been good with directions. All you know is that you have to walk through snow and up a slight incline, and it’s pissing you off.
The others are similarly scattered all over the mountain or the base of it. The basic idea is a hopeless one; you’ll all just keep walking until you find something that looks promising and screech for Dave, who’s somehow going to be exactly close enough to hear the bugle for assistance and to arrive just in time to save everyone from injury or certain death.
Yeah, you really thought this one out.
Vriska starts walking long before you’ve got your balance back and the snow out of your pants. So, she stays in front and you sort of just hang back with Fef. It feels good, to stare at her back and think murderous thoughts. A lot better than keeping up with her and pretending you want to talk to her, or anything.
And besides, now that you and Fef are out of earshot, you can gossip.
Fef steps over a fallen log delicately, and hovers in case you try falling over again “What do you think of the picture? My God, you should have seen that thing, though, it was so ugly it made me want to hurl.”
“How did you guys get rid of it anyway? When Tav was talking to you it sounded like Sol was squawking at the top of his voice in Japanese.”
“That’s exactly what happened.”
“And…and it worked?”
“Yep.”
“Classic Sol.”
“It was kinda scary, but- oh, here, let me.”
Fef props her stick up on a tree and grabs you around the waist, and pretty much throws you up a stone ledge that was almost too high for you to have a hope of getting over. To spare your pride, you offer her a hand up. She ignores it and makes her own way up, with a lot of scrabbling at the rock and pumping of her legs in mid-air, then grabs her stick and continues on as normal. Up ahead, Vriska’s getting up the steep path without asking for help. She looks back every now and then to make sure that you haven’t disappeared. Or maybe she’s waiting for you to do something funny, like falling over again.
You hate her right now.
“The real question right now is what we’re gonna do about John when we get him.”
Fef hums “Think he’s gonna have PTSD?”
“Wouldn’t you if you got kidnapped from a giant red bird by a green wolf?”
“Beats the hell out of what I normally do on snowy Sundays.”
“Fef. No. Too soon.”
“Sorry.”
You clamber over yet another rock and nearly cut the palm of your glove open as your hand slips “What I mean is what we’re gonna do about John and Dave in general. You know there’s someone after John, right?”
Fef nods cheerfully “Oh, yeah, yeah, of course! Eridan told me that.”
You roll your eyes “We never can keep a secret in this group, can we?”
“Eh. Who needs secrets among friends anyway?”
Vriska calls back from her one-woman charge into the wilderness “Are you guys trying to kill John? ‘cos you’re being so slow he’s probably gonna be dead by the time we find him!”
You’re looking up the snowy slope for a hand-sized rock you might be able to grab up and smash her head with as you continue further into the woods and there are more opportune moments for stashing a body, but as you’re looking, you catch a flash of red flickering through two trees near to where the ground levels out into a path again. Your heart seizes up. For a moment, you think you’re about to see a red version of that Lizard-Squatch love child, but no.
It’s just a hiker showing way too much skin for this weather.
She stands about 30 feet in front of Vriska. Her arms are crossed and her stance suggests that she’s posing for a film poster about sassy girl-friends in high-school taking down the man in a talent
competition or something. She’s got a lot of wild black hair that’s doing a good impression of a sea-urchin, and her clothes are beaten in a way that tells you she’s probably been living in the woods, or on the road, for much longer than you’d be able to bear it. Even from this distance, you can tell there’s something weird about her.

Something not-human.

Fef clutches her stick tightly “Uh, hi!” she calls out.

Vriska looks up in shock. She hadn’t noticed the hiker, although you don’t know how she could have missed the foolish, brazen soul wearing nothing but jeans, boots and a torn jacket in these temperatures.

Fef just gets straight into it “Hey, have you seen a kid with black hair and kinda funny front teeth wandering around here? We lost our friend.”

“John.” says the hiker. She sounds like she not only smokes about 2 packs a day, but eats the ashes hot from the ash-tray “I know. That’s why I’m here, about John.”

Every alarm bell that is installed in your primordial human instincts are going off, full-force. She’s a predator. She’s a monster. She’s probably mentally undressing one of you, because you’re getting that uncomfortable, sexually repressed vibe that people who haven’t talked to other people for a long time get.

For some reason, you want to call a dragon-slayer. You don’t know why this is the first animal to pop into your head out of the spectrum of other monsters that she could be- no, that she is, because you know she really is something terrifying and non-human. Maybe you’re making it up. Maybe you’re thinking a little bit too hard about the last season of ‘Hannibal’, or maybe one of those alarm-bells in the back of your mind is going off because it still has a programme in it, a programme to recognise the monsters which once stalked your hairy, stunted ancestors.

Then again, Fef’s talking to this thing as politely as she would in a line at a store “Oh, you know John? That’s great. And also, kinda creepy. You’re not…you’re not the one stalking him are you?”

“Fef.” you wheeze “Fef, don’t antagonise the creepy woman, Fef. Don’t do it, Fef.”

The hiker’s head tilts slightly to look at you. Vriska starts to retreat down the slope, but she stops when she notes the hiker is no longer interested in her. She starts back up again, keeping her movements neat and furtive, for fear of startling the strange young woman.

You can’t imagine what she’s planning to do, but it’s your cue to start moving and you’ve got to follow it. Nudging Fef with your elbow, you start climbing again. It is difficult to do and keep your eyes on the hiker at the same time. She’s not really a hiker, now that you think about it, and she’s probably responsible for all the deaths on this path that have occurred in the past few weeks. Why are you just remembering those fucking murders?

It would have been great if you remembered them, say, fifteen minutes ago before everyone went their separate ways.

Now you realise that those animal attacks were not perpetuated by any kind of animal that the law enforcement investigating would recognise. The question now is whether or not it was this woman, or whatever it is masquerading as a woman underneath that taut skin, that did it.

And how she knows John.

“How do you know John?” you have to shout to make your voice heard, so it echoes. The entire forest seems to be shouting it.

The woman sticks a finger in her ear and twists lightly, as if irritated by the noise “Not intimately. I guess the story didn’t make it much further than Dave, did it?”

“What were you doing? Watching them?”

A wicked grin that turns your legs to water curves her mouth “I don’t watch much of anything these days, little boy, but I was listening intently. Taking notes. It’s interesting, the way John talked about me.”

“What did you do to him?” demands Fef, and she looks pretty threatening with her stick “Did you set that wolf thing on him?”

“The Lycan? No, not me,” she shrugs dismissively “I don’t know what those djinns are thinking, letting her run around unchecked. She’s going to cause some serious trouble.”
Names, now. Names make this a little more real than you’re prepared to deal with.
“Djinns…you mean…”well, it’s a long-shot, but as far as you know Officer Zahhak is from around
the same region as where Islam started, and where those things are supposed to have started too
“You mean Officer Zahhak?”
“’officer’?” she repeats derisively “Bleh, that’s a foul taste on my tongue, right there. That’s just…
I can’t believe he went and threw himself head-first into another system.”
“He was in the labs with you.” suggests Fef.
She’s still hazy on the details, but you and the other three who were already in the know did your
best to give her an abridged version. Obviously, it was not a good idea to mention the labs to this
woman. She flinches as if she’s been struck and her smile slips a little.
“Yep. We were together. Neighbours, in fact. They got out before I got out. Ask John to tell you the
story, assuming he’s still alive.”
A prickle of fear travels up your spine “Are you gonna help us, or just stand there looking cool?”
“You’re asking me for help? Surely by now you’ve noticed I’m something weird.”
Suddenly, Vriska is next to her, and you’re in almost the same spot she was when she first noticed
the young woman. She made her trip silently and stoically and now that she’s at the top, she has her
shoulders squared and her chest puffed out like a bird sizing up its own reflection in a mirror it has
mistaken for an opponent.
The young woman doesn’t seem at all disconcerted by the company. Just a little pissed off to have
someone in her personal space. She edges along the rim of the cliff, away from Vriska.
Vriska lets her back away “Listen. I don’t know who you are, or what you think you are, but you
don’t scare me.”
“Then you’re very stupid.”
“We’re looking for John, and if you’ve met John, then I bet you like him. Everyone likes John. And
I bet you’re out here trying to find him just the same as we are.”
The young woman cocks her head to the side, her motion quick and somehow reptilian “Like him?
What, that idiot, goofy magnetism? No, I’m not about to fall for that. I know his type. The
unintentionally charismatic. They’re never good people to invest trust in…still, having said that,
that’s exactly what I did.”
“So…so you’re looking for John?” asks Vriska, still trying to sound rough and intimidating through
her confusion.
“Yes, I’m looking for John.” the woman’s sarcasm is scathing “Gods, you people.”
Vriska bristles “What’s that supposed to mean?”
The woman folds her arms “Nothing, little sister, just that I find your entire species a chore to
communicate with.”
“Don’t call me that.”
You clear your throat loudly and wave from the bottom of the slope “Hi, excuse me? Yes,
ambassador of reality, and I know you must be busy, but I wonder if you have just a minute to talk
about our lord and saviour- REALITY CHECK, FOR FUCK’S SAKE! John is lost in the woods
with a green wolf that wants to kill him out of some misguided jealousy, and you two are having a
pissing match! Women, you’re both fierce! You can both be the alpha, but if you
two don’t fucking stow your issues in the overhead compartments, I swear to God, I will demonstrate
with the UTMOST EAGERNESS why I am one of the scariest people to face in my dojo!”
Your voice, shrill and screeching, bounces around the mountain-side. Whatever monsters these
woods may be stuffed with are definitely listening now if they weren’t before. The green wolf knows
you’re here now if it didn’t before.
But on the bright side, you’ve rendered the two of them speechless.
Fef sighs behind you, cupping her face in her hands. Only Gamzee is allowed to have that reaction to
your bullshitery, but you’ll have to wait to punish her for her indiscretion until later on, when your
hands aren’t full with these two idiots.
The woman has found her voice again “No one has spoken to me like that in years.”
“Well, you must be talking to yourself most of the time, then, because that attitude ain’t gonna fly in
polite fucking company.”
For some reason, she smiles widely. Given the shape and the sharpness of her teeth, you would have rather that she growled at you “My name is Terezi.”
Before you can think of an appropriate insult, Fef volunteers all of your names “I’m Feferi, that’s Vriska, and this is Karkat. So, Terezi, are you gonna be helpful, or are you just gonna stand there looking cool all day?”
“Sure. I’ll help.”
Then, just to add to this general moment of all—round weirdness, a thin, scaly tail flicks out from behind her and coils around her leg.
Why did we think we were qualified for this again?

Chapter Notes

It's time to play, 'where the hell is John'!
Is he behind that rock?
Is he up that tree?
Is he- WHOA, FUCK, IT'S GOT TEETH, IT'S GOT CLAWS, IT'S FAST, RUN, RUN RUN!!

Your name is Gamzee Makara.
Well, this will be interesting, won’t it? A look at the fevered mind of that loveable, spaced-out, forever confused lanky scarecrow that we all know and either love or despise equally passionately?
Wait, what? What do you mean that-

Your name is Sollux Captor.
That stuff with Gamzee was a fake-out, obviously. He doesn’t have anything interesting to say, does he? No cool back-story, no useful plot-points to add. If we went with Gamzee Makara, we’d just watch him striding through the snow searching for daisies while Kanaya tried to keep him on task and failed miserably. No, instead, we get a look at you, with Rose and Eridan.
Where are you Sollux Captor?
Well, right now, you’re up a tree.
Of course, when the thing started to chase you, you screamed. But in the distance, you heard Karkat’s familiar and comforting rage-bugle ringing out and bouncing all over the mountainside, effectively drowning out what little cries for help you, Eridan and Rose had time to make before you had taken to the trees and made the group decision that screaming was only going to attract a host more of antagonists. So, this is where you are right now.
Up a tree. Stuffed up there at awkward angles, keeping the most tenuous grasp on the bark and branches as the slippery material of your winter-clothes tries desperately to dislodge you. There’s snow melting down your spine and your boyfriend’s thighs are on your shoulders. In ordinary circumstances, this would be a great thing, but for right now, you’re just kind of terrified that if you slip even slightly you’re going to wreck his balance and he’ll fall to his death.
Finally, his weight shifts up and off as Rose lifts him to a second, higher and wider bough. You watch him go up kicking daintily and cursing like a sailor. He reappears and offers you his hand, as does Rose. There’s another scary moment where the solid wood beneath your feet turns to void and you’re just kind of trying to focus on Eridan’s determined face, and not the growls, or the way the tree shivers every time the hungry thing underneath it butts its head into the trunk.
Then you’re on your stomach and slung over the branch. Eridan pulls you upright. Looking past his arms and through a screen of snowy branches, you see the thing looking up at you.
“Everything about this is terrible.” you announce.
Eridan pokes his head over your shoulder “W-what do you think it is?”
“I- I don’t… I don’t know if a zoologist would know what that is, babe. I don’t think that’s anything.”
Rose frowns “If the last one was the lovechild of an unfortunate union between the Sasquatch and Lizard Man, then this one looks like the Loch Ness monster sent her lovechild with the Mothman to a Catholic boarding school.”
“W-why Catholic?” asks Eridan “W-what screams Catholic about this thing to you? I ain’t nev-ver seen, in all my years of hail-Marying, a priest charge a tree head-first and ram it with horns.”
As if on cue, the monster retreats, stamps its hoof to the ground and charges the tree again. Snow rains down on all three of you. Eridan lets out a little shriek as a whole blob falls on his head. Rose dusts herself off “I don’t know why I said Catholic boarding school. Perhaps because they are typically so strict?”

“Rose, stop talking about Catholic,” you manage through your gritted teeth “You’re making it angry.”

“Oh, let it be angry. If it knocks the tree over then at least it will knock it over on itself and we might get away.”

Cautiously, leaning heavily on your shoulders, Eridan stands “I’ve got a better idea, as I tend to.”

“Oh fuck off,” says Rose impatiently, as she immediately catches on “I could and would have thought of that. Any old fool can think of climbing into the next tree over while it’s too mad to notice we’re- wipe that smile off your face, Ampora, or I won’t be blamed if my hand happens to slip violently into your back and dislodge you from the safety of this branch.”

You’re just gathering the courage to get up and go, by staring fixedly at the monster as it charges again and again, telling yourself it can and will eat you if you don’t move, when something catches your eye. Something is glittering in the snow.

The ground has been torn up by the thing’s hooves and horns. With the grass and snow peeled away, you can see something dull and metal glinting in the weak light of the afternoon. It has been buried so that, up until the monster started charging and tearing up the ground with its hooves, it could have just been a part of the landscape.

Something at the back of your mind throws the pieces together before your confused conscious process knows what is going on. And, before you’re even aware of those pieces coming to the front of your mind, you’re edging in the opposite direction.

By this time, Eridan and Rose are well on their way to getting onto the other, thick, wide branch that Eridan identified as a safe option. When Eridan realises you’re going in exactly the wrong way to the way he picked, he grows a little afraid, but can’t get past Rose to stop you. Making a shooing gesture, you keep going. Your footing is sure. The monster is still distracted by its rage, and it is convinced that all three of you are still in the first tree.

Carefully, you step over to another tree. Snow rains down and makes your footing hell, but you cling on stubbornly and manage not to slip and fall to your death, which is always encouraging. Eridan is, of course, scandalised by your idiocy. His jaw is open and his hands are fists at his sides. Rose has a grip on his shoulder that suggests she just barely stopped him from tearing across the trees to rescue you from whatever bad decision you’re clearly about to make.

Below, the monster smacks its head again into the now empty tree. You wonder if it might be able to tell from the way the tree sways freely, without your weight to hold it back, that it is attacking nothing. But that face? No, that face holds no intelligence. Only instinct. Hopefully, it will be easy to trick.

While Eridan and Rose glare daggers at you and the thing rams into the tree again and again, you begin to creep down to the glint of metal that you saw buried in the pine-litter. You’re not sure what the hell it is that you plan to do once you’re there. Just that you need to get there. You need to see what that it is. Then you can worry about basic things, such as survival and not getting gored by monsters later.

You’re about halfway down the tree when the monster notices something has changed. It looks around, uncertain, scenting the air. From the steam issuing from its wide nostrils, and the slightly perturbed look on its face, you’re guessing it can’t smell you for some reason. Well, none of you are bleeding, and that thing has actually begun to smash its face in its frenzied efforts to bring the three of you down. Maybe it can’t smell anything through its own blood?

Rose is thinking differently. She snaps a branch, loudly, deliberately, and stares at the thing as it looks up. Its eyes light up with a hungry kind of glee.

“That’s right, you fucker,” hisses Rose in a voice she must have learned from a movie “I’m right here, for the taking. Me and my friend, we’re both nice and lean cuts. No gristle here. What do you say? Want to try your luck?”
Eridan joins in, stubbornly averting his eyes from you as you slink down the branches “Bet you can’t reach us. Bastard. You don’t ev-ven know-w w-what I’m sayin’, do you?”

While it may not understand what’s being said, it understands that its lunch is talking. And that it’s hungry.

So while the thing beats itself bloody against the other tree, you touch down onto the pine needles softly. You’re actually amazed by how little noise you make as you creep over to the half-buried door. Normally, you’re as clumsy and uncoordinated as a dog on ice. Makes a nice change to be moving gracefully and slowly, more like a mountain lion, but you wish that the circumstances were different.

Once you have reached the door, you swipe away the stuff on top of it. The snow rasps, but the monster doesn’t notice. It is preoccupied with backing up for another charge. When it reverses, it comes back so close to you that you could touch its back, if you reached for it. Every time it does this, your breath freezes in your throat.

In less than half a minute, you’re unearthed a metal square, built right into the ground. A door. You hope to God there’s some kind of passage that you can jump into to hide in here, because if the door makes noise (and oh you bet it will) you can’t think how else you’re going to get out of the situation. You look up at Eridan and Rose. They look back at you, then to each other, then back to you, and nod.

Permission. Good. Great.

Digging your fingers into the dirt, you find the lid of the door, and push the chrome slab upwards. It is heavy, and yes, as you had guessed, it shrieks. As luck would have it the monster hits the tree trunk at the exact same time, so it is so dazed that as it turns on you, it can barely stay straight on its feet.

“Sollux!” cries Rose.

The monster starts towards you.

Eridan makes some kind of inanimate whoop of rage and fear and lands squarely on the monster’s shoulders. Eridan is by no means light- all that work to stay on the swimming team has made him about 6 feet of concentrated muscle. The monster goes straight down. Rose starts to shimmy down the tree, swearing at the top of her voice.

While those two are doing their thing, you find yourself staring into a dark throat. A shaft. But it’s not completely dark. There are soft, halogen lighting strips built into the wall, which must mean that someone is using this place.

You look up to tell Eridan and find that the monster is on its feet again. Apparently it didn’t occur to it to just roll over on Eridan while he was on the ground. So now the two of them are whirling around like a deranged totem pole. The top half is pummelling the warped, snarling bottom half, and he’s digging his nails into the wounds that are already there. Amazingly, Eridan is keeping his balance very well. The monster can’t quite manage to stagger drunkenly, not enough to knock him off, because Eridan has his legs locked around the thing’s throat, too low for it to bite, and he’s hugging it around the shoulders to pin its arms to its sides. It cannot do much more than roar in distress.

You hope it’s not a call for help.

Rose lands on the ground and dashes over to you. Briefly, she stares into the long, dark tunnel that extends beneath your feet.

“Should we?”

You shrug “Why the fuck not?”

“Alright. Get in the hatch.”

“I’m not leaving you-”

“Fine, then don’t, but be ready to climb like the dickens when we’re coming.”

Rose marches over to the monster and gives it a good, solid kick in the back of its legs. The effect is instant- it crumples face-forward. Eridan springs off its back and manages to land on the thing’s head, just to add insult to injury. Rose grabs him and hauls him over to the hatch. You take that as your cue to start winching yourself down into the dark. Your stomach swoops as you swing the first
leg in, but then the monster is getting up and there’s no time for hesitation or nervousness. Rose follows you in. Eridan follows her in and grabs the lid. He ducks into the hatch, cursing as the monster’s brawny wrist and hand make it in. It claws vaguely at the air, searching for a throat to slash.

“Has anyone got somethin’ sharp?” his voice echoes, panicked, down and beyond that, into what sounds like a much wider space at the end of the hatch.

“No!” says Rose.

She puts her back to the far wall of the tunnel and, pressing her legs hard against the wall where the rungs are mounted, she scoots up beside Eridan and grabs the edge of the lid. Even with the two of them straining to shut it, the hand shows no sign of retreat. Not even the slightest pop of sinew and bone to be heard.

Then you get a brainwave. Tugging your earring out, you climb to the spot where Rose was a moment ago and poke Eridan in the side with the sharp point.

He looks down, and his eyes light up.

He snatches up the earring and drives it into the flesh of the monster as hard as he can. Outside, there is a muffled, but deafening roar and the hand retracts jerkily. The lid snaps down, onto the fingers.

One more roar, and the fingers are sucked out of the small gap. The lid slams down, trapping you in the dim, echoing shaft. You watch Rose scrabbling at the edge of the lid and wonder what the heck she is doing—until she throws a massive bolt, horizontally across the lid. Locking the monster out.

You grab her trembling legs and help her feet find the rungs again. Looping your elbow around one, you hang off to the side so she can reclaim her place. While Rose is getting herself orientated, Eridan leans down and kisses the top of your hair.

“And that’s w-why I lov-ve you, Sol.”

Your name is not Gamzee Makara.

It is Kanaya Maryam.

You are not sure why the author is so fixated on getting to a POV coming from Gamzee Makara, nor do you appreciate that they seem to think it appropriate to inject these little, somewhat playful, but obnoxious little explainers at the start of your POV. Why should they? What on earth could these possibly boil up to, except for some kind of dull introduction to an even duller mind?

Now, that’s not to say that you don’t love your friend. As platonically as it is possible for one of your emotional distance to love one of his distance from that pesky thing called ‘reality’, you love him, but that doesn’t mean that he’s helpful in a crisis. For example, right now, while you and Tavros are debating on whether or not to investigate the source of that shout (indubitably Karkat; you would recognise his rage screech anywhere) and the closer series of roars and bellows that followed, you are fairly certain that Gamzee is still attending his own agenda.

That is to say, he is looking for flowers.

Flowers, in the snow. Granted, it was extraordinarily weird to find a crop of fresh-faced daisies underneath the snow and John and Dave’s fort. But your attention was more focussed on the snakebird-thing that Dave turned into, so you hardly paid attention to the daisies. Gamzee is not pleased with yours nor Tavros’s priorities. He has spent the better part of the forty-five minutes or so in which you have been walking carefully scanning the snow, for more signs of life.

“Dave said he would take care of it,” you are saying “If anything, the more we hear, the faster we need to move, yes? So we can get John and get the hell out of here.”

Tavros frowns “I-I don’t know. Thinking of, uh, thinking of the people, our friends, out there, not really being able to- to help themselves. I mean I know they can, but also, they can’t, because who knows what’s in these woods?”

You look over your shoulder. The prickling sensation all over your back is like the sensation you get when there are eyes on you. Unfriendly eyes.

“All the more reason that we should move, I believe. Specifically, away from this place, now.”

“Alright. Which way do you think we should- should go, um…not up the mountain, right?”

“No, not up the mountain.”
Gamzee straightens up suddenly “We should go this way.”
Both you and Tavros slump in frustration.
“Gamzee,” says Tavros patiently “The time you want, to look at all these flowers, it’s just not there, Gamzee, it’s- and there he goes.”
Gamzee strolls off into the snow without a care for what the two of you are saying to him. Helpfulness is not his strong suit, as you have previously mentioned.
“Well this way is as good as any, I suppose,” you loop your hand through Tavros’s arm and start to march off after him “But I’m still tempted to smack him.”
Tavros smiles fondly “Tell me about it.”
Gamzee stoops and holds up yet another flower. This time, it makes you pause.
He’s got a sunflower. A fully matured sunflower, with just a bit of stalk, and a lot of yellow petals. It’s as shiny as if it was just sunning itself.
“Y’all’re tellin’ me this ain’t weird?”
He waves the sunflower in both triumph and accusation. Tavros plucks it from his hand and turns it over suspiciously, as if he thinks the flower might be a plastic one planted to throw them off. You look in the direction from which Gamzee has come and find that there is a small trail of green parting the snow, like a trail of blood. Crouching, you find that there is a scattering of soft, lush grass near to where Gamzee had been when he got the sunflower.
“What is this?”
Gamzee shrugs “No idea, sister, but I reckon it wouldn’t be a waste ‘a our time if we followed that there trail.”
Tavros furrows his brow “Huh. Ok, ok. I’ll bite. Let’s try it.”
Suddenly concerned, Gamzee looks back in the direction where the screams and the bellows were coming from a moment before “Ain’t we gone check on the others first?”
“No,” you say firmly “They can take care of themselves, and you know it. Eridan’s a bloody maniac when he’s afraid, and Feferi has that big-ass stick with her. I’m not worried about them at all.”
He shrugs and chews on his bottom lip, but does not retort.
“So…follow the green grass road?” suggests Tavros.
You squeeze in between the boys and take an arm each, and set off down the trail.
You don’t think you’ll be going back to school tomorrow, no matter how the night ends.

Your name is not Dave.
You’re the other guy, but Dave is back there, and Dave is frustrated. Very frustrated, because you have taken the reins and you’re refusing to give them back, although he asks more and more insistently each time. He wants to be in the saddle when you find John, you think. He wants to run for John and scoop him up and hold him hard.
But that’s dumb. That’s not a good use of your time. You need to be cold and calculating right now, but Dave doesn’t get that. He just wants to find John, and he doesn’t trust you to be able to find John by yourself.
You’re not listening to him right now.
Right now, you’re strung up in a tree. Your wings are folded lazily, waiting at any moment to spring open like sails and catch the winds. Your tail is coiled around the trunk of the tree. The bark may be chapped and blackened from the winter winds, and the snow may be painfully white, but nothing will see you if they look. Not unless you want to be seen, and you don’t.
You just remembered something. There are a lot of things, now, at the back of your mind. Things that have been climbing out of the darkness back there and into the light at the front of your mind. Some of them, you’re glad to have back. Some not.
But you’re only thinking about what it is good to have back.
You have just realised two things.
The first one makes you feel a way like the way John makes you feel- as close to happy as you can
get. There’s a reason you don’t like Gamzee. Up to this point, you thought it was just because he and Tavros are together when Dave wanted to own Tavros instead (not you- it’s only ever been John that you wanted to own), but it was something from the moment that you met him.

It wasn’t an automatic dislike. You were just getting a little territorial without knowing it. And so was he. That’s fine. This is his land, first, and your land second, but from the way he reacted to you he’s going to be fine with sharing.

That’s good. You’re fine with that, too, and you’re kind of excited to talk to him about it, later on.

The second thing is about Lycans.

All about Lycans. You know what kind she is now—a Dire.

Dave thinks, what, like those old wolves?

Yes, you say, like the old wolves, except not.

You never make sense, says Dave, why can’t you do that linear thinking thing like the rest of the world?

I do, you retort, you just don’t know how to let me finish my thoughts.

It’s been a long time since the two of you argued like this. Or talked to each other at all. Normally, you just stuff him at the back of your head. You’re halves of the same thing, after all, without an idea of how to share. It’s only fair that you get some mental silence when it’s your turn to drive.

But this is different, because you’re excited.

You’re excited, notes Dave.

Yes.

Silently, you uncoil your tail from the trunk and slink over to the next tree. Snow falls in a light powder as you move. No more falls than a breeze would knock from the branches.

Why, asks Dave, what is there to be excited about right now?

You’ll see, you say, I don’t have the patience to explain it all to you now.

Except, he can hear some of what you’re thinking. Because he isn’t listening for things about Gamzee, he doesn’t hear that. But he is listening for things about John.

And the Lycan with John.

As you glide among the tree-tops, Dave shuffles through the memories.

He remembers it all kind of differently to you, though. When he fumbles over these memories, he hears a young, deep voice reading the facts out inside his head. A lesson, told to a child perched on the speaker’s knee. A bed-time story, told underneath a fort made of bed-sheets and pillows. It recalls something to you as well- a bigger bird. More orange than red.

She’s going to eat John, says Dave, they always take their prey away before they eat them. We’re going to find his corpse stashed in a tree, aren’t we?

It’s more of a big-cat behaviour, you think, remembering some documentaries that Dave has watched. But, yes, she’s going to do it. She’s going to kill him and put his corpse in a tree.

Peace offering, you say, she thinks he’s hurt us.

John would never hurt us, he insists as if you’re the one trying to tell him so, how the hell are we gonna make her understand that?

We’re not, you say, we’re going to kill her.

Fine by me, says Dave.

It’s the first thing the two of you have agreed on in a long, long time.

Your name is Rus Zahhak, and you’ve got a problem.

The Lycan must be feeling far, far better than she allowed you to know, because the trail has started up in her paw-prints. A trail of flowers and grass, flourishing despite the snow on the ground.

You are disgusted, both with her refusal to sit still enough to make sense of her troubles, and furious with yourself for not watching her more closely. Recently, you have had some problems with mortals. It has been a long, long time since you have had a contract with a mortal, and it is distracting to have the tugging on your power and consciousness.

Thank the gods that Jamie Egbert is no fool. You may have to call upon him soon, if only to let him know his son and other charge may not be returning home tonight. You heard them in the woods-
well, not heard, you just sensed them and from there it was an easy matter to imagine what they were
discussing. Plenty of times, you have heard their chatter at what they call ‘the Fort’.
When Lycans are at full strength, they leave growths of flowers and grass in their wake. The trail
will wane soon. The flowers only last for about half an hour after the Lycan has passed. You had
better move fast, then, if you want to rescue John and the rest of them.
The woods are full of terrible things tonight.
We're not getting any better at this saving-people dealie

Chapter Notes

The drama continues

Your name is Sollux Captor, and the darkness is almost total.
Until Rose finds the light-switch. She lifts the veil of gloom, which the three of you had descended,
cursing and bumping into each other and nearly slipping from the rungs a couple of times, and
illuminates a strange room. Eridan is clinging to your shoulder. When light floods the room, he
shields his eyes and moves away from your side instinctively. Then, he hesitates, and clasps your
hand with his free-hand. He sometimes forgets the two of you are dating now.
Rose surveys the room, her hands on her hips.
“Well,” she says with an air of finality “Fuck me, this is scary.”
“Did you guys ev-ver see ‘Alien’?” asks Eridan “‘cos this really fuckin’ looks like ‘Alien’.”
You have walked into a room full of what appears to be giant, over-sized foetuses. Well, not so
much foetuses, because each one of them is almost fully-formed and look quite mature. In the peak
of adolescence, or in their young adult-hood.
Each one of them is suspended in a clear, yellow liquid, like dehydrated urine. Tubes of them,
mounted in the floor and the ceiling. Rows, stretching into a long corridor Bile climbs the back of
your throat, as you take in the sight of the twisted limbs and the mottled skin. Under the harsh
halogen lighting, what you take to be faces grimace in harsh, unforgiving shadows. They all seem to
be frozen in a growl or a snarl. The faces are so vastly different from each other- so much borrowed
from animals that you know of, and many others that you don’t, it’s almost impossible to guess at
what kind of hybrid the creators intended to make when they sat down and planned the things out.
All you can tell is that they’re supposed to be strong. Strong and scary.
Rose glues herself to the side that Eridan has left free. The three of you advance, and you’re tempted
to start humming ‘We’re off to see the wizard’, but you resist the urge.
“This is…this is not much better than what’s up there, is it?” Rose keeps her voice limited to a
whisper.
Going by the thick layer of dust on everything, no one has been down here for a long time. But it still
feels safer, to whisper while weaving through row upon row of tubes full of suspended monster.
“This is where Dav-ve comes from?” mutters Eridan “Jesus Christ.”
“No, I don’t think so. Look at how sparsely furnished this room is. There’s just these tubes. I would
have to guess that this is where they hold the failed attempts. Or maybe these things are still
growing?”
You’re tempted to break away from them, to press your face up against the glass and stare in horror.
But you know how that tends to go in movies, and you’re not about to risk having one of these
things bust out of its tube while there’s already more monster than you can deal with overhead.
Faintly, you can still hear its claws scrabbling at the hatch.
“There has to be a way out of here, right?”
You glance up the hall. The lighting doesn’t make it easy to see, but you can tell that the hall ends
somewhat abruptly up against another, grey wall at the far end.
“Let’s check down there,” suggests Rose “But we shouldn’t split up, whatever we do. And…and if
you see anything that looks like Dave, well, it couldn’t hurt to see what…what the fellows of his
kind look like, could it?”
The three of you progress into the hall. There is really nothing here, except for the tubes. At the
bottom of each, the platforms that hold them up are thick, black, opaque squares. With the monsters suspended between a black square above and below, they look kind of look like giant, horrific magnets. Suspended exactly in place, frozen exactly as they are, and never once moving. From what you can tell, there are no obvious controls on the box. Maybe Rose was right about these being the failures.

They look wrong to you, but not failed, having said that. Just a little undercooked. The outsides and the insides are all in the right places, but the skin needs to be crisped up a little. By the elements. By experience. You can only hope that none of these monster ever get a chance to become more whole than they already are.

Eridan swallows nervously “I don’t like this.”

You squeeze his hand “I’m not enjoying it much either.”

“Oh, don’t be so grim, boys. This is very interesting. In a morbid way that robs me of my faith in the government entirely…they did say that this whole project was a government operated project, right?”

You shrug “I didn’t listen to much of what Tav said after he told us John had been kidnapped by a green wolf.”

“Oh, w-we talked about it,” volunteers Eridan, looking smug for being the one with the secrets, for once “There’s nothin’ good or redeemin’ ‘bout w-what they w-were doin’ up here. Just a w-whole lot of v-violence. Dav-ve says he doesn’t remember that much, an’ I w-was hopin’ it w-would stay that w-way. But the w-way thin’s are shapin’ up right now? I don’t think w-we’re gettin’ aw-way from this.”

You haven’t even thought about what this all is going to mean for Dave. It’s hard to connect this stuff with him. You saw him as the giant bird, but there was really nothing Dave about it. It wasn’t his body and it wasn’t him talking from it- does he have some kind of alternate personality? It was just so confusing to look at, your mind could barely begin to process or absorb it at all. The whole ‘Dave-is-a-genetic-experiment-slash-monster’ thing going on right now.

Even with these monsters suspended in tubes all around you, you can’t bring yourself to feel fear for Dave. Just doesn’t feel anything close to real. You’re walking through a bad dream. You have had plenty of those before, and this is the same, only now, you’ve brought Rose and Eridan in after you, by some stroke of misfortune.

Rose sighs through her nose “We had better start collaborating with the adults the moment we get home. Officer Zahhak seems to like Dave a good deal, so we can start with him. I’m sure if we explained the situation to him, then he’d help us. You know I think Kanaya already tried to tell me that this was happening, but she somehow lost her courage. She just couldn’t get it out of her mouth. I don’t suppose I would have believed her either, no matter how she tried to convince me of Dave’s secrets. I mean, this isn’t exactly the kind of thing that happens all the time, is it?”

“Could be,” says Eridan stiffly “There’s obv-viously a lot goin’ on on this mountain that we don’t know-w about. Stands to reason that w-we coulda missed a w-whole lot more than this. I bet you there’s a w-whole fuckin’ lab down here.”

You’re about to agree with him when you hear a terrifying noise. The unmistakable, metallic echo of the lid being thrown open. At once, the three of you freeze and turn back the way you have come, expecting to see the monster tumbling down the shaft. Instead, you see your own shadows in a stark contrast.

Cursing, you turn to see that it is a hatch at the opposite end of the hall that has opened. The flood of light only lasts for a moment, then a huge figure climbs into the hatch and chokes off all but the fringes. You watch the shadow bobbing and growing fatter as the figure descends.

Two of them, actually, having a curt conversation.

“…shit killed him, I can’t believe she killed him. She’s working her way through us all, you know.”

There’s another crash as the lid is shut.

“Well no huge fucking duh, there, ya dumb shit. I know the bitch is coming for me. She’s…she’s determined, ain’t she? Ta make life as livin’ a hell as she can?”

“Hide,” hisses Rose.

She lets go of your arm and darts sideways, concealing herself behind the furthest side of the box that
she can. You and Eridan share one desperate look, then separate. He ducks behind one of the tubes, and you take the one beside him. Opposite Rose’s. From the way you’re doubled up and stuffed down as far as you can go, you can’t see through the stippled glass. You’ve got no way of knowing if they’re coming for you or one of the others, except by sound. Glancing sideways, you see that Eridan has made himself impossibly small by curling into a little ball.

Rose must be doing the same, because when you risk a quick glance around the corner you can’t see an inch of her.

Apart from Eridan and the wall, all you can see is the spiny, elongated back of the monster in the tube. Its skin is rash-red, even under the yellow liquid, and the spines that emerge from its back are an extension of its vertebrae, going by the spacing and the quantity of them.

Nice. You’re going to stare at Eridan for the duration of this experience.

“These things give me the fucking creeps.”

Or disgust.

“They ain’t supposed ta be pretty, fuckwit.”

“Yeah, but these ain’t even not- pretty. They’re just fucking ugly. You’d think, I mean, we work for years on these bastards, and they’re basically our children, right? You’d think that we could have made our children a little less stomach-flipping ugly.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Die, are you sauced?”

“What, and you ain’t? You…you saw the pictures that Snowman took, right? You saw how bad she fucking up the body? Man, he shit himself.”

“I’d shit myself too if there was a dragon clawin’ me up.”

“The hell you would. It wasn’t voluntary. Your bowels do that when you die. And he was dead as a fucking doornail when Snowman found him.”

“Hn. She gave a good performance, then?”

“I don’t fucking know, I wasn’t watching. I was trying to sleep when you jokers call me up and tell me I need to get out here like the hounds of hell are on us.”

“Dragons ’a hell, buddy. It’s the dragons ’a hell.”

They fall silent for a moment. Shuffling, sharp footsteps walk down the row. The three of you are hiding about half-way between where you have come from and where they have come from. The beginnings of a plan has formed in your mind, but you don’t know how you could communicate it to Rose and Eridan. And it probably wouldn’t even work in the first place, since your plan is essentially just sneaking along the row of tubes, out of sight, then bolting up the ladder for the open air, where the monster is still probably waiting, even though you can’t hear it scratching at the lid anymore.

What about the way the others have come in from? You’ve got no idea where that goes, and it’s probably nowhere good, since they’re definitely familiar in this place.

You’d bet your arm they are some of the staff of whatever project it was that had Dave and hundreds of others trapped.

When they speak next, they are alarmingly close.

“So, we just sit around here waiting?” asks the one you heard called Die.

You hope that name is a nod towards some kind of gambling addiction, and not his favourite thing to cause other people to do.

“You got a better idea?”

“Well if I’d known I was gonna be stuck down here with your ugly mug I woulda brought a magazine.”

“At least I ain’t gotta worry about you compromisin’ my honour while we’re down here.”

“What the fuck, man? Why’d you have to say that? How can you even think about sex with these things all over the place? You’re fucking up, Fin, you’re really fucking up.”

“No I’m not. I just got me a stronger stomach than you.”

You want to shout at them, like, if you’re going to be pinned here in an ecstasy of fear and terror for your own survival, could they at least have the decency to discuss some company secrets that you
can report back to Dave and the others, assuming that you do, in fact, survive?
“You don’t really…you know.”
“What? No, I don’t want to fucking fuck you, you moron.”
“Ok. Fine. Good.”
“What are you, some kind of homophobe?”
“No, I just don’t want to ruin our perfect friendship.”
This is obviously some kind of hysterical joke, because both of them bust up laughing at this. Your heart nearly stops as a fist strikes the glass of the tube, sending shivers down the entire structure. It’s just one of the men smacking it in mirth, or catching his balance, of course, but your chest contracts sharply and you can hardly hear yourself think over the roar of the blood in your ears.
To calm yourself down, you look over to Eridan. His head is up, his face bloodless. He starts forward. Just a little. Enough to make your heart stall once again, and before you know he’s even moved, he’s jammed right next to you. Mercifully, there’s enough space to accommodate him too. And the men don’t seem to have noticed.
You wrap him up in your arms and give him the most venomous look you can manage to let him know what a dumb idea that was. He smiles unabashedly, just happy to be next to you. That’s fine, you guess. If you’re going to run for your life, you’d at least like to be holding his hand when you do it.
One of the men has started to cough. There is the sound of the other one striking his back, urging him to bring himself under control.
Maybe now, while they’re distracted, you can start towards the door. What about Rose, though? Lowering yourself to the floor, so that your cheek is against the cold stone, you peer across the way and will Rose to appear just as you are. From this new angle, you see a pair of stained, thick boots, attached to a pair of thicker legs that are quickly swallowed up in a trench-coat. Great. A trench-coat. No one with good intentions has ever worn a trench-coat, except for maybe on ‘Twin Peaks’ or ‘Supernatural’.
By some miracle, Rose gets the urge to look out too, and she chooses to look out on your side. You flick your eyes over to the door you have come from, hoping she has got the message, then retreat swiftly before you can be discovered, lurking there.
You move first. You try to keep it quick and fluid, and somehow manage to keep it silent as well. Eridan follows quickly. Again, the two of you are completely concealed.
“Whew, man, I gotta not laugh like that. My lungs can’t take it.”
You glance around the edge of the new base and see Rose doing the same, still exactly opposite you. She flashes you a fast, nervous grin, before ducking behind her tube again.
“What the fuck could be taking the others so long, do you think?” asks one of them.
You can’t tell which one of them is supposed to be Fin and which one is supposed to be Die, despite the different accents.
As if in answer to his question, and to condemn your hopes of escape completely, the other door opens. Light floods in. A thick, wet slap as something organic hits the walls and splashes everywhere.
Both the men hoot in disgust.
“Ah, fuck!”
“Goddammit Stitch! Why you gotta do that?”
A pair of footsteps starts down the other shaft “Ah, quit bitching. I had to take care of this thing. Didn’t you dumb fucks hear that roaring?”
“Well why the fuck do you think we got in here? We relocated the whole meeting place because of that fucking roaring. There’s some evil shit going on, on the mountain tonight…was that big bastard waiting out there?”
The footsteps hit the floor, with another splash “There are way more out than we thought. At this rate, we’re gonna have to flush this whole damned mountain.”
A stony, sulking silence.
“Fuck,” mutters one
“Hell,” agrees the other. “The Djinn up there isn’t gonna be happy about that.”
“Yeah? Well, fuck him. We’ve dealt with his kind before.”
“Yeah, and he escaped.”
“Well fuck him too. We got his number. Snowman knows who he is, and he’s screwed.”
“Hey, Stitch, ain’t you gonna shut the fuckin’ door?”
“What for? Nothing’s up there.”
“Because we’re in a fucking top secret fucking government facility full of fucking monsters, now get to it!”
“Jesus. Calm down.”
You grow panicked at the thought of being trapped in here with THREE of them now, and find yourself moving along the bases again. You make it to the next base, with Eridan in hot pursuit. You are so hyper-aware of your situation that you can actually feel Rose’s presence moving between the tubes.
The door slams. The puddle of gore splashes again, as the man lands in it for the second time. They continue talking easily with each other, blissfully unaware of your presence.
“Besides, there are plenty of things in them woods right now.”
“Oh yeah? Like what, Fin?”
“Like that thing you got all over your boots.”
The smell of coppery, cloying blood washes over you. Eridan muffles a minute noise of disgust in the back of your neck, but urges you on with a sharp poke in the ribs. You scoot over to the next base. Somehow, Rose knows exactly when you’re moving and matches your progress exactly. As you are moving, you realise you have picked probably the worst possible moment to go. When the man is walking towards Fin and Die, so that you’re actually parallel to him, so close that you could reach out and tug on the hem of his gore-stained slacks (who wears slacks to climb a mountain?).
You move like you’ve got nothing to be afraid of. He doesn’t notice you at all.
Or Eridan, or Rose.
At this point, the only thing that’s stopping you from standing up and strolling out of the place is the fear that they will be able to see you through the reflections of the tubes.
“Where are they all coming from?”
“I don’t fuckin’ know, do I?”
“No ideas at all?”
“Fuck off, Stitch. You’re the smart one.”
“No, I’m the one who thinks before he shits.”
“Yeah, Fin, you don’t do much of that.”
“You can fuck off too. I don’t know why I gotta be the poor bastard that gets here early.”
“Shoulda brought a magazine.”
“That’s what I said.”
Suddenly, Stitch stops. He back-pedals.
“This fucker is a sight for sore eyes.”
And, of course, he stops directly in front of the tube you and Eridan are hiding behind.

Your name is Karkat Vantas.
It’s about to become part of a title. The title will be something long and extravagant, like ‘Karkat Vantas; slayer- of- serial- killers- who- look- like –hikers- but -then –prove- to –be- fucking- double-crossing -bastards -like -I- always -knew- they’d -turn -out -to -be’.
Or ‘Karkat Vantas; last-victim-of-notorious-butt-head-pretending-to-be-a-hiker-to-attract-victims’.
It’s not gonna be a snazzy, sharp title, but it will communicate the essential information.
Which isn’t to say that she’s hurt you or anything, this butt-head pretending to be a hiker, but you know there’s something coming. Some grand, ulterior motive. She’s got a tail, for fuck’s sake, of the like you have only seen snaking from above the rump of dragons in fantasy movies and comic
books. This is not right, by human standards. This is not normal, by human standards.
Neither is this smart, by anyone’s standards, to be following a dangerous unknown with a scaly tail
coming out of jeans that are far too light for the weather, into a forest that has recently (like, is right in
the fucking process of doing so ‘recently’) proved itself to be stuffed full of the kinds of monsters that
are only described by people so high out of their minds that they transcend recognised forms of
consciousness.
This is really dumb, to make a long story short.
To make a longer, scarier story short, you’re on your butt, screaming like a little bitch with Feferi
beats back about eight feet of solid muscle and white fur with her stick.
In the snow, you didn’t notice it coming until its hand was crushing your shoulder in a tight grip and
you were screaming. Being at the back of the group, you had the pleasure of watching all three faces
turn in varying degrees of ‘oh what is it now Karkat’, then that changing to shock and pure
adrenaline when they realised the danger was valid- not just you getting snow in your pants again.
It picked you up and threw you into a tree. When that happens in the movies, people get up,
coughing, and charge.
When that happens in real life, people break ribs, scramble to their feet, then sit thefuck back down
again because their chest feels like a pincushion. You’re screaming, but you’re less worried for
Feferi’s safety and the effectiveness of her stick against the monster than you are that a piece of your
ribs may have dislodged and taken up tenancy in your lungs. Your breath is short and burning. Your
vision swims.
Fat lot of good that black belt is right now.
Out of nowhere, hiker-chick Terezi barrels into the thing. Through a veil of the pain-induced tears, it
looks kind of like a motorcycle knocking a steam-engine off its tracks. By some miracle of chance
and coordination, Feferi delivers a solid, splintery blow to the creature’s jaw at the same time. It goes
down with a bugle of anger and distress, and Terezi rips at it in a frenzy with her claws. Blood flies.
Viscera flies.
Feferi squeals in disgust and steps back. She tries to shield you from the gore, but is quickly smacked
in the face by either a low-flying or well-aimed organ and knocked on her butt too. The two of you
sit there, in bloody snow, unable to speak, alternating between staring at each other and staring at the
display that looks like something they have to edit out of those nature programmes with the big-cats.
Feferi finds her legs. Leaving the stick beside you with a solemn instruction to protect it, she staggars
off a respectful distance and pukes in the snow. Once, twice, a bit of dry-heaving, then thrice.
The entire time, Vriska has been observing this spectacle with a kind of glint in her eye that makes
you want to offer her a straitjacket.
She’s never seen anything like this before, but she likes it. The look on her face is sickening to the
point that it feels indecent just to be aware its there, so you pick something else to stare at.
The lump of reddish, greyish meat sitting at your feet. Its function is as mysterious and vague as its
shape.
“I’m staying home from school tomorrow.” you tell the organ with the utmost civility.
When Terezi is done, she rounds on you.
Seeing her coming at you with sleeves of blood and a bit of meat caught on her lips, you make a grab
for the stick. Bad idea, says your broken rib, now pay the price you ambitious little shit.
You black out.
When you surface again, the girls are all collected around you. Terezi’s damp in a way that suggests
she has just scrubbed herself with snow to clean the blood away, which is mostly gone. Feferi is
holding your hand like she’s going for the Daytime Emmy performance for the category of
‘Concerned Friend’. And as for Vriska?
Her expression is so obnoxious, you scrounge up the courage to tell her so out loud, despite the fire
in your chest “Wipe that fucking smirk off your face.”
She doesn’t “Does it hurt?”
You can’t begin to communicate how much it hurts “I can taste my lungs.”
“Pull up his shirt.” orders Terezi.
Feferi, like you, is utterly scandalised “No! Wait, what the fuck for? What do you-”
“I’m gonna fix him.”
“Don’t you fucking touch me.” you growl. Some blood from a cut on your lip bubbles over as you speak and drips down your chin.
Terezi looks at you for a moment. She’s blind, you realise. Her eyes are milky and clouded from lack of use, and their focus is vacant. Aimed at you, as oppose to looking.
“Don’t bite your tongue.”
She then wrenches up several layers of clothing and places her hand on your stomach, right on the site of the wound, without a care for how much you screech.
Feferi lets out a yelp of sympathy-anguish. Instinctively, she smacks Terezi on the head with the stick. Terezi narrowly misses head-butting you in the stomach.
“Idiot!” she hisses.
Feferi refuses to be intimidated “Man-handler! Be careful with him! He’s in a lot of pain!”
“I’m gonna puke.” you threaten.
Instead, you black out.
You black in and out for what you assume is only a minute or so. You are conscious of incredible pain, including a sensation like someone has stuffed a coal into your chest, and a gentle, insistent weight on your chest. Also, trying to punch Terezi. Your arm waves vaguely. You are unaware that it is moving until you see it drift into your gloomy field of vision, and, because somebody up there must love you today, accidentally bop Vriska in the nose. The next time your eyes open, they open for good.
With Feferi’s help, you sit up. The girls are on either side of you, and Vriska is on her back in the snow, clasping her wounded nose and cursing in a steady stream.
“It doesn’t hurt.” you prod experimentally between the struts of your ribs, where you felt the wound earlier “What did you do to me?”
“I healed you,” says Terezi proudly “Easy as hell.”
“Do…do I owe you something now?”
“Gratitude. A favour, maybe. Consider it my pleasure, if you can. You’re clearly compensating for your microscopic size with that big sassy attitude and pissing off everyone while you do it, but that’s no reason that you should suffer.”
“My nose,” wheezes Vriska, somewhat nasal “Karkat, you bastard.”
“Sorry,” you say without an ounce of feeling.
Feferi draws the spotlight by thrusting her stick out, like a dog pointing into the distance. You and Terezi jump.
Following the pointing stick, you see what has struck Feferi dumb with fear.
“Oh fuck me.” you say “Is that a Yeti?”
“A what?” asks Terezi, unapparently unconcerned by the pack of giant, white columns of muscle making steady progress towards you “I don’t know what that is.”
“Those giant white things over there, that’s what! Can- can you fight them?”
Vriska sits up “Holy shit. Well, I don’t know about you folks, but I don’t think I wanna stay around here.”
She springs to her feet and tears up the mountainside. Of course, the moment she does this it gives you permission to freak out and follow. Feferi takes off after you and Terezi is left with no alternative but to sprint after you. You’re amazed that you can actually move, considering the pain that was in your chest only seconds ago.
Only slightly more amazed by what a weird fucking day this is turning out to be.
Up ahead, Vriska makes a sharp left turn. You don’t know what the fuck she’s doing, but hey, left is a great direction, so left you go.
“In here!” she barks.
At first you can’t see what she’s pointing to, so you assume she wants you to stuff yourself into her pocket or hide under her jacket or something.
Then, because today is just one of those days, you watch her dive head-long into a tree. Instead of
falling to the snow with a cracked skull as she should, she shoots into it. There is a whoosh of air and a slightly hysterical whoop of excitement that dwindles into the distance, as it retreats underground. Why the fuck not? You leap into the chute the moment you see it.

You don’t know why Vriska thinks it’s fun to hurtle through a throat of unending darkness with no idea of what’s at the bottom, but she’s still laughing beneath you. You, on the other hand, are screaming at the top of your voice for several gods’ help—basically, anyone who might be interested in saving you from falling and breaking your neck. Say, by cushioning your fall with a conveniently placed sack of shit named Vriska.

This single, rational thought enters your mind with a devastating clarity, among the insane tumult: Vriska really isn’t good for John, and she needs to figure out a way of existing in close relationships with people that doesn’t involve subjugating their will to hers.

What Vriska needs is an equal.

Then you’re being spat out of the blackness into what looks like one of those all-white rooms where they stuff crazy people and, yes, that somebody up there must be feeling especially affectionate today, because you land ass-first on Vriska’s back.

The noise she makes is the most exquisite noise you have ever heard.

Your joy is quickly dampened by about 180 pounds of friend falling on you. There’s no time to scramble out from under her before Terezi completes the asshole sandwich. The four of you lay on the floor, groaning at varying octaves. Vriska wriggles weakly at the bottom. Terezi rolls off the top, and Feferi gets off of you too.

You wheeze. Vriska has to push you off, and she does it with great relish.

“Everything hurts.” she announces.

“What…oh…this doesn’t…no this isn’t good.”

You have to wipe your eyes before you can tell what she’s so scared of. You want to black out again, but your ribs are no longer broken, so you just have to stare at this weird shit now.

A massive, clean, fully-stocked laboratory, spreading out in front of you.

You stare. The people in the labs stare back.

Your name is John Egbert, and you’re in a lot of trouble.

You can’t believe you said that to Dave. Told him you loved him to his face. Dear God. Dear spirits. Dear everything holy, everything that people pray to, just, fucking, everything, because you told Dave you loved him. YOU SAID THAT. WHY DID YOU DO THAT.

You should just let this fucking wolf eat you, you really should. Thanks to the incredibly embarrassing thing you said to Dave, you kind of just want to get eaten right now.

Don’t know where you are right now, or why you’re still here. Why would she want to save you? Or, want the trouble of keeping you pinned underneath her? Well, it’s not that hard, since all she has to do is growl at you and you’re terrified enough to be convinced moving is not a good idea.

But still. You’re being kind of obnoxious, the way you’re knocking your head against this tree trunk. God, you hope Dave gets here soon.

No wait, no, you don’t want to see him ever again.

No, yeah, yes you do.

No you don’t.

You don’t know what you want or what the fuck is going on.

You just want this wolf to let you go.
Your name is Karkat Vantas and you’re thinking very fast.
People. Men, specifically, three men who are reaching for guns at their hips and whose faces are contorting in anger and fear. There’s a body on the slab, a body that is human except for the legs, which are borrowed from some kind of equine animal. Ok, so obviously they’re the staff of the place which Dave escaped from.
Your mouth moves before your brain has time to catch up to it.
“If you kill us, you’ll never find the snake-bird-thing!” you bark.
The authority in your voice surprises even you. Right now, you are completely terrified for your life and still in shock over the fact that your rib was broken so recently. You sound like a lion roaring, but feel more like a kitten mewling on the inside.
Still, it gets them frozen in place.
“You mean the Basilisk.” says the man with the largest gun, which appears to be one of those kinds of things that vintage mafia-men haul around.
“Get out of my way,” growls Terezi.
She essentially flings you to the side before you can protest that you’ve got the situation under control, and stands there, her hands balled into fists at her sides.
At the sight of her, the men around the lab either reel back or start forward. Some of them are predators. Some of them are prey. Terezi doesn’t react fearfully to this. Even you can see that not a single one of these men would be a match for her in one-on-one combat situations, and you’re just some dumb kid that almost believed that she was only a hiker.
“Oh my God.” mutters one of the men that flinched.
“You’re still alive?” growls one of the men that started forward “How did we miss that?”
“What, you think I was advertising the fact? Not until recently. And, while we’re on the subject, boys, who the hell did you think was killing your men if it wasn’t me?” she cracks her neck, and the sound makes you want to rip off your own foot and throw it at her to ensure she never makes the noise again.
“We didn’t know what to think.”
“You never fucking do know what to think, if Snowman isn’t telling you, do you? How is Hine these days?”
One of the flinching men has developed a sheen of sweat on his pale forehead “She said…she said you people might start to show up again.”
Terezi frowns “Still a scheming lunatic bastard, then.”
Vriska has finally managed to disentangle herself from Feferi. She marches right over to Terezi and stands next to her, her face livid.
“You fucks better start explaining.”
“This- this looks pretty self-explanatory,” Feferi gets to her feet and dusts herself off as casually as if she were only standing in front of a few dogs straining on their chains, not a bunch of scary, scarred men armed with substantial guns. Because, you know, what does she have to fear from these guys “I mean, they must be the scientists, right?”
One of the larger, barrel-shaped men puts a hand up “I’m with security.”
A man in a fedora kicks him in the shin “Don’t tell her that!”

Just when you thought it wasn’t going to get weirder, here comes the plot
The first man glowers “Ain’t we gonna kill ‘em anyway?”
“Well, yeah, but that don’t mean they need our fucking life stories, does it?”
The man with the vintage-looking gun clears his throat, silencing the other two immediately. He must be in charge. Or think he’s in charge. In all honesty, you like to think that you’re in charge in almost any situation with your friends, and you have a hard time acknowledging a genuinely competent leader, over someone who has just taken charge because it suits him to do so.
This guy could be either one. All you know for certain is that he wants to kill you, and unless you’re very, very smart, he’s going to get his wish.

Your name is Kanaya Maryam, and you have to admit, you are impressed.
You lean over to Gamzee and whisper “Alright, I’m impressed.”
He smiles- and it’s not a grudging, or a condescending smile either. He seems to be just pleased that someone is acknowledging him as a contributing member of the group with more than a pat on the back, more than equivalent, in terms of how patronising it is, of a gold star for his ‘good citizen chart’.
You must remember to chat about that to Karkat later- about treating Gamzee more humanly than you have been doing so, for the majority of your relationship. Despite all of his flaws; the real, the imagined, the mysterious, he is a fundamentally intelligent person. His intelligence is just channelled into more ridiculous pursuits, such as looking for daisies in the snow while the rest of the group searches for a missing person.
And look where that has gotten you!
To the wolf.
The big, green thing itself. You decide, looking upon its bracken-snarled fur and blood-matted muzzle, it would be challenging to find an uglier creature anywhere. It is quite beautiful, like a big cat is, but you cannot thing of it as anything but superlatively ugly when it has one of your friends pinned by the chest underneath a massive paw.
John’s lips are turning blue. His eyes are closed, but he is not dead. He’s wearing that adorable, scrunched-up expression that he tends to have on whenever you catch his eye in a Math test. That expression that beseeches immediate assistance, emotionally and psychologically, from any kind soul who might catch his eye.
Bless his heart, he knew you were coming.
He was probably hoping for a little more than a freshly-recovered cripple, a slight, lithe girl (after all, what good have women ever been in survival situations?) and Gamzee, but hey, at least you found him, right?
The wolf is lying in a puddle of flowers. Now you realise that wherever its moss-coloured feet touch the earth, growing, living things spring up in its footsteps. It would be beautiful, poetic, even, if you hadn’t already decided that the wolf is scum and needs to die for what it is trying to do to your friend-family. Just looking at it makes your fingers itch to cause some damage.
“Suggestions?” you ask “Shall we go a little ways away and call for Dave?”
The three of you are hidden in a snow-covered bush, a short, and probably not safe distance from the wolf-thing. Nowhere in the forest is a safe distance from the wolf-thing, but it is not the most constructive course of action you could be taking, to dwell on these things.
“Nah, sister, no need.”
Tavros stares at his boyfriend “Explain that to me, Gamzee, how there’s apparently no need to… to sic our big bird thing on the big wolf thing. Why would we not be doing that immediately?”
The three of you are hidden in a snow-covered bush, a short, and probably not safe distance from the wolf-thing. Nowhere in the forest is a safe distance from the wolf-thing, but it is not the most constructive course of action you could be taking, to dwell on these things.
“Nah, sister, no need.”
Tavros stares at his boyfriend “Explain that to me, Gamzee, how there’s apparently no need to… to sic our big bird thing on the big wolf thing. Why would we not be doing that immediately?”
“Trust, babe, I got this under control.”
You exchange a sceptical look with Tavros over the top of Gamzee’s curly head, but you don’t voice your concerns. For some reason (the blood around its muzzle, perhaps?) the creature hasn’t smelled you yet, nor has it heard the low murmur of your voices. Its eyes are trained on John. You imagine the weight of that glare, combined with a paw the size of a car’s windshield on his chest must be
absolutely crushing.
“What exactly do you mean that you ‘got this under control’?” you ask, a little more sharply than you mean to “I’m with Tavros. What about this is under your control?”
He flashes you a knowing smile. You get the feeling something horrible and unprecedented is about to happen.
Before either you or Tavros can get anything out of Gamzee with a vague resemblance to sense, he’s off. Just, rolling right out of the bush, into the snow, in plain sight of the wolf.
You cannot process the act of valiant stupidity you have just witnessed. You are not sure that anyone would be able to.
“What the-” Manages Tavros, before his incredulity chokes him “Oh my-”
You know how he feels.
The wolf, of course, looks up. Its reddened muzzle crumples- the colours, red on green, are like Christmas.
“Hey,” says Gamzee brightly.
John’s eyes fly open.
“Gamzee,” his voice is hoarse “What the fuck are you doing?”
“Savin’ y’all.”
Gamzee unzips his coat and tosses it onto the bush, right on top of you and Tavros.
Now, you’re not quite sure what happens next, thanks to the coat that has been draped directly over your field of vision. All you can hear is something like a glass being shattered on tile, then water hitting stone, then a gasp of shock from John.
Then a roar, of sorts. Not a roar, really, more like a mewl of satisfaction- the noise Rose’s cat makes when it has brought something mangled and dead for its owner. But the volume and the harsh, thrumming octave of it belongs to the fiercest of roars.
You and Tavros reach for the coat and fling it away at the same time.
“Holy Satan.” you say.
“God Almighty.” echoes Tavros.
The thing you presume to be Gamzee looms up over the wolf, whose face is priceless. You never knew that wolves could look completely floored with shock, but this wolf is doing a wonderful job of it.
“Oh my God!” shouts John, frustrated “How many of my friends are monsters?!”
“Jus’ me, brother.” says the thing in a voice that is not Gamzee’s, but close enough to his to be recognised.
It’s craggy. It’s tall- as tall as a lamppost. It’s got arms like rakes, and joints like arrowheads. Its skin is a delicate, coal-black that reminds you of light on water at night- a violent, bleached kind of black. You can’t tell if it is your imagination, the swirls of colour on its hide, or if it is some effect of the natural incandescent quality of the skin.
You can count almost every bone, if you want to. The sight of it is stomach-churning in a way that nothing has ever been to your eyes before, but comforting, at the same time, because the thing is looking at you and flashing you, with teeth the size of steak knives and a jaw the size of your arm, such a lazy, pleasant smile, that you can only smile back.
You and Tavros exchange another look.
“He could have fucking told me.” says Tavros sourly “That he’s some kind of massive black skeleton.”
“That’s not the kind of thing to slip into casual conversation.”
“Wendigo.” growls the wolf.
Every hair on the back of your neck stands to attention. Your stomach turns somersaults- it’s official, this is the most disgusting thing you have ever seen again, though it is substantially prettier than Gamzee.
“Your- your kind are all dead.” it says slowly, as if uncertain of its words. You, yourself, can’t begin to understand why they can all talk. It makes sense for Dave and Gamzee, as they have lived as humans for years. But this wolf? Where the fuck did it get its unsteady English from? “Dead or...
or…"

“Canadian?” offers Gamzee “Yeah, I know. We ain’t that common no more, but we’re still around.
Me, my Pa, my bro. We all got the curse.”

Your jaw drops “I knew there was something weird about Mr Makara!”

And yet you could never mark a specific complaint. All you could comprehend of the man was that he was exuberant, funny, some kind of Eastern-Asian (Turkish, Iranian?) and that he loved his kids like most parents do. But there was something about him that had you glancing over your shoulder.

That scares you- the fact that, yes, you noticed there was something off about Gamzee’s father. But Gamzee?

You share a deep friendship with him. A long-time, long-term affection that was established in the sand-box and has gone unchallenged by the stressors of adolescence and high-school, and you never felt threatened by his weirdness the way that his father was just a little threatening. You just assumed that he was somewhere on the spectrum.

Well, this is certainly going to have you double-guessing what you think you know for a long time.

“Now…we can do this easy, or not easy. Which one’re y’all leanin’ towards?”

“Canadian,” repeats John, completely removed from the dire nature of his situation by this newest development “Dead or Canadian. What the fuck? Is Canada some kind of Disneyland for monsters? I bet Skin-walkers are real too. And Kokopelli. Fuck it! Everything is real! Science is a lie and magic is the truth! Reality is a hologram constructed by a crack team of bald old magic-men who know their stuff! My high-school education doesn’t mean jack-shit!”

“Shut up.” says the wolf.

It presses down on his chest loud enough to produce a crack.

Gamzee moves, you think. In one instant, he is in front of you. In the next, he is astride the wolf’s broad, grassy shoulders with a glint in his blank white eyes that makes you want to throw up, again, for about the fourth time this night.

“Not easy, then.” his voice has changed- now it is dry and wooden, and the most threatening thing you have ever heard.

One hand he plunges into the wolf’s right eye.

The other, he reaches around the wolf, his arm impossible long, and plucks John out of her grasp as easily as plucking a petal off a flower. John goes up into the air along with a gout of thick blood from the wolf’s eye.

Gamzee’s dead eyes land on you. No sooner than you are up, out of the bush and on your feet does he flick John towards you. John screams, though his journey through the air is gentle, as is his landing. Gamzee has thrown him as he would throw a baby up in the air, with all intentions of catching him again, except that it falls to you to pick up his slack so he can wage a battle of unspeakable horror.

You catch John. The weight is unbelievable and almost knocks you back on your ass, but somehow Tavros has sneaked up behind you without making a noise and braced himself against the heavy landing. The sound of the gears in his knee joints are only a slight creak as he throws himself against you to keep the two of you upright.

Then, immediately, he has you under the arms, as you have John cradled like a new bride in yours, and tugs you backwards, out of the way.

Even in its agony, the wolf has found a purchase in the arm that just flung John away. You hear the sickening crunch of bone. Gamzee lets out a low rasp of pain, then cocks his sharp head back and lets loose a noise like a tree falling.

No less than a second later is there a screech of reply. A bolt of red falls from the grey clouds overhead. As it grows bigger and bigger, you can see that it is Dave, obviously, bound for the wolf and what the wolf called a Wendigo at the speed of a small comet.

“Take cover?” you suggest.

John tightens his arms around your neck “Take cover.”
“Get off your ass. Go save my brother.”

Your name is Equius Zahhak, and you have the most intense headache you have had in a long time. “What’s wrong with you?”

Through the sheets of your blurring vision, Roxy appears to be about four people at once. With your balance almost non-existent, you grasp the banister of the staircase and lower yourself carefully to the hall floor to wait out the attack of vertigo.

“She’s coming! Nepeta, Eq is dying!”

“And your shouting isn’t making it better.” you groan, putting your head on your knees.

There’s a voice in your head that does not belong there.

“Help me up?”

Roxy grabs you by the arm and drags you up with difficulty “Goddamn your dumb weight training, man, you weigh about eighty thousand pounds.”

You weigh a healthy 180 pounds, but you don’t bother to correct her. Your head seems to be splitting from the inside. For some reason, you’re thinking of a story that your brother once told you to make sure you didn’t make a life-long habit of the penchant for eating bugs that you had as a younger child. Of the goddess Athena, who has either been dead for thousands of years, or, if the Percy Jackson series is to believe, is going strong and somehow getting men pregnant.

Her father, Zeus, was afraid of getting caught out by his wife if and when his baby-mama was discovered, so he did the natural thing. He turned her into a fly and swallowed her. As is so often the case with negligent partners and parents, karma was a bitch and acted swiftly. His little girl burst out of his head, as a fully clothed, heavily armed woman. In the ensuing stunned silence, the woman announced herself to be a goddess and you’re assuming an owl landed on her helmet or something, giving her her scared bird in one fell swoop.

You feel as if you’re about to have one of those moments, even though you’ve never had one romantic or sexual relationship in your life (the word ‘asexual’ is relatively new, but the concept is old, and you were grateful to hear of it after centuries of worrying that you were broken in some way) and you have definitely never done anything that would result in a pregnancy. Immaculate or otherwise.

Still, there’s a war goddess in your skull, and she’s making herself known with the splitting headache and the voice that does not belong to you.

You have no idea what it is saying to you.

You have no idea if it is using words, screaming, whispering, or just thinking. It is not anyone or anything attempting to contact you telepathically, since you know what that feels like. Natural and easy. Not like Athena is ramming her spear against an eye-socket to aid her escape.

Roxy, meanwhile, is talking loudly into one ear, somehow aware that she is competing with another unheard voice “Listen, I’m gonna find my elusive roommate and I’ll get her to make that tea that works so well for my migraines…you think that would work on djinns?”

“I’m going to throw up,” you warn.

“Fair enough, fair enough. Here. Lie down.”

She pretty much drops you onto her bed, unable to manoeuvre you. Djinns are made of sterner stuff. Your bones are much denser and full of magma in the place of plasma, and Roxy can’t be expected to lift a young adult djinn who is not cooperating all by herself. No one can. She’d need nothing short of a crane to get the job done.

“Ow.” you mutter.

“Whoops.” she fishes a book out from under your spine, then a single shoe and a fork “Sorry. I’m not a good house-keeper.”
You groan incoherently, instead of saying what you wanted to, which was an assurance that you didn’t mind if she had a dead body in her bed if your head would just stop hurting. Roxy charges off into the house, screaming at the top of her lungs for Nepeta. Each syllable is like having a nail hammered into your forehead. You would gladly throttle her right now, just to stop the noise.

For what seems like hours, you just lay there on your back. Faintly aware of what seems like the prongs of another fork is digging into your back, but lacking the energy to do something about it. The light overhead seems brighter than the sun.

After a while, you shut your eyes. No sooner than you have does the voice resolve itself.

“Can you hear me?”

A rough, calloused hand lands on your shoulder. You want to open your eyes, but something tells you that you will be back to square one if you do so.

You know who that is.

You’re a djinn, and besides, you’ve lived a life long and hard enough to know what a ghost’s touch feels like.

“Dirk?”

Mercifully, your head no longer hurts.

“Did…did I really hurt you there, man? Shit, sorry. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

You have half a mind to punch him in the face “No, it’s alright.”

“I can’t stay for long. In fact, I can’t stay at all. I gotta go right now.”

“What is it?” you can’t help but be irritable.

He did, after all, leave you alone in the world but for Nepeta and your brother. Now, there are others, but they do not mean the same kinds of things to you that he did.

Not to mention that he had to go and die on you and abandon his kid brother to the elements of the world. You don’t know what kind of fortune god must have smiled on Dave to deliver him to the family that has him, but they must have been either kind to the very core, or Dave is part of some kind of divine bet between two equally childish, equally obnoxious higher powers.

“Dave needs your help.” he sounds strained now, as if speaking through an asthma attack, as well as several layers of tin foil and a sock stuffed into his mouth “He’s in bad trouble. There are things going down in the forest. You need to go to the fort right now.”

Even though this is the first time you have spoken in years and likely to be the last for just as much time, if not the last ever, you can’t help but want to hurt him before he goes “What do you want me to do? Dig you up and introduce you to Dave?”

“You’re a real shit, Eq.” you can hear the smile in his voice “Get off your ass. Go save my brother.”

And then he is gone.

And then you go too, grabbing your gun from the kitchen table as you go.

Chapter End Notes

Let’s assume Eq was cleaning his gun or something. Not that he just leaves them sitting around like silverware.
A word from Gamzee Makara

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Your name is Gamzee Makara.
Yep, totally. It’s you in here.
Your brother, Dave, not your blood brother but your brother by another, he got him some problems, you reckon, about who’s who and who got the wheel when. Maybe he got it different in his head.
It’s just you in here, in your head. Never been no one else, never gonna be no one else, because you know who you are and you like being that person.
Dave, on the other hand? He got two of himself, and both of them hate each other and themselves. But you gotta hand it to him.
He sure knows how to use them claws.
This thingie, the thingie that took John- holy fuck, what is the name, you know the name- it knows what to do with its claws as well, but you’re angrier and Dave sure as hell wants to kill this thing with more passion than it wants to survive.
Is it a Legume? No, Luke. No, fuck, that’s a name, and fuck you batter pay attention to the battle. The battle, as it were, is turning out to be a whole lot of biting and rolling and screaming and scratching. Dave comes down from the top. He got him a wicked tail, which he’s got to wrapping around the branches and hanging from, or using to get to another place so he can hit the thingie better. You, for you’re part, you’re basically just kinda slashing.
Wendigos are creatures of stealth, by nature. That’s probably why you never noticed you were sharing the forest. So damned sneaky that you sneaked around the biggest, most orangest motherfucker you ever did lay your eyes on, and even you didn’t know that you were sneaking by it. Him. Your bro, Dave. He’s the orange motherfucker.
Lycan! That was it! It’s a Lycan!
Yeah, you know all about these things! Your old man taught you about what kinda world your kind sprung the hell out of. Hell- good word for it.
Way back when, somebody got hungry and took a look at their friend and thought ‘I’d like me a bite of that’, and had them a bite of that, and a couple generations later, your people are roaming the forests, eating small furry things and the odd mountain man. Your father told you about the kinds of things that were out here. To take your prey. To kill your mate (like hell, you’d ever let anything happen to Tavros) and your babies (or whatever kinda Gamzee Jr there is in your future) or your pack (shit, now you’re scared for Karkat and all them else).
So he told you all about Lycans.
Motherfuckers die like cockroaches die. Only after you thrown everything in the room at they hard backs, tried stamping, squishing, burning and finally it just rolls over on its damned back and gives the fuck up.
You just gotta keep trying.
The Lycan gets your arm in her mouth and tries to snap it, but she can’t. Your kind aren’t the kind to break bones. Too tough for that shitty business, but she’s gnawing away like she thinks she’s gonna make a dent. You decide to take advantage of the Lycan’s confusion and sorta scissor your arms around her neck, so you’re choking her out with just sheer elbow strength. Her mouth goes slack around your arm and she tries to pull back, but you ain’t ready to let her.
And now, down comes Dave in a righteous fury with his beak open so wide you’re gonna have to see if you can fit your head in it, when he un hinges it, but later.
The Lycan gets a whole lotta claw beak in her side, and the blood sprays out like a drink sprays out when you accidentally shake the can. She screams, but it doesn’t really hurt her. The scream is an angry one. Vriska makes a noise like that when she hits her side on a table edge.
Dave is triumphant, though. Basilisk. Whoever that motherfucker behind them big orange eyes is, he thinks he won him a match. He thinks he’s a victor, and that’s probably what got his feathery ass in such hot water in the first place, when he got to thinking he’d won and turned his back to go, and then she got herself up and threw herself back into battle.

You should never turn your back on the body, no matter how dead you think it is. The way things are going right now, you figure you’re gonna hafta rip her head off to keep her dead. The Lycan’s mad, now. She tries to turn around to snap at Dave, who reels back in shock, all like ‘how the fuck are you still moving I’m offended’, and you hold her the hell back. You gotta dig your heels in, and you’re dragging up big furrows in the soft earth as she strains for Dave.

“Pull back!” you bark at Dave “She’s stronger n’ she looks!”
Dave hisses at you “So am I!”
“No,” you say impatiently “You ain’t this strong, brother.”

Just talking drags your focus away from holding back this crazy motherfucker and before you know it she’s got you another five feet ahead and she’s getting closer all the time to the way that the others ran.

Yeah, they all up and ran away once the big battle started up. You don’t blame them. Big-ass orange bird, surprise skeleton friend, taking down what looks like a werewolf covered in mould. Hell, if you hadn’t be around this kind of crazy shit your whole life you’d’a been ten feet in front of Kanaya, who can run like lightning when she’s scared. Also, Tav’s new legs seem to be working out great for him. Like, he had no problem at all helping John get himself outta the way.

She bites at your arm, hoping to snap it this time. Just because it’s like stubbing your toe, but not getting hurt bad at all, you shift your arm out of her reach and tighten your grip. She ain’t giving up this easy. And you can’t do nothing from this place but watch Dave hit her again and again, and make such little progress.

You gotta wonder what the hell Dave did the first time so that he got away. Maybe the Lycan didn’t really want to hurt him?

Yeah, that makes sense, since she’s doing all of her biting and scratching on you, and she was saying those weird things earlier, about wanting to help him get away from John. You can’t reckon how she reckoned that John and Dave ever wanted to be apart from each other, or were bad for each other so had to be away from each other.

Crazy bastard, this one. You gotta do something about her.

All at once, you let go, stepping back at the same time. Now, in human terms a step back don’t mean that much. But in your terms, that means that a second later you’re hanging from a tree at the back of the clearing, hooked up by your elbows around two big branches on either side, giving her the dirtiest look your black eyes can manage.

The Lycan lurches forward. First, she can’t believe her luck. Second, she really can’t and she starts looking around for you. And then Dave, like the determined fucker he is, goes in for another strike. Even though the Lycan’s back is turned, you know this is a bad idea. Hell, you wouldn’t be surprised if this is how your motherfucker got himself clawed up the first time. Thinking he could take her on. Dumb bastard.

You take another step, and you’re on Dave’s back now. Dave screeches in indignation, but you just pat him on the back of the head, and wrap an arm around his neck and pull up so suddenly and viciously that he has to pull back or his neck will snap.

“What the hell?” he growls.

“Me the hell.” you answer “Don’t be doing that, brother. That’ll be how she won the first time.”

“She’s not going to win now.” says Dave stubbornly “Get off me.”

You don’t reckon you’ll be doing that, or wanting to do that for a little while, and tell him as much. He struggles, but there ain’t much use in struggling when a Wendigo’s up on your back. When a Wendigo gets where it wants to be, it tends to stay there.

The same thing can kinda be said for the Lycan. It’s dashing away at a top speed, taking advantage of the brief confusion between you and Dave. Time goes all different with creatures like you. Fights are quick. This whole thing has been maybe two minutes, a minute and a half, and your people aren’t
nearly far away enough from the crazy bastard going for them.
Gotta take that bastard down, then.
You urge Dave forward, hanging off of him like a baby animal hangs off its parent’s chest “Drop me on her.”
“Drop you on her?” he repeats, with the first hint of emotion you’ve heard out of this shape of him- and a course, this being Dave, that emotion would have to be a kind of evil glee.
Dave lunges forward, flying low among the trees without trouble.
“Alright. I’ll drop you on her.”

Your name is Karkat again.
You’re not sure how much longer your name will be Karkat. Like, will you remember being Karkat when you die? Because there are about ten guns pointed at you- most of the men have two guns in their hands, just to prove their masculinity and badassery- and you’re sure you’re about to die, and, like, well, you just want to know; are you going to remember being Karkat?
Are you going to remember Feferi, who even now brandishes her stick fiercely, her teeth gritted in a dog-like grimace as if she’s going to bite the first pair of balls she gets close to and possibly tear them off? Are you going to remember Vriska, who is posturing and making a noise kind of like a growl as well, and almost looks as fierce as the armed men do?
Mostly importantly, are you going to remember your sweet, dumb-ass friend Gamzee?

If you get to take just one thing away from this largely disappointing and up to this point, uninteresting short stretch of years that you’ve had, you would like to take Gamzee away from it.

But you don’t really want to die, so you’re just going to keep talking until they shoot you.
You continue from the first, vague point that you made, which has probably confused your own ideas of what the hell it is you’re going to say than it has confused the men.
“I know the Basilisk.”

There’s a collective, heavy silence on the room.
Feferi and Vriska each look at you sideways. Vriska’s face is actually kind of comical, from the way she is straining in every nerve to spring forward and attack, attack, attack, while also sending you a painfully clear message of incredulity as to how stupid you are being. Why don’t you just barf every secret you own on these hostile strangers, Karkat? Tell them about everything! Why just out Dave as a monster?

“Tell them about everything! Why just out Dave as a monster? Why don’t you come out of the closet too? That’s right, Karkat, why don’t you tell the nasty men about how you’re asexual and you’re so scared of saying a word to anyone because no one will understand?

Except, that’s not what Vriska is saying, since she has no fucking inkling as to why you have stubbornly avoided any kind of sexual exploration and shied away from dating, so far, so a lot of that abuse was just your internal dialogue.

Get your head in the fucking game, you tell yourself, because you’ve just made all of your friends’ (plus Terezi’s) survival your responsibility by calling attention to yourself.
“‘We know everything.’” you continue, thinking about the dust, about the derelict feel of the whole place around you- as if everything has just been unearthed from storage. You glance at the packing peanuts that litter the floor, and the boxes they are pooled around “‘We know what you did and why you were shut down.’”

If Terezi’s eyes were capable of expressing emotion, they would be flashing in surprise, you bet.
Yeah, bitch, that’s right. You’re Karkat Fucking Vantas and you are so all over this Sherlock shit.

Of the men rumbles a laugh that you feel should make the ceiling shake “‘The things you did- unspeakable things! I can’t even make myself say them, so I won’t even talk about it, but, like, you guys are total assholes, and the Basilisk is mad about it. He’s assembling a…a taskforce. With so much skillling- uh, skills, in killing, that, like, you won’t even fucking believe it.’” now you’ve begun to hit your stride.

Strider. There’s a pun in that somewhere, with ‘stride’ and the fact that you’re possibly saving a
‘Strider’, but you don’t have the time to find it.
“I mean it. If you guys kill us, that only adds to your list of sins,” you grope into your hair and pluck a piece of down, left over from the terrifying, short jaunt into the sky that nearly made you snort your heart out of your nose “See this? Yeah, I’m tight with the Basilisk.”
The down is an offensive, fruit-like orange that could only belong to Dave’s plumage. Anyone to ever see him with half an ounce of brain matter between their ears would never forget an experience like seeing Dave. You know you’re never going to be able to get onto a roller-coaster without being overwhelmed by the urge to scream “DAVE PUT ME DOWN!!” ever again.
“Exactly what has it told you,” demands one of the men, squinting suspiciously.
You surprise yourself and him by barking “Everything! Didn’t I say that already? I know about-about everything!”
You’re distracted for a moment by a cold chill that seems to envelop your left side. As if someone is standing beside you, and their body is composed entirely of a draft. The hair on the back of your neck stands straight up and you can’t stop yourself from shivering visibly.
Where the next words come from, you are not sure “I know all about the plans to crack this place open. Those abominations you’ve got in those tubes. All of those monsters, suspended in that amber gunk. Some of my people are in there right now- our people, getting ready to rip that place wide open, and you know what you can do about it? You can shoot me, and you can shoot my friends, and you can shoot this scaly fake hiker thing right here, but that won’t put a scratch on us. We know what you’re doing and we know how to stop it, so you better throw down those guns and throw the towel in after it, gentlemen, because I am not fucking around with you.”
There is an expression on your face that does not belong to you.
A borrowed anger, so fiercely hot and violent that it makes you sick to your stomach, and you want to double up over and around it as if your rib has been broken all over again.
Finally, after a long and even heavier silence then all those preceding it, one of the men speaks. “Kid,” he drawls in a way that reminds you of how your fifth-grade gym coach used to casually berate the fat kids for not being able to keep up with the exercise regimes “You put on a good show, but that’s all it is. A show. You don’t know the first thing about what we’re trying to do.”
And now it feels as if your entire mouth has been ripped off your face, glued onto somebody else’s, then that lucky face-stealer has crept into your stomach and is now speaking. So, for all intents and purposes, it looks like Karkat Fucking Vantas is doing the gum-flapping, but you know there’s a stranger sitting on top of your stomach and making your mouth move around words that have been crammed down your unwilling throat.
“Trying to dominate the planet. The species you kidnapped were like living, breathing, screaming science projects, and what government in the world can resist that? This new one, apparently. The change in administration finally put your happy few, your gang of murdering bastards out of the job, didn’t it? Now there’s a surplus of angry vigilantes with a grudge to settle, and some keys to a storage facility that somebody forgot to change the locks on. We all know what that means, don’t we, kids?” you look to your friends for support.
When Feferi’s eyes meet yours, they are wide in shock. Apparently, she has also figured out there is a stranger sitting on your stomach, making your mouth move against your will.
“Death. Lots of it. The question is, which side is going to be slaughtered? Is it Terezi and the others that are going to die choking on their own blood, or not? Personally, I got my money on the survival of the side that tracks down their enemies and leaves them to freeze to death in a puddle of their own blood and shit. That kind of stuff is just the right type of brutal for a fight to the death, don’t you think?”
By now, the few that did have any colour in their face that wasn’t ruddy from alcohol and rage have become drained and pale. The effect is surprisingly satisfying. If you had power over your own tongue, you would be thanking the stomach-stranger for taking the reins. Otherwise, you probably would have gotten everything blown sky-high.
The man who first complimented you on your showmanship speaks up again, although you note a
slight quaver in his voice this time “Who the fuck do you think you are?”
You point to the ceiling without knowing why “I’m his friend.”
Overhead, muffled and shrill at the same time, there is a shriek and a crash that reverberates through
the entire complex. Dust rains down in a thick sheet. All at once, your body is your own again, but
you cannot yet move it.
In your ear, you hear a rough, deep voice which the words must have belonged to “Thanks, kiddo.”
Then you are lifted off your feet and thrown into Feferi’s outstretched arms, just in time to miss being
squished by a large chunk of ceiling that lands where you stood only a second before. And following
it down, what looks like a giant, very convincing Halloween prop that gained sentience and the
power of movement.
It lands lightly on the rubble, and straightens up as more and more rains down behind it. A huge
green body crashes to the floor at its feet.
The creature twists its rake-thin neck from side to side, creating the sound of glass breaking on bricks
as the crik is worked out of its neck.
Its black eyes flick over to you “Hey, Karkat.”
An orange shadow falls over it from above.
From Feferi’s arms, you wave to him “Hey, Gamzee.”
You would know that dumbass anywhere, with any face.
This is great. You were hoping to see him at least one more time before you were killed, and now it
even looks like you might survive.

Chapter End Notes

By the way, asexuals, you’re not monsters. You’re just people who don't have the need,
time, patience or desire for sex, because you're asexual and if the human race were all
pirates then you folks would be the people to steer ships through dangerous, siren-
infested straits while the rest of us non-asexual masses strain against our bonds to get
some sweet siren ass (drowning ourselves in the process)
For this service that could be, my asexual friends, I thank you very much. You guys just
steer that ship right through. The sirens can't touch you. They weren't trained for this,
damnit, they were assured by some dumb bigot in head office that asexuality wasn't
real, but fuck you, head office, because look at this fine pirate ship strolling by you with
an asexual at the helm. Fuck you sirens, and fuck your stupid, ignorant head office.

And yes, I did just accidentally assume Karkat's narrative voice for that A/N and I can
only apologise for said infringement of basic dignity.
A short note from John Egbert

Your name is John Egbert. Things are going to plan, you think. At least you assume so, because there’s a giant cloud of dust rising into the sky, a murderous cacophony and the faint sound of Karkat screaming curses at the top of his considerable range. Absolute top. Oh, hell yeah, he’s mad.

Kanaya holds onto your hand tightly “Be ready to run, dear.”

“Something wicked this way comes.” adds Tavros.

You cough “I just spent an afternoon underneath a big wolf paw. I feel violated.”

“Violated? Did she-”

“No, she just sat on me.”

“Vriska sat on me for half an hour one time in kindergarten, you remember? I was screaming but no one came to help me, so I had to punch her in the nose to get her off me.”

“Yes, Tav, I remember.”

“FUCKING RUN!”

Feferi tears out of the snowy gloom and grabs the first hand she reaches, which happens to be yours. You imagine she would have Kanaya by the neck, but she’s brandishing a huge stick in the other hand and there is no room for even Kanaya’s slender swan’s neck.

And Karkat is hot on her trail.

“GAMZEE’S A FUCKING SCARECROW!” he shouts, like that’s going to make any kind of sense, then grabs Tav by the hand, Kanaya too, and he’s off after Feferi.

Not too far behind him is Vriska and that – oh fuck! That red girl, from the park, who kind of made you accept your sexuality, you guess? Why are you thinking about that? For some reason, even though you’re running for your life in a snowy forest after being freshly freed from something ungodly that wanted to kill you, all you can do is look at the slight swell of breasts under her weather-inappropriate jacket and think proudly: ‘I had those all over me and I didn’t give a shit’

Good for you, John Egbert, keeping those priorities as straight as your sexual preferences.

Feferi doesn’t seem to know where she is going, so nor does it matter where she stops, really, only that she feels that you are safely out of the range of the ferocious battle sounding off in the background. She stops after about two minutes of running full-pelt, which has left your insides and throat feeling as if they were scoured by a metal brush.

The hiding place she selects is not so much a hiding place, or a selection, as the patch of snow beside a bush where she happens to fall in exhaustion, roll onto her side to tell something to you, and then falls into. Her hand slips out of yours, but she does not go very far. With a muted sort of interest, you watch your friend being inexplicably swallowed into the snow.

“Shit!” she barks “Guys, I think I found a bomb shelter or something!”

Everyone gathers around.

Terezi offers her a hand up “That’s not a bomb shelter.”

Tav glances over his shoulder nervously “And that’s not a human, over there.”

He nods towards a lumpy silhouette, against the green and white shadows that have begun to fill up the forest.

It’s massive. Bigger, even, than the new Gamzee you have just been introduced to.

You know your heart should be doing back-flips at the sight of it, but honestly? You’re not sure if you have the energy to even protest, anymore. Too much has happened. One does not get sat on by a giant green monster without learning something about themselves, and what you have learned is that there’s only so much fear you can process in one day before you become completely jaded to your surroundings. In short, you only have a limited number of fucks to give, and by this late hour of the day you are completely out of them.

Feferi has just fallen into what appears to be a shallow metal coffin, at the bottom of which is a hatch. Beyond that hatch could be anything from a dinosaur to a monster, and you just don’t care about
what it might be anymore.
“C’mon guys,” you say “I don’t want to die.”
YOU ARE GOING TO TELL ME WHAT’S HAPPENING AND YOU’RE GOING TO DO IT NOW, OR I’M GOING TO LOSE MY FUCKING MIND AND SHIT ENOUGH BRICKS TO BUILD SOMETHING TO PUT THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING TO SHAME, IS THAT CLEAR?!

Your name is Sollux Captor, and you are just preparing yourself for the certainty of death as the men are paused next to your tube when light spills in from the outside, accompanied by a whole lot of screams in familiar voices and some cursing in the loudest, most grating voice you were petrified you would never hear again.

Eridan looks at you, his face full of fear and wonder “Karkat?” he whispers.

The man in front of you whips towards the entrance in time to see Feferi jumping to the bottom of the passage from the rungs. She then seizes the owner of the pair of legs following her down, who turns out to be Vriska, and plops her on the floor.

“What the fuck?” shouts the man, Stitch, that was in front of you.

He reaches for a gun on his belt. Before you can consider what a terrible idea it is, your hand shoots out and grabs the gun off of the belt before he can get to it. The fury on his face is almost enough to make you drop the gun, when he turns on you, but instead you point it at him. Your hands are shaking.

“Oh, giv-ve it to me.” Eridan bumps you gently out of his way with a bony hip, aiming the gun at Stitch with a frightening confidence.

“Shoot ‘em!” barks Stitch.

Eridan plunges the gun into Stitch’s shallow stomach, crumpling his suit, but he does not pull the trigger “If one bullet goes, so does your man! Guns on the floor!”

The other two men aren’t really sure what’s going on. They don’t know if they should be gaping at the kids spilling into their top secret fucking government full of fucking monsters, or at the kids who were hiding right behind the tubes the entire time. While they are trying to decide, Rose straightens up, sneaks around them and snatches another gun away from the man called Fin. She points the barrel at him while gesturing for the third and final man to give up his weapon.

“Fuck you, you little pansy.” he growls, but forks over his weapon.

Encouraged by Rose’s success, Eridan spins Stitch roughly by the shoulder and knees him in the back, forcing him into the middle of the aisle.

“Get on your knees.”

“Kinky!” shouts Vriska, although you doubt she has even half of an idea of what is going on around her.

Her eyes are glazed in a way that suggests she has seen too much in one afternoon to properly process it, and her brain might be giving up the ghost, rather than trying to make sense of the information being flung at it.

Stitch goes down first, then Fin, then the other one. Rose and Eridan each stand behind them, pointing their appropriated guns at the heads of their respective owners.

“So!” calls Rose.

You go to her side and take the second gun from her, assuming your position behind the third man.

Your hands are still shaking. Really, it will be a simple matter for any one of these trained and brutal individuals to take their guns back and shoot out your legs, and from there it is an ever simpler matter of a slaughter. To comfort yourself, you push the gun to the back of the man’s head, so that the mouth of the nozzle (barrel? Nozzle is what’s on a hose, right?) digs into his scalp.

The hatch bangs shut.

John climbs down, allowing Feferi to take him about the waist and put him down. When she puts him down, he keeps going down, as his knees buckle and he sags to the ground in her arms. Feferi falls with him, cradling him.
“John!” you breathe “Are you ok?”

He flashes you a shaky thumbs-up, gripping Feferi’s arms with the other hand, as if she is a life-preserver in a choppy sea.

Your friends are relieved and disgusted to find themselves in the relative safety of the bunker. Tavros puts his palm to one of the tubes and squints at its contents with a distinctly green tint to his face.

“Tav,” you manage, your mouth dry as sand “Where’s Gamzee?”

“He…he turned into a massive scarecrow monster and beat up the wolf. That’s how we got John out. And then…like…I don’t know. Still fighting, they are, um, I think they are.”

The only thing you can hear from the outside is a heavy hammering on the hatch. It reminds you of the noise the monster that chased you in here made, so you guess that is why your friends are in here. One of them probably tripped over the entrance while they were trying to get away, and they all piled in with the typical amount of forethought that your friends tend to put towards their important plans and decisions.

“Are you trying to tell me that Gamzee is some kind of monster?”

Tav nods absently “Most of his kind live in Canada nowadays.”

“Tav, are you ok?”

He sits down heavily, putting his back to the tube he touched “I don’t fucking know.”

You raise an eyebrow. This is the first time you have heard Tav swear in a long time. On the bright side, his legs still seem to be working perfectly well.

Karkat seems more offended than afraid to find himself surrounded by these monstrosities of nature. He is about to voice his discomforts and complaints when a girl you haven’t seen before pushes past him and stands in front of the men. Her stance is wide and authoritative, in a way that suggests she’s about to pull out a nail-studded bat and beat the men for whatever slight they have committed against her.

“Well, if it isn’t Stitch, Fin and Die. Hello, you old motherfuckers. How’s life been treating you?”

All three of the men either curse her, glower, or avert their eyes. In fact, all of them seem to be afraid to look her in the eyes.

You get their concern. She’s a small thing and almost as skinny as you, which is never a compliment when someone is told so, but she’s got this aggressive, uncompromising way she holds herself. If she were struck in the face with a crowbar, she wouldn’t bend to absorb the impact. She would just stand there and the bar would bend around her sharp cheekbones, possibly snapping all the way in half, and she wouldn’t have so much as a bruise. Her hair is shoulder-length and tousled by the snow and wind. She’s got the skin of a corpse or a snowman, and her eyes are glassy with blindness.

You are immediately and completely terrified of her, and it’s all you can do not to pop her in the chest with the gun, and stain her light jacket and jeans (which, by the way, are utterly inappropriate for the kind of weather going on outside)

Ad when a scaly tail curls out from around her legs, moving back and forth like a snake scenting the air, that pretty much seals the deal.

If she tries to talk to you, all she is going to get is a strangled scream in response.

“What’s all that shit all over you, Stitch?” asks the girl- the woman. You can’t tell her age “You smell like a slaughterhouse.”

Remembering the organic spatter that preceded his entry, you look over your shoulder and see a length of intestines and a single filmy sac you assume to be a single lung sitting in a puddle of blackish blood.

Nice.

Now you glance down at your captive and realise that he wears sleeves of the black blood all the way up to his elbows.

Driving the gun into the back of his head, you growl, surprising both him and yourself with the ferocity “Give me the knife.”

“Had to fuckin’ protect myself, didn’t I?” he digs a knife out of his pocket and tosses it to the floor.

The knife skitters over to the strange girl with the tail and leaves a black smear in its wake “There’s things all over the mountain.”
“You’re gonna flush out the mountain, aren’t you?” her expression is thunderous “You bastards are gonna destroy this entire mountain.”
Before any of them can form an answer, up comes Karkat, looking impossibly livid. He folds his arms and gives the girl and the men an even darker look than the one the girl currently wears.
“Somebody is going to explain this to me. In little words, so I can understand. And they’re going to do it now.”
“In a minute. I need to talk to them first-”
Karkat interrupts the girl with a high-pitched shriek “NO! NO MORE SECRETS, NO MORE SNEAKING, NO MORE CRYPTIC-ASS CODED CONVERSATIONS, NO SIR, NOT IN FRONT OF ME! YOU ARE GOING TO TELL ME WHAT’S HAPPENING AND YOU’RE GOING TO DO IT NOW, OR I’M GOING TO LOSE MY FUCKING MIND AND SHIT ENOUGH BRICKS TO BUILD SOMETHING TO PUT THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING TO SHAME, IS THAT CLEAR?!”
Evidently, the girl has never been on the receiving end of one of Karkat’s tantrums. She stares at him in disbelief and when he gestures for her to sit her ass down, right this minute, she somehow knows that she must do so.
“Jesus, Karkat.” says John weakly “Calm down.”
“I will not calm down. You there, strange, sinister men. The one covered in what appears to be either tar or diarrhea.”
Stitch looks up.
“Start fucking talking. Don’t skimp on the juicy details. I’ll have you know that not all of my friends are completely incompetent with those lovely shooting implements they’re holding.”
The man raises a scarred eyebrow “What experience do you kids have?”
Eridan is quick to offer up his resume “I once shot my brother in the thigh with a BB-gun.”
You nod “Yeah, Cronus still has the scar.”
For some reason, the man is not impressed. But he is cornered and he at least has the good sense to realise it.
“Worst to worst,” says Tav “We’ll just set my good friend here on you. See these legs?” he pulls up the leg of his jeans to show the glint of steely prosthetics “She made me…me need these. It was an accident, of course,” he gives Vriska the most threatening look you have ever seen Tav’s sweet features form “Wasn’t it?”
“Yeah,” she says, nonplussed “Totally an accident. I think about it every day, and stuff. Worst mistake I ever made and all that.”
Still, Stitch does not seem threatened by the posturing of a bunch of high-school students. This is going to end badly, you think. He has seen your faces, along with the other two men, and he may have heard your names. At least he knows yours, from when Rose called you over to hold the gun to Die’s skull.
Seems kind of obvious that one of the parties currently in the bunker will not be leaving the bunker. Alive, you mean.
Your money is actually on the gangsters, or whoever these men are.
“Alright, strange man with the diarrhoea sleeves. Start talking. Terezi, make sure he’s telling the truth.”
The girl, Terezi, frowns at him “What do you actually want to know, Karkat?”
“EVERYTHING!”
She blinks “Fair enough. Tell him what you know, Stitch.”

(what Stitch knows)

The programme was funded in the 60s. One, solitary politician in some back-water, back-woods town happened to discover something not unlike Gamzee’s people and had his view of the world
utterly changed by it.

At the time, the black community were in the process of wriggling out from under the boot of the white authority and elevating themselves as the equals that they were, in truth, which frightened the politician terribly. Before his maternal grandparents moved, they had been proud owners of one of the largest cotton plantations in the South, and he spent most of his adult life longing for the days that his mother had been born on the tail-end of.

(“Man, I bet he loved ‘Gone with the wind’,” says John bitterly, glancing at his own dark hands)

So, knowing what he knew and fearing what he feared, of course the man decided that a great majority of the black population of America were monsters of some description. They, after all, were the roots from which the practices of hoodoo and voodoo and all their poisonous cousins had sprung, and these monsters that he came across were nothing that any rational, Christian God would allow to exist, so of course, it was the black people’s fault. Also, the Asians and the Jewish and the Natives and the Mexicans and the gays, but he had to start small, didn’t he?

So began a covert campaign, funded by a certain organisation famous for sticking burning crosses in the yards of the non-white citizens. What started as a bunch of petrified and drunken racists combing the woods at night and poking sticks into the underbrush, searching for more of the monsters that the first of them had seen, was quickly discovered by a larger branch of the government and summarily taken over, and transformed into something far more sinister.

The focus was taken off the black community, which was a relief to the local one especially. Given the era, they were used to a having a bunch of drunken white men standing around the streets of their part of town and shouting things at all night, but were starting to get confused as to why they were screaming “you’re eating our livestock” and “show us your fangs!” instead of the standard racial slurs.

(“Why do w-we need this context, exactly?” demands Eridan “W-we just w-want to know-w w-what you mean w-when you say you’re gonna flush out the mountain.”

Karkat retorts “The hell we do. I said I want to know everything and the man is telling me everything. Chill your man-tits, you homo. It’s gonna be over in about 1000 words anyway.”

“homo” repeats Eridan sceptically “What does my sexuality have to do with anything-”

You elbow him in the side as your man, Die, begins to chuckle with an edge of hysteria and desperation to his voice.

Stitch takes this as his cue to keep talking, pretending that it has not happened.)

Within a year of the idea of the programme’s germination in the mind of a man, terminally ill with racism (he would be killed two years down the line, shooting himself in the face while attempting to join other KKK members in a suppression of a protest in favour of black rights) had grown and blossomed into a programme that had tendrils reaching into every corner of the country, but whose head was essentially on this mountain. The programme’s headquarters had been moved to avoid awkward confrontations with the politician who began it. Moved not to this mountain, but they kept some storage facilities here.

(“You’re standing in one. Most of the stuff in here is older than your parents. Real retro.” adds Die, in an effort to remind himself that he’s more powerful for being a grown-ass man, by talking down to a bunch of kids.

“I doubt that. My mother is barely sixteen years older than me.” says Rose in a clipped tone “And I’d thank you to leave our families out of this.”

“Did anyone else see that?” asks Feferi.

“What?”

“I swear, John, that thing just blinked.” she points to one of the tubes, but he shakes his head and tells her firmly and gently that she’s just imagining things.)

Where the real headquarters are? No one knows. There might not even be a stationary base of operations. It has been suggested many times in rumours by the staff that the base of operations is not stationary at all, but held in some kind of mobile bunker. Or run out of a trailer.

(“Like Walter White’s meth lab.” says Karkat.

The look on his face is so intense and concentrated that you almost can’t stop yourself from cracking
up. That is, until you catch sight of the gun in your hands again and the laughter trickles back down your throat to be dissolved in your stomach.)
The labs, certainly, were all run out of a research base or a storage facility.
(Finally, you feel like you’re getting closer to a truth.
It is here that you jump in with a question of your own “Was it here that Dave and the others were held?”
Terezi answers for you, however: “No, not here, but not that far away either. Don’t worry about it, kid, you won’t need to be going to those places any time soon.”)
Each facility held a few dozen test subjects, which were mainly from the two Americas and Canada, as well as the island chains that surrounded them. Sometimes, there were imports, but the project was essentially still in fledgling stages, you understand, and highly secretive. To look for rapports and allies with nations that were not directly connected and therefore, feasible to reach for the American government that started it, were to be avoided until the subject material of the project was a little less enigmatic.
Before the project could ever reach the stage where seeking links overseas was viable, the project was cancelled.
Under threat of death, of course, otherwise it would be a multi-national and expansive, under-ground black market and highly profitable.
What happened was this: the headquarters, wherever they may or may not have been, were approached by a number of powerful beings.
(“Do you know what a djinn is?” asks Stitch, without a hint of interest.
“No.” is the resounding answer.
Except for John, who says “Kind of.”
Everyone looks at him.
“Look, when your father wears an animal totem around everywhere, you feel kinda left out by society. You start looking for fellows in suffering. I was just talking to this Iranian kid online and they told me their parents put cat’s eyes up in every bedroom to make sure there aren’t any djinns around to cause sleep paralysis and that stuff.”
Stitch scoffs “Those aren’t these kind of djinns. I’m talking highest of the high. Noble blood. Noble bodies. Noble people, royalty, from the dawn of civilization, and they told us either we were shutting down the programme or they were killing us all down to the last infant.”)
Following this threat, the labs were quickly shut down, and the staff disbanded. Those who did not want to go down without a fight were taken by the djinns to be eaten.
Literally, eaten.
This was not a rumour. When the director of the entire programme refused to the djinn’s face to close down operations when first asked, the djinn at the head of the entourage smiled, distended his jaw and bit the director’s head clean off.
That was five years ago, and since there has been a djinn posted at every lab to ensure that they’re being closed down safely.

“There’s one on top of this mountain.” Stitch’s eyes seem to glaze over for a minute “Beautiful bastard. What I wouldn’t give to cut him up and see what makes him tick.”
Curling his lip in disgust, Eridan says “How many of you are left in the world?”
“Staff? Fucked if I know.”
“I bet you do know, though.”
The man rolls his eyes “Look, kid, I ain’t said a word of lies since you got me down on my knees here.”
Terezi cocks a thin eyebrow “Why should we believe that?”
“You know, missy, you know full well I’m telling the truth.”
“The important question is why you’re telling the truth, Stitch.”
Slowly, she approaches and crouches in front of him. Taking his chin between two pointed fingers, Terezi turns his face up so that he looks her in her dead eyes.

"Why are you telling us these things?"

He grins "You know, I knew there were some people in here. I’m not stupid. And I’m not a newbie in this world. These bunkers- there’s always someone lurking around here."

Her face grows thunderous “Don’t mince words, Stitch, just tell me what I want to know.”

Then, to emphasise her point, she draws a long knife from the sleeve of her shirt and puts it to his throat. Suddenly, the gun in your hand feels a whole lot less dangerous.

Die makes a weak, inanimate groan of protest and Fin averts his eyes, expecting a massacre. You, too, can’t help but feel that you’re about to be sprinkled in blood, freshly-warmed by the hot internal tissues of a throat.

But she does not cut him.

His Adam’s apple comes dangerously close to being grazed as it slides up and down, underneath the honed edge of the blade (you were never good with brand names, but it looks like it could do some serious damage, even in inexperienced hands) “This is a storage facility, get it? There’s a reason we got this stuff packed away.”

A noise at the back of the room cuts whatever else he wants to say short.

A noise like wet flesh hitting glass from under water, which is exactly what it is.

Feferi reels back. She had been staring intently at the tube, where she swore she had seen the occupant blink.

“Oh my God! Not to say I toldja so, John, but I fucking toldja so!”

The amber fluid has begun to drain from around it. Without the yellow, dehydrated-urine coloured filter on the creature’s hide, it looks even more disgusting than it did before. Its carapace glints in the dull internal lights of the tube.

Stitch’s grin is catching. By now, Fin and Die are wearing it too, and none of them look the slightest bit sane.

“The doors are locked. I locked the doors. I locked the fucking doors!” crows Stitch “There’s a little keypad over there, see?” he jerks his head back at it, his hair drifting from its tightly gelled style

“Time lock! Two minutes after the next people entered this place, the doors lock automatic!”

“Tell me the passcode!” Terezi seizes him by the collar so they are nose-to-nose and presses her knife threateningly to his gut, the way Eridan threatened him with the gun a few short moments ago.

“There’s no way to unlock it, if that’s what you want.”

“There’s got to be some way!”

Die chips in “There really ain’t.”

“You- you’re going to kill yourselves?” demands Karkat “Why the hell are you- what, haven’t you guys got something to live for, because I fucking do! I’m not dying here!”

“Live for?” repeats Fin sarcastically “This is life. This facility. The others like it. It’s what I loved. And since it’s been gone? Life just ain’t life no more.”

By now, the other tubes have begun to drain. More and more of the creatures stir sluggishly, blinking many eyes and cracking the knuckles of fists as big as your head. Most of the conscious have noticed you and the others, and are now straining against the glass to get out. They’re hungry.

“You really don’t want to live anymore?” asks Vriska.

So far, she has been relatively silent. But now, when she speaks, you remember that tone of voice. Utterly callous and cruel. The way she sounded the first time she apologised to Tavros for the accident she caused.

She reaches for your gun and you feel that you have no choice but to give it to her. Your hand is made of air without the weight, but your chest and insides are quickly turning to lead. Then Eridan passes his over so you can keep Die pinned, and gets away from Fin, taking refuge behind you with a hand on your narrow shoulders.

At the sight of Vriska holding the gun, Fin’s smile only gets wider.

“You gonna shoot me?”

“I think so.” says Vriska.
With the skill of a frightened amateur, Vriska pulls back the safety and puts her finger on the trigger. She squeezes it experimentally, as if seeing how far she will have to pull before a bullet is spat up.

“Vriska…” you say cautiously “Vriska, don’t.”

All around, the tubes are close to empty of the fluid. Feferi’s monster, the first one to move, has had the cylindrical glass part of its tube start to move down from the top. Given the height of the monster, it won’t be long before it can stick its head out and start biting.

“Vriska, don’t do that.” says Rose forcefully “You’ll deafen us.”

“This is a silencer though, isn’t it?”

With your miniscule knowledge of guns, you had thought it was just a weird kind of model of gun that had a long, swan-neck-like protrusion at the muzzle (or is it nozzle? Still not sure). Vriska doesn’t seem to think so. The way she holds the gun, you doubt she’s ever had one before. She’s just doing what she knows from what she saw on TV.

Just as Feferi shouts a warning that the first monster is reaching out from its tube, Vriska pulls the trigger.

The sound is startling, but muted by the silencer and largely drowned out by the massive, meaty splat that follows the gunshot.

She has blown his head off.

Not Fin, who she was aiming for, but your guy.

Die.

Die’s head essentially explodes from the force of the bullet passing right through his eye. Thankfully, it stops somewhere in his body, the bullet, so you don’t catch it in the leg or the kneecap.

On the downside, you do get spattered with brains.

Eridan screams and pulls you away, a little too late not to be splashed with blood and pinkish, greyish chunks that wobble when they hit the ground. Wobble. Actual, wobbling bits of organs all over the floor in little jelly puddles that used to enable the cognition of a sick, sick man.

You need to laugh about this, so you do, otherwise you would be screaming.

Eridan wrestles you out of the jacket that has caught the blood and a few of the wobbling brainy bits and throws it in disgust onto the floor. Without intending to, he ends up covering the cavernous, smoking wreck of the face of Die.

Vriska lets out a choked laugh.

“DIE!” screams Fin, hysterical, but not with laughter.

You can’t tell if he’s ordering Vriska to do something or calling out to his freshly fallen comrade, but you don’t have time to think about it, because Vriska turns the gun on him and blows him away too.

Not on her first try. Die was beginner’s luck, with the headshot.

This time, she catches Fin in the shoulders and flattens him on the back. Vriska quickly straddles his chest and pushes the barrel of the gun into his mouth and shoots. A piece of blood-covered vertebrae skitters away from the body, the firework of blood surrounding the ruined head, and hits the sole of your shoe.

This time, you do scream and jump back. Into the opening tube of another monster. Its arms are around you in the same instant that Eridan lets out a shriek that sounds like the noises mountain lions make at night and launches himself at the thing. It has no visible eyes, so Eridan goes for the fleshiest bits he can see in the chinks in the carapace. By way of weapon, he has only his nails.

The monster’s arms are clammy against your skin.

A black panic threatens to overwhelm you. But at the same time, there’s a perfectly rational part of your mind thinking: ‘hey, that junk it was floating in was probably something to keep its body sterile and nurtured, so I bet it wouldn’t be bad for me if I bit the crap out of this arm right now’.

You find a band of oddly green, exposed flesh between two plates of armour and bite down so hard you feel a filling towards your molars come loose.

Bugling in shock and pain, the beast lets go of you.
Eridan takes the opportunity to wrench you away from it. Bits of the same nasty green flesh are caught underneath his nails. You painted those last night, his nails. You painted them blue while he was asleep and did a bit of a messy job of it, because you were more focussed on how lovely his face is when he’s asleep than on the paintjob.

Funny, the places your mind goes when it’s shutting down.

Karkat dashes to your side “Get in the tubes!”

“Are you fuckin’ nuts?!” screams Eridan.

“When they’re empty, you dumbass! Here, watch me!”

He sprints low along the row of opening tubes, both to avoid the hands reaching for him and to hammer a spot in what you thought was a seamless tube base. Wherever his fist meets the metal, it caves to his touch, in the shape of a square button, and the glass begins to slide up again.

One of the monsters vacates their tube to get at Karkat, and Karkat smashes the button before leaping into the freshly empty spot.

Seeing that Vriska is prepared to fire the final bullet into the final skull, he extends a hand in Rose’s direction.

“Rose!”

She flies to him, but just before she can reach him, a monster looms up over her. Its arms are open for a back-crushing hug. She falls smoothly to her knees and slides right between the monster’s legs, and gets to her feet just as quickly. She has to jump to clear the now waist-height of the rising tube.

Within seconds, she and Karkat are blocked off from the world and safe again. One of the monsters hammers its fists against the tube.

The two of them crouch. Naturally, Rose folds over Karkat protectively and covers her ear with a hand. The hand still holding a gun.

Wordlessly, Eridan tugs you to the nearest empty tube that he can find and pulls you to the floor.

The cacophony in the room fades into a dreamy, swimming kind of echo that is inaudible but for Eridan’s breathing. As the glass cage slides up around the two of you, you put your ears to his lips and whisper.

“I love you.”

That might be the first time you have said it and truly known that you have meant it.

“I love you.” is his response, and he buries his face in your collar.

You smell like blood. And outside, there is the muffled sound of a human screaming.
Finally, a successful rescue is concluded. Sorta.

Your name is John Egbert, and this is a new kind of fucked-up you didn’t expect to experience by the end of the day. That human screaming that Sol hears? Yeah, yeah, that’s you and you are not ashamed of it.

Worst to worst? You were hoping that you’d just see some weird, far off figures that provide a menacing presence and little more. But instead? Now you’re trapped inside a glass tube with a bunch of monsters milling around outside and Feferi’s knees dangerously close to your crotch.

She sits with her back to one end and you sit with yours to the other. Rather than looking at the horrors going on outside, or worrying yourself by watching your friends huddled in doubles in the other tubes, you just stare at her.

You’ve never noticed that particular freckle before; the one just above her jaw-line on the right side of her face. You kind of assumed that Indian people, especially the ones with darker skin, don’t get freckles, which, of course, is a stupid thing to think and you’re not even sure of how the idea entered your head.

“I think you and Vriska should break up.” says Feferi.

“Oh yeah?” you risk a glance outside at the dead bodies she has left in her wake.

One of the monsters is hunched over the body. It pulls free a long, juicy red shaft which you take to be a femur, and starts to beat it on one of the tubes. Thankfully, it is one occupied by another monster. You’re not sure if it wants to free its comrade or just finds the action satisfying.

“Yeah,” continues Feferi “When it came out that you’d been…abducted by a green wolf, she wasn’t scared for you at all. I mean, I know it’s in Vriska’s nature to pretend that she’s not afraid of anything or for anyone, but that’s gotta end at some point, right? What’s the point in being her boyfriend if she’s going to just treat you the same way as everyone else? It’s not all that fun to be Vriska’s friend.”

“Sometimes friendship isn’t about fun.”

She smiles “I know, John. This isn’t fun, right now, but I’m doing it because you’re my friend.”

She reaches for your hand and gives it an affectionate squeeze.

She’s right, of course. Vriska is a cold, distant and unabashedly proud of it. She expects a certain level of competence and devotion out of all her friends, so that they are not just her ideals of what people should be, but that they match up to her own ideal of what she should be like.

It’s kind of sickening, the amount of time she has spent projecting an unreasonable image of frosty heroism over people to whom it is irrelevant anyways.

Say, if it had been her with the gun instead of Sol from the very start, she would have plugged each of the three men and called it good. Without thinking about what it meant to actually kill. Just because it looked good and sounded cool inside her head.

Now she can say, oh, yeah, I’ve totally killed three men.

If it were up to you, you would have let someone- something else do the work.

Just, maybe, cut them on the arm or the hand so the smell of blood could attract the attention of the monsters. Then they could be torn apart by what you assume are their own creations (these things don’t look natural to you, like Gamzee and Dave- they look like something that was an attempt to be superior to both of your friends’ natural forms, but just ended up kind of pathetic and weird) and the cycle of sin would be complete, kind of.

But Vriska had to make it complicated.

“John?”

“Yeah, Fef, just thinking.”

“Thinking about Vriska?” she presses.

“About Vriska.”

You scan the room, but you don’t see which tube she is in. And besides, you stomach can’t quite deal with the sight of those disgusting monsters and the bodies in the process of being dismembered.
“Hey, Fef?”
“Yeah?”
“I think I might be in love with Dave.”
She nods “I think so too.”
“Well, why didn’t you guys tell me I was? Jeez! I could have saved so much angst and time!”
Feferi grins “I’m sorry, John. I thought you might want to figure it out for yourself.”
You shake your head in amazement “No, Fef. I’m nowhere near smart enough to figure that out for
myself, let alone to know what to do with my feelings.”
“If we ever get out of this tube, you can ask Dave out.”
You wrinkle your nose “I’m not sure how Dad would feel about that.”
She gives you a kind of sympathetic grimace “Because Dave’s kinda like your brother?”
“Well, kinda.”
“Think about it this way. So, like, if you’re a foster family fostering a kid, would you be mad about it
if your own kid fell for the foster kid? I mean, it’s not like the foster kid is a blood relative or a step-
relative, which is usually why people freak out. I guess… I guess foster kids aren’t the best example,
but Dave’s more like a close friend than a member of the family, right?”
“Yeah. I guess.”
“So it might be even better for him if you guys did get married.”
Your heart does a backflip “Get married?! Fef! Too soon!”
“What? It’s just been legalised all over the country, John! You can’t tell me that you don’t want to
take advantage of that!”
“Yes I can! I haven’t even kissed him!”
She grins “I bet you kiss him when he’s asleep.”
Your face grows hot “I do not. That would be really creepy.”
“You’re blushing.”
“I am not.”
A heavy fist hammers on the side of the tube, making you both scream.
Feferi scrambles over to your side of the tube and ducks under your arm.
“Shit!”
“Let’s hope it doesn’t find the button.”
“It won’t.” she says confidently “It’s just a stupid fucking…uh…well, I don’t know, what does that
look like to you?”
“Looks like the Lizard Man fucked a vampire. And not the sexy kind of vampire.”
Cracks have begun to web out from under the fist.
Not knowing what else to do, you shut your eyes tight and plant your face in Feferi’s shoulder.
About two seconds later, there comes a noise that you have never heard before.
Like the big airy whoosh that sheets caught in a strong wind make, followed by a hundred bones
breaking at once and the sound of something extremely heavy falling down. Glass shatters.
Explodes, and rains down on your shoulders and hair. You can feel the pieces dropping harmlessly
down the back of your jacket, as benign as snowflakes. Feferi is screaming in your ear, but not in
fear. She just seems to want to be as loud or louder than the explosion sounding around you. From
this close up, she almost manages the task.
When the roar has finally died down, and you dare to raise your head to inspect the damage, you find
yourself staring at a very neat kind of carnage.
Death by fire, as it were. Not the normal kind of fire. The word for it is probably a djinn’s fire, or
some similar term that clearly communicates the source.
What has happened is essentially a flash fire. A fire blazed through the storage facility and made ash
of all of the monsters without exception. The three men are no longer recognisable as such. The mess
of their heads has been turned into something that resemble what a dropped egg might look like, if it
had been dropped to blacken on a red-hot stove eye. The bodies have put their arms up, as if to
protect their destroyed faces from the fire, and bare their teeth.
You don’t quite it.
So, the fire was hot enough to make literal heaps of ash out of all of the monsters, but it was not hot enough to blast away what remained of the men?
The smell of cooked meat is incredible and tempered by an even stronger smell of melting metal and burnt wood. So, apparently, monsters smell like wood when they’re burnt? It looks like a few of them even exploded in the super heat.
You see Karkat’s pale face underneath a spatter of congealed goo, as a mask of disgust while he watches a barbequed chunk of monster meat slide down in front of his nose. Behind him is Rose, looking a little less disgusted, but no less shocked by the sudden turn of events. Your tube is shattered from about the height where your chest would be if you were standing.
Out of the corner of your eye, you catch a flicker of movement.
At first, you don’t believe what you see.
It’s just too weird to be seeing.
It’s just too nonsensical to make sense of, because, what? What even is going on? How is this a thing?
It’s Equius Zahhak. The officer, in jeans that make his ass a natural wonder and with his hair loose all over his shoulders. He thrusts his hand through a tube where Karkat locked up one of the creatures. The glass is somehow still gooey and melting, from the heat of the fire Equius must have spewed all over it. His hand does not stop once it has passed through the glass, but goes right on through into the unfortunate monster’s chest. From around the engulfed wrist, there is a flurry of sparks trapped underneath the monster’s skin. This quickly resolves itself into a full on fire that literally shoots out of the holes you assume serve as the ears, eyes, nose and mouth.
It falls in a moment, a smoking husk.
“Oh my god!” shrieks Karkat, all echoing and muffled “Equius is a demon!”
“Djinn.” says Equius softly “I’m a djinn, kid.”
“Can you let us out?” asks Tavros civilly enough, apparently unconcerned by what he has just seen “I would, uh, like to- to remove myself from this…this general vicinity as soon as possible.”
Then, you see Vriska is inside the tube beside him and you understand his urgency.
Terezi stumbles out of a corner of the room, frantically smacking the ash off of her clothes. There’s not so much as a single scorch-mark on her, which you guess means that dragons are completely fireproof, even if they look about as much like a dragon as you do. Except for the fucking tail that’s curled around her leg, of course.
“John, help me.”
Feferi has stood up and seized the edge of a giant piece of jagged glass. In the part of the tube that has yet to snap, there is still a giant scar zig-zagging to the base of the tube. With your help, Feferi manages to kneel the piece of glass out of place. It flies to the floor and shatters, scattering in every direction. You notice that Equius’s feet are bare, as you ease through the doorway you have just made for yourself.
And that he’s his tanktop fits him fantastically.
Oh, yeah, you’re so gay right now that it physically hurts you to think about. There’s a little headache forming under your left temple because of, or because of the massive trauma you have just now, just barely survived. One of those is to blame.
Equius goes to each of the tubes containing monsters in turn and burns them all to ashes. One of them explodes, confirming your theory that he did in fact blow up a good deal of them. The insides hit the tube all over, and when Equius retracts his hand, it’s covered in scummy guts and blood.
While he finishes his dirty work, you step around the room as carefully as you can over the corpses and ashes to let the others out. Karkat is not happy when you let him out. Tavros’s hands are shaking, and Sol needs to be grabbed under the arms and hauled out of the tube by Eridan.
“Sol? Can you stand?”
Sol looks down at his legs “No, babe, I don’t think I can.”
Eridan hauls him up all the same and attempts to prop him up on his feet. It works, for a second, but Sol tumbles forward. He falls into Equius’s chest before Eridan can reach for him.
“Are you injured?”
“I can’t feel my body.”
Equius scoops him up and slings him on his back “Well, you’re probably nearly out of your mind with shock, kiddo. Is anyone else hurt?”
“How the fuck did you get in?” demands Terezi “Who are you?”
He gives her a long, sad look with piercing eyes and approaches her cautiously.
“Terezi?”
She looks up, her hair hanging over her eyes “Is that who I think it is?”
Her posture immediately changes. She stiffens and tenses, as if expecting a trick.
And you’re just as confused. Do they know each other? How many people here actually know each other? How many freaking secrets are you gonna have to stumble over or trip flat across before this problem is solved and Dave can live in peace?
Dave.
DAVE
OH GOD DAVE’S STILL FIGHTING

John Egbert : be Equius Zahhak ===========>
Equius Zahhak: chase the varmint down =========>

Your name is Equius Zahhak, and for a moment you were actually kind of confident that you had saved the day.
You don’t do that very often. Given your line of work, you’re usually just solving the problems that the major, most damaging problem creates, say, catching the culprit of a murder. It is not often that you manage to get there before much in the way of disaster happens. Except, that it would appear that somebody took it upon themselves to administer a gang-style, triple execution. You suspect Vriska. She’s got a lot of blood on her and that stunned euphoria that most sociopaths get on their faces when they’re fresh from their first murder.
Wonderful.
It would be so much easier if it were Terezi, because she would have just bitten out their throats. And who can blame a dragon for doing what comes naturally, even when what comes naturally is tearing out the throats of their enemies, and sometimes strangling them with a length of their own intestines? But Vriska- now you’re going to have to keep a weathered eye on her.
She’s always been a weight on your mind. Hopefully at least now, John will have the good sense to dump her freaky ass and go out with someone normal, or at least more willing to admit they have emotions. And admit to himself that he’s gay. Yes, it’s going to be a good day when John finally allows himself to realise that.
Wiping the slime of gore from your hand on your shirt, you have to move quickly to get your arms around Sol before he completes the fall of 6ft onto his angular face. You assure Sol that he will be fine, and you are about to ask John if he’s ok (because no matter how much you tell yourself it isn’t fair to have favourites, John is totally your favourite out of the kids, excluding Dave) when he zooms past you for the airy opening you had to blow in the place of the hatch to get to the kids.
“John!”
Sollux swears in his first language.
You have no choice but to use your officer-voice “JOHNATHAN JAMES EGBERT STAND STILL!”
It works, thankfully. He knows when to listen to you immediately and without question.
John turns around. If he were some kind of robot, you are sure you would hear he gears of his neck grinding as he turned.
His face is absolutely insane with fear “Dave’s still fighting.”
“Dave is still fighting,” you repeat “A gigantic Lycan, with a Wendigo on his side. John, no, you would not be anything but a hindrance if you went up- JOHN GET YOUR NARROW BUTT DOWN THAT LADDER THIS INSTANT!”
You hand Sol over to Terezi, who stumbles under his weight, and dash after John. John’s on the top rung when you get your hand in the back of his jeans and tug on them. You can only watch with incredulity as John literally slips out of his jeans and leaves you with them in your hands.

A bark of laughter sounds from Vriska in the facility.

“JOHN!” you bark “JOHN, SO HELP ME, BISMALLAH, I’M GOING TO KICK YOUR ASS!”
“FUCK OFF! I GOTTA HELP HIM!”

He’s fast. But he is also running through the snow in his boxers, from a djinn; a species whose average speed is about 80 miles per hour when you’re being lazy, and 300 miles per hour when you’re really motivated. It takes a substantial amount of care not to snap his spine like a twig when you get your hands on him. Even so, the two of you roll several feet in the snow, all the way to the bottom of the slope.

John is both surprised and angry to find himself once again in his jeans and stuck under a djinn.

He looks at his jeans “How the hell did you get me back in these?”
You glower “I’m a djinn, Johnathan. We have tricks.”

“Oh, yeah, I bet advanced high-speed dressing is a big subject in the djinn-Hogwarts!”

“Alright, that’s it, young man, you’re getting put in a tree.”

He doesn’t think you’re serious, but you quickly destroy that notion.

Up he goes. You grab him by the collar and gather him up like a kitten, and pick a nice, tall tree.

John folds his arms with a sour look. He only grow frightened when you’ve reached the top of the tree and begin to lower him into it.

“Hey!” he protests “Don’t you dare leave me up here! I’ll fight you!”

“And I will win.” You strip off your shirt and tie it around his waist, knotting it tightly so that he cannot escape, unless he somehow manages to bite through it.

In the spot you have placed him in, he will be sheltered from the wind and the elements, screened from whatever birds might think it’s a good idea to come over and defecate on his head or thief his glasses, and most importantly, he isn’t visible from the ground. You’re going to have to scratch or scorch the trunk on your way to helping Dave if you’re going to remember where you’ve actually put him.

“Be good and be quiet.”

John’s face is thunderous “I hate you so much right now.”

You let yourself free-fall to the forest floor, wary of smacking yourself on a branch on the way down. Once you have landed, you allow yourself to become aware of the sound of the vicious battle being waged not so far away, underground. You don’t quite know how the kids all managed to get out, but the threat has been neutralised for them- and by that, you mean it’s been shot, burnt and exploded. They’ll be safe, whatever happens to you.

You always knew you were going to end up back in one of those blasted facilities. These circumstances are far better than you could have predicted, however.

En route to the tumultuous battle, you pass a staggering man. He clutches at his rib cage, which you see has been almost completely exposed.

Recognising him, you stop. To him, you appear out of the thin air to torment him in his last moments of life.

“Clover.” you nod to the old technician “Do you remember me?”

Out of all of the staff members, Clover was the one who came the closest to being kind to his charges. You suspect it had something to do with him being an animal lover, and, as you once overhead in a conversation that was between him and Eggs over the gurney you were strapped to, he had about fifty cats and found it hard to differentiate between his pets and things that looked like pets to him.

You’re still going to kill him. At this point, it might be a kindness to put him out of what must be complete misery.

Clover’s glazed eyes pass over you “Aren’t you that blue guy that made us shut down everything? Yeah…yeah I know you. You bit the head off of the director of the programme.”

“No, that was my big brother, actually, but I understand your confusion. What’s going on over
Clover shrugs “Carnage, I guess. They’re all dead, if they’re lucky. Look.”
He gestures to the exposed ribs poking through what little, thin coating of red tissue has not yet been ripped from his chest.
“If you squint, you can see my heart.”
A cruel idea enters your mind.
This is a man who you remember most vividly not for his love of cats, but for the time where he stuck a needle in either of your wrists, and two more in either femoral artery in either leg to see how much blood could be drained from a juvenile djinn before they passed out.
So you reach into his chest and pluck out the organ. It flutters in your hand once, twice, then weeps blood without so much as a twitch.
You hold it up for Clover to see.
“Here it is.”
He topples over about ten seconds later. The gurgle issuing from his throat is the kind of noise that comes out of a sink when the last of the water has drained from it. Tossing the heart over your shoulder, you start to run again.
The battle is still fierce when you reach it. Scattered around are several bodies, torn up in ways too horrific for even you to bear looking at for a long time. Evidently, once the beasts realised that they were surrounded by hostiles, they all took a moment off from battling each other to rip apart their tormentors.
You observe the battle from the lip of the smallish cavern they have created by ripping into the roof and punching out giant pieces of what served as both a forest floor and a ceiling.
Two of the monsters you recognise.
There’s Dave, struggling and bloodied underneath the claws of the green wolf, who appears to be attempting to bite off his wing from the joint. On his back is a stranger- a Wendigo, not that far from the spongy black carapace of its childhood, but doing its fearsome best to get the wolf off Dave. It’s trying to do so without also flinging Dave’s wing into the distance after it, which proves more difficult than it could have previously assumed.
“LYCAN!” you bark.
Amazingly, all three of them freeze.
The Lycan swivels its heavy head at you, and the Wendigo, perched on it like a massive black mosquito, peers at you with an undisguised delight.
“Eq-bro!” it warbles ‘My motherfucker! Great fuckin’ timin’!”
Oh, Allah, is that Gamzee in there?
Well, you’re going to have to worry about that later. For now, it’s time to save Dave.
“Lycan, this has gone far enough.”
She bares her teeth to you “Djinn. You do not control me.”
“I knew you were there…I should have pulled you from the cave and killed you in the snow…if I had known you were going to do this, I would not have allowed my brother to help you for even a second.”
Her snarl is fearsome, but yours is even more so. Her ears flatten in a response, but she is not yet willing to back off her prey.
Gamzee the Wendigo senses what you’re about to do and makes himself scarce, darting up to the lip of the cavern with the agility of a spider. He perches on a large chunk of rubble and watches you curiously.
“He will be found. And killed. If he lives like you do.”
“So what are you doing to him now?”
Basilisk or Dave is unable or unwilling to speak. He stirs weakly underneath the Lycan’s paws, though it is obvious he is not trying to escape. He just wants to move his chest so that her sharpest fore-claw is no longer positioned directly over his rib-cage any longer.
“You’re going to hurt him so badly that he has no hope of escape?”
A growl rumbles from her throat “Hurt, then help. Take him away. Just as soon as he turns back.”
Dave drives his beak into her leg, suddenly, with such a force that even you can hear the bone chipping as his beak hits it. By way of response, she swats him across the face. When his head lolls back into place, you can see that a long, livid cut runs the length of his face. It takes a supreme amount of willpower not to burst into flames right there and then. You need to get her away from Dave before you start to dismember her. She is beyond the point of forgiveness or pardon. Still, for the sake of appearing merciful, you say “I’ll give you one more try to get away from Dave. After that, I cannot be held accountable for what I do in defence of him.”

The Lycan growls. And your patience is at an end. The ground falls away from your feet. Without twitching a muscle, you lower yourself into the crater and grab the Lycan by the ragged scruff of her neck before she has a chance to bite you. You launch yourself into the sky. High above the forest, the town and finally the mountain. As the peak passes underneath you and you see a faint feather of smoke rising from your brother’s cave, you imagine that he watches you with something close to displeasure. Well, let him. John and Dave were put in danger just because he had to take it upon himself to show mercy.

The Lycan is as light as soap bubbles in your hand, and even more so when she transforms into a wriggling girl, naked as the day she was born except for a tattered pair of shorts and a long sweep of wild hair that’s unexpectedly black, rather than the green of her other pelt. The scruff changes to a throat, which spasms violently under your hand. You cannot summon the sympathy to move your hand to her shoulder.

Still, you keep soaring into the frigid air until you have passed through the lowest layer of grey snow-clouds. The girl lets out a strangled scream in the middle of the cloud. No doubt, this is the coldest she has ever been in her life and will ever be. You do not expect her to have much of a life to live past this point. Emerging into a cloud-scape of towering, greys and blacks and thunderous whites bowing in around you and scraping the sky, you and the girl find yourselves quite alone. Not so much as one stray bird heading south for the winter or an airplane seeking its destination among the snowy thunderheads. She struggles so weakly that you realise the life is almost gone from her. Since you are not quite done with her yet, you move your hand to her hand and let the rest of her fall. She hangs in the empty space. The sky opens up beneath her, in a rolling field of fog and cloud. Again, she screams.

“DON’T!” is her plea.

“Why not?” your voice is as cold as the clouds which have left you dusted in frost from passing through them “You have done enough to merit this end.”

“My name is Jade!”

“What does that have to do with anything!”

“My name is Jade!” she repeats with a forceful certainty, trying to make you understand what this means to her “I had no pack, but I had a grandpa. And then I was taken away from him by the organisation, but they had to let me go. The men- they put fire under my skin and stuck me with metal stingers and never let me take two legs down! They tormented me!”

“They tormented me too. You don’t see me taking it out on people who have done nothing wrong to me.”

Her eyes are a violent mixture of mortal fear and anger “I didn’t touch you!”

“Dave is an extension of me. Like your family was to you, I imagine.”

Her eyes have teared up, though whether it is from the fierce winds or the closeness to death, you do not know “I wanted to help him! You really think he’s safe in your world? The world where they took us away and tore us apart? They did it to him once already. Making him live with you- it isn’t natural. It isn’t what’s good for him. It’s made him crazy. There shouldn’t be two- the Basilisk and the boy, only one, together, one together!”

You sigh. While you are well aware of Dave’s psychological problems resulting from his traumatic childhood, you are not about to allow this murderous Lycan to use it as an excuse for what she did to
him while his blood still stains her.
“And I can make him that way,” she continues, unaware that she has already lost her battle or unwilling to believe it “You have to let me help him.”
“I think you’ve done more than enough to help him.”
She feels the fire enter her skin a split second after the first ember jumps from your bloodstream to hers. From there, Jade the Lycan has around four seconds of consciousness left, which she spends hanging from your hand and screaming inhumanly as her veins explode. Black blood blossoms under her skin, like oil swirling on the surface of the water. Her eyes pop from her head and slide down her cheeks in a goo that reminds you of raw egg yolk. Her hair is all gone up in a single spark, and by the time her skin begins to peel away, she is already dead.
For fear of leaving evidence, you hold onto the blackening corpse until there is nothing left to hold onto. The wind batters against her and carries the scraps of Jade away, to be pushed and funnelled into snow clouds and dusted on some little town, far away. You can only hope that no one catches a piece of her on their tongue.
“This is going to be a mess.” you say, then you begin to descend to the earth.
Well, I've just about finished writing the rest of the chapters. After this one, there shouldn't be many more than 6 or 7 left. Kinda sad, now that I think about it.

Your name is Jaime Egbert, and it would probably make this situation a whole lot less awkward and confusing if you were out of the house at the time that your son and his friends rushed in, blue-lipped from the cold and bloody from some unfortunate that hopefully had it coming, and stretch out a groaning and bleeding Dave on the kitchen island.

In the movies, parents are always conveniently absent. That way the kids can conduct their youthful business without the obnoxious interference (or, you know, mature and helpful experience) of their elders. Equius is among them. The one carrying Dave, actually, but he is admitted into the category of youth because, being a djinn, he is eternally young and beautiful. His ass is certainly that of a man who could comfortably coexist among a pack of teenagers.

“David!” you screech.

It is not your most collected nor graceful moment as you dart forward and practically fling Vriska backwards over the couch in your effort to get to your son and the other one. At the sound of your frantic bark, Dave tries to sit up on the island.

“No, no,” you press him back down by the shoulders “Don’t try to move, sweetheart, just stay down. Stay there, I’m going to call your doctors and get them out here as fast as I can.”

“No,” rasps Dave “No more fucking hospital.”

“Oh, Jesus, gods, what happened to your face?”

Halving his face is a long slash of blood that has made something of a bloody beard on his chin and something like tear-tracks underneath his eyes.

At this, you nearly become hysterical. In your best moments, you are a man of reason and rationality, and most of all, of sound mind. But this is the second time in the short space of one and a half months that Dave has been carried home from death’s threshold and you just can’t take it anymore. Equius has to get Tavros to take over mopping the blood from Dave’s face to tackle you down in the garden. In your hands is the first, weapon-like instrument you could find.

“Jamie!” he shouts “What are you planning to do with that cheese grater, huh? This is ridiculous!”

For a man of your size compared to a man-boy of his, you put up a good fight and actually succeed in kicking him off of you. Djinns bounce like basketballs if you hit the right spots.

“Get off me! This has gone too far! This is the last fucking time I let that boy get beaten to shreds!”

And you turn back to the woods, well aware of what a lunatic you are being, and that the kids crowded around the kitchen island are all watching you. Dave’s pale, slashed face hovers in the corner of your eye. If anything, it only makes you angrier.

Equius is willing to try reason before he tackles the cheese-grater wielding maniac again “Jaime, you’re not dressed for this weather! You’re in jeans and a tank-top!”

“So are you!”

“Yes, but I am literally on fire underneath my skin!”

He takes a step closer, but you whip the grater through the air.

“No closer.” You growl.

Equius’s shoulders slump “This is, if you will pardon the profanity, a fucking joke, Jamie. Just get back in the house and be there for Dave.”

“Oh, I was there for Dave! I was there the whole month he spent trying not to die in that fucking
closet we have to put him in at the hospital and what happened? He got almost-killed, again!
AGAIN! This pattern is a really dangerous pattern, Eq! I need to put an end to this maniac who’s-
“I burnt her to death!” he snaps.
You falter “You fucking what?”
He points at the iron-coloured clouds overhead “I said I burnt her to death. In the clouds. She wanted
to take Dave away."
The knot of anger in your belly only tightens, if anything, at the knowledge that she is now out of
your reach. And you were going to get so creative with this cheese grater.
“Tell me that it’s over, Equius, and then I’ll put down the grater.”
He frowns “I can’t answer that question honestly. Not yet. I just don’t know. Just, please, collect
yourself.” he nods to the window “For the kids.”
Vriska pushes the kitchen window open and shouts “Fight! Fight! Fight!”

Jamie Egbert: be your son ===========>
John Egbert: recover ===========>

Your name is John Egbert and things are finally alright.
For the moment, anyway. You suspect that it’s only a matter of time until the light of the smoker’s
cigarettes are underneath the window again. It has never even crossed your mind that the perpetrator
of your stalking might have died already. Whether it was in the bunker at Vriska’s hands, during the
fight that Karkat and the others just barely escaped from, or as far back as the encounter in the park
where boobs were officially taken off the menu for you, you’ve never once thought that it might
really be over for you.
Whatever is happening to you and Dave has only just begun.
“So, how does my scar look?”
You turn your head to the side to look at Dave grinning on the other end of the pillow “It looks like a
big strip of bandage.”
“Is it making my face all weird and red and puckered?”
“No. You look-
Gorgeous. Beautiful. Like everything you could ever want out of life.
“Fine.” You settle for the most bro-like, underwhelming adjective your tongue will allow “You look
fine, Dave.”
He does look alright.
In the end, they did not call the doctors. Dave’s injuries turned out to be superficial, when he could
be persuaded to stop squirming and groaning long enough to examine him. Equius declared him free
of internal injuries and assured your slightly manic father (still holding the cheese grater he was
apparently going to use to exact his vengeance on Dave’s aggressors) that the only reason Dave was
carrying on was because he was tired and was trying to tell people to fuck the fuck off so he could
sleep. That was the general gist you got too.
Most of the blood was the wolf’s. After Equius got you out of the tree (and got punched in the face
for his trouble, although it hurt your hand more than his rock-hard face), you ran to what was left of
the bunker where Karkat and the others nearly died.
It was absolutely drenched in flowers. The flowers had grown up from the wolf’s blood, according
to Gamzee. To you, it looked more like a god had lain down and slept, than that a wolf had bled
everywhere as it attempted to maim and cripple Dave. The scene of incongruous beauty, of flowers
among the stark snow and evergreen landscape was somehow divine, rather than sinister.
As it turns out, you’ve got a lot to thank Gamzee for. While it was Equius who snatched the wolf off
of Dave at the end of it, Gamzee was the one who tackled her again and again and did his best and
better to keep Dave from being broken again.
And it worked.
Dave is only as bruised as he might be from falling off his bike. Granted, falling ten feet from a bike
and rolling down a concrete embankment and cutting his face on razor-wire on the way down, but
still, it does not even approach being as bad as it was the last time.
He wanted you to lie next to him and you did not hesitate to climb into the nest beside him.
Downstairs, your father, Roxy, Nepeta, Equius and Terezi are discussing adult things like yours and
Dave’s fate and who else might have to die to prevent Dave from coming to anymore harm. Godcat
is no doubt overjoyed by all the laps to shed on and is alternating among them. All of your friends
have gone home to hug their families and weep themselves silently to sleep. A little earlier, you and
Dave were on his laptop, instant-messaging in a group chat where you and your friends were
predicting the nightmares that would result from this experience. They were all asking Dave if he
was ok. Gamzee if he was too, to a lesser extent. You ached to ask Gamzee a little bit about himself,
but to do so over a popular chat website would have been one of the dumbest things you have done
to date.
Vriska wasn’t online.
After it was established that Dave was just a big whiner and wasn’t going to die on the kitchen
island, you pulled Vriska aside.
The exchange went something like this.
“You killed those men.” you said.
“Yep.” said Vriska without a hint of guilt “I did.”
“I can see you’re not sorry about it.”
“And I can see you don’t get why I had to do it.”
You realised that you couldn’t have explained to her the way you wanted to leave the monsters to do
it- the scenario you conjured up in the tube. In her mind, no alternative existed. In her mind, the only
choice was to kill.
“I don’t think we should see each other anymore.”
Her only response was a dry smile “Gee, you think?”
And now, here you are, freshly single and in bed with a person whom you now recognise as a long-
time crush.
Life is really weirdly convenient sometimes.
“Hey, John?” Dave’s voice is more subdued now “Do you think it’s over?”
Your eyes are fixed on a discoloured patch on the ceiling. Dave used to have a veritable Milky-way
of glow in the dark stars on his ceiling and you still aren’t sure why he took them down. The
discolouration is roughly in the shape of Saturn.
“I don’t know.” you say, truthfully.
“I hope it’s over.” he say “I don’t know how much more of this I can survive. You think this is
gonna scar?” he gestures to the cut.
You nod “Yeah, but it’s gonna look badass.”
He grimaces “Man. Shit. My face is, like, marked forever by this shit. Isn’t that weird?”
“I guess so, yeah. It is weird.”
“But you know what’s weirder?”
You shake your head to indicate that you do not.
Dave is delighted to tell you “You freaks. You guys are the weird thing. You guys just came right in
after me. How weird is that?”
“It’s not weird,” you protest “It’s a little thing called friendship!”
“It’s not such a little thing, if you guys will chase green wolf monsters down with me!”
“Excuse me, but they were obviously worried about me. That’s why they came to the woods,
because it was me in trouble.” you take a moment to find a patch on his shoulder that is not bruise-
stained, and punch him fondly in the shoulder “If it were you? They woulda been like ‘eh, it’s just
Dave’, but me? Fuck nope! John’s important. John’s the….the…”
“The friend-leader?” suggests Dave “The funny one?”
“Hey, I resent that stereotype. Have you ever noticed in movies how the lone brown character is the
comic relief? You do know that’s just so they don’t have to give them a proper character and
After that, Dave goes quiet. You decide to follow his example. Dave is a dangerous person when
you don’t know what is on his mind. He turns on his side after a while of silence and looks at you in a way that makes you very uncomfortable. You couldn’t say why, really, but it’s one of those looks that you get before he does something exceedingly strange and poorly conceived.

“You know what you said?”
Oh shit.
You knew that was going to come back to haunt you. A quick glance at the bedroom door shows you that it is locked, so the chance of outside interference is minimal. As is your chance for a smooth escape. In your panic to remove yourself from the situation before you confess undying love, you might shoulder-charge the door and break it from its hinges entirely. Well, that’s a risk you should have considered before you let Dave lock you and him in a room, where you’re sharing a bed.

“Yeah.”
You hope to God and the gods that he is not referring to what you think he is.

“That you love me?”
Shit.
Shit. SHIT.
WHY DID YOU HAVE TO SAY THAT? BECAUSE YOU thoughT you WEREN’T GOING TO SURVIVE? YOU COULD HAVE JUST WRITTEN HIM A DAINTY LITTLE LOVE LETTER FOR HIM TO DISCOVER AFTER YOU DIE, BUT NOOOOOOOO, YOU JUST HAD TO GET CARRIED AWAY BY THE MOMENT- and he’s staring you really need to say something.

“Yeah.”
He stares at you, his red eyes wide “Well, what does that mean?”

“What do you think it means?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about it hard and I still don’t know what you meant. I mean, what kind of…you know?”

He wants you to choose between brotherly and that happily-ever-after Disney stuff that allegedly lasts forever.

Which one does he even want to hear? You know what you’ve got for him, but he doesn’t. Here is the potential to either make the relationship super awkward and ruined forever, or to change it in a way that you cannot yet understand.

You make your choice.

“I think it’s the…the fairy-tale kind.”
Dave’s only reaction to cock an eyebrow “How long have you felt like that?”

“Dunno. Long time, probably.”

“Well, what are you gonna do about it?”

“What?” your heart misses a beat, then another, and another, and appears to stop beating entirely as Dave’s lips curve into a smile.

Definitely not the sneer of disgust that you were expecting.

In fact, his smile is just down right..sly.

Like this is what he wanted to- nope, not even gonna go there, no, no, there’s no way that he might return even the barest affection for you that you have for him. Not happening.

“What do you mean what am I going to do about it?”

“I want to know what your plans were. Were you just gonna languish and suffer and pine, or, like, make a move on me or something?”

Your face is red-hot and you are blushing. One of your favourite things about having dark skin is that people generally cannot tell when you’re embarrassed or blushing. But right now? You’re sure your face is just about as red as Dave’s eyes, and possibly as luminous too.

“I honestly don’t know what I was going to do.”

“Huh.”

Dave turns onto his stomach, still facing you. His wings creep out of the slits in the back of his shirt and unfurl, stretching, flexing, and then folding neatly against his shoulders again. You watch them,
mesmerised, as always, by the rippling movements. Like the surface of an orange star.

“I don’t mind.”

He reaches for your hand, and you do not have the good sense to execute that shoulder-charge you planned earlier. Instead, you let his hand close over yours and shiver involuntarily at the sensation of his cool, bruised flesh.

“Uh…” is your incredibly eloquent reply.

He smiles, but it is a bittersweet gesture “I don’t mind if you like me. Love me. Whichever one it is. I really don’t mind.”

“What- what do you want me to do about, about the way I am…towards you?”

“I don’t know.” he says simply “I don’t know if we should try to think about that until everything is a little calmer.”

“Ok.”

He notes the disappointment that you could not disguise.

What did you want him to do, fall into your arms?

Yes. Kinda. But that’s not what is going to happen, because this isn’t a Disney movie and Dave’s scared right now. He doesn’t need a lover to comfort him, but a familiar friend, in his familiar role, to make sure that he feels safe. Whatever Dave needs right now, it’s your responsibility, as the one completely infatuated with him, to supply it without a question. Later on, when his life is well out of danger, you will worry about your own needs.

But for now? What Dave wants, Dave gets.

“Having said that.”

You perk up “Huh?”

Now it is Dave’s turn to look embarrassed, although he somehow manages not to blush “Having just given you the brush off, can …uh…can I just kinda hang onto you tonight?”

“Hang onto you?”

“Spoon.”

“Oh my gods,” you squeak, before you can stop yourself, then croak “Sure.”

Glad of the excuse not to have to look at him, you flip over on your side, with your back to Dave. The few seconds it takes Dave to gather the courage to bring his body closer to yours, to gather you up to him and fit the curves of his body to yours, are the longest of your life. He threads an arm around your waist. You can feel his breath on the back of your neck and in your hair. Your pillow dips as his head joins yours on it. He slips an arm underneath you and cups his palm about your stomach.

Lastly, he laces his hand into one of yours. You hope he doesn’t notice you shaking.

Just when your pulse is beginning to return to normal, Dave unfurls a wing and folds it over the two of you to serve as a blanket.

You can hear your heart beating as loudly as if it were sitting on Dave’s nightstand.

“I thought you were dead.” He mutters “I really thought you were dead.”

You squeeze his hand in yours “I’m not, though. I’m alright. We made it out alright.”

The two of you fall silent after that. Dave doesn’t seem shy about nuzzling right up to you. You, for your part have split your energy between distracting yourself from the boner that is trying its hardest to ruin the moment, and between not crying. You’re not sure if it is from relief from the fact that Dave suddenly seems to be open to the possibility of loving you back. Or if it is from the relief of being alive and breathing, despite all you have been through.

If there’s one thing that a teen learns about himself when trapped under a wolf’s haunches in sub-zero weather, it’s that he has to be grateful for what he’s got.

And right now, you’ve got a Basilisk cuddling up to you. That’s something pretty good, right there.

John Egbert: be your dad =========>

Jamie Egbert: where did you put that cheese grater? =====>
“I said Boxcars and the other two are dead. How many more times do you want to hear it?”
Roxy’s head drops to her arms “Until I believe it!” she moans “Oh my God, how did this happen?”
Nepeta made the discovery.
She was summoned to the office of Boxcars by an anonymous call. The voice on the other end of the
line said only ‘you’re wanted’, and Nepeta figured that since she had been called to such a busy
place, she would be fine.
What she found in the room was a neatly arranged slaughter.
Hieronymus Boxcars had been given a Colombian necktie. Chris Deuce and David Diamond (the
big Dave) were each arranged in the chairs in front of him, their expressions a prefect, hideous
mockery of professional interest. Chris Deuce had his organs piled in his lap, carefully unwound so
as not to pierce the intestines and soak the room in the smell of the waste contained in them. David
Diamon was missing all of his fingers at the knuckles, and had had each one painstakingly stuffed
into his mouth.
It is this detail that Nepeta for some reason feels compelled to return to “So whoever killed them took
their time.”
You cannot believe what you’re being told.
“I cannot believe what I am being told.” you say “Are you telling me that three of the hospital’s staff
were literally murdered in an office on a busy hallway and no one noticed it?”
She nods, her face grim “The shutter was drawn.”
“And…and that masks the sound of a brutal slaughter, how?”
“It doesn’t, so their killer must have either killed them elsewhere or found some way to mask the
sound of the murder within the office.” Nepeta jabs the table absently with her forefinger, as if
illustrating some point you cannot yet comprehend “There are still search parties combing over the
hospital, trying to find a sign that they were murdered somewhere else.”
“Does that mean they’ve opened up Dave’s room?”
She shakes her head “No, Jamie. I went in there and searched it myself. Not so much as a scalpel out
of place.”
“Jesus.” groans Roxy “Are they really dead?” Like, really, really?
“Yes, Roxy.”
“Did you check for pulses and everything?”
Nepeta gives Roxy a strange look “Honey, the bodies were proof enough. You don’t…survive that
kind of stuff. They’re dead.”
“What do we do now?” you ask.
Equius finally speaks up. Whatever he did to finish off John’s kidnapper and Dave’s tormentor left
him sapped of energy almost completely.
“I don’t think there is much to do but to leave.”
“Leave?” you repeat “What do you mean, leave?”
“I mean gather up John and Dave and leave the mountain.”
You shake your head “No. That’s beyond foolhardy. I’m not going to leave this mountain as long as
there are two djinns here who offer their protection. Do you really think I’ll ever find a better set-up
for the boys in the rest of the world?”
But Nepeta seems to like the idea “The organisation never had any contacts outside of the US.
Maybe if we got them to Britain or something, then they would be safe.”
There are a thousand reasons for which you do not want to move, but the most glaring and obvious
is the one you chose to voice “I’m not running away from this. Equius, you have already proved that
you’re able to protect the boys. I know it’s a lot to ask-”
He sits up straighter “It’s really not.”
You smile at him “Alright. I just know that they’re far safer here than they would ever be anywhere
else in the world. And I know that wherever we go, this will chase us. At least while we’re here we
kind of know what we’re dealing with. You send us abroad and that could all change, and not for the
better.”
“So what? So you guys stay here and dig yourselves a nice little hole until the trouble passes?”
“Yes, Roxy,” you say coolly “Unless you have a better idea that doesn’t entail running away only to be found again later on.”

She chews on her lip, but she does not respond.

Nepeta shrugs “I guess we just have to hope that nothing else bad will happen.”

Equius gives her a sceptical look “I am concerned for the others. Anyone who knows that those three were the doctors ensuring that Dave did not die probably knows about the rest of them.”

She waves a hand dismissively “The doctors were killed because they helped Dave heal. I’m sure anyone who’s strong and smart enough to commit a murder secretly in an unlocked office on a busy hallway doesn’t have the time to bother with children.”

“Except for sport,” mutters Equius.

This catches her off-guard. Nepeta scratches the back of her head “Um, maybe we should arrange something with Rus so he can watch out for the kids?”

“I’ll to him,” you offer “We seem to have an understanding ever since I sold my soul to him.”

An uncomfortable laugh goes around the dining table.

Jamie Egbert: be that scary woman smoking outside =========>
Scary woman smoking outside: introduce yourself =========>

With pleasure.

Your name is Hine Snow. You are John’s stalker, the doctors’ murderer and what many would consider the boss of the labs that have just begun to fall into ruin under the djinn’s mountain.

And this has just gotten fun.
A word on Hine Snow.

If you, dear audience, will pardon the disruption in the style of this fic. Yes, I know it’s a bit alarming. What, we’re not going to do one of those second-person perspectives, to emulate the way in which the hallowed comic itself is told? Well, to do requires us to step into the mind of the character. Hine Snow is a character who, yes, whose head we have already peeked into, and I assure you, readership, that to look any further would be a terrible decision for anybody.

She’s not quite right, this woman.

She’s not really even a woman, or a human, but not in the super-human sense that Gamzee, Dave, Terezi and dear Equius defy the label.

How shall we describe a person like Hine Snow? In many ways, she defies description. Hers is a special kind of lunacy and madness that, while being completely lucid and aware of itself and its improbability, exists in a kind of paradox where it also couldn’t give a shit if it’s an illogical state of mental affairs. Re-telling her back story would be time consuming and largely irrelevant, so we’re only going to take a snippet.

Suffice to say, however, that she is not a Maori as her name suggests. She merely took the name when it became apparent that she was going to have to duck off the radar of the world for a little while. Because, honestly, how many people in the world have a name as improbable as Hine Snow?

Come on, people, use your heads.

Hine Snow was in her second year of university and on her tenth psychiatrist when she was approached by those who ran the programme. The year was distant from the one that would see Dave’s capture - distant, even, from the time that a certain young djinn would be brought in in chains and strapped to a table to see what made him tick. She has a youthful appearance when you take her true age into account, which is either down to good genetics or some kind of witch-craft.

The programme informed her that it was aware that she had a serious kind of disorder that prevented her from feeling an empathy at all and, rather than seeking help for it, she chose to use the long string of psychiatrists that she was referred to by the last as a sort of practice, although she would not have known it at the time.

Practice for what, you ask?

Practice for her illustrious career as a head of the branch of the labs, and for torturing captors of a system until their minds broke and their backs followed the suit. Not that she ever physically harmed one of her captors, but she might have well have been reaching into their bodies and extracting internal organs to satisfy a persona curiosity.

She was recruited long before she graduated from university and did not start from the bottom by any means. The programme made it its business to be informed on the people it brought over the threshold of its illustrious programme, and it was decided amongst the higher ups that Hine Snow’s unique brand of evil-genius had to be put to use before she could wreak havoc on their system as she had on the mental-health community.

They put her in charge of one of their least valuable test subjects; a species of elf that the woods of South Carolina were lousy with, and of which they could always capture another if Hine Snow did indeed damage this one beyond all repair.

Which she did, of course.

By the end of the second day with her, the elf was finally released from the room where the two of them had been designated to work. They had not given Hine Snow any specific instructions, except to ‘experiment’.

The elf went in rebellious, relatively sound of mind and as physically healthy as a malnourished prisoner is going to be.

When they were released, they came out with a rib cage that had been caved in onto an empty insides, clutching their face, which bled profusely from the crater where there had once been an eye.
They made it about fifteen feet before muttering to a stunned assembly of guards and one prisoner: “She’s insane.”
Then they collapsed. The popular version of the legend of Hine Snow’s origins story say that the elf was dead when it hit the floor. In reality, the poor thing languished without a digestive track of any kind for two days, in a state between consciousness and death, before it was finally euthanized by a lab technician who was concerned about expending the resources on something that was plainly far beyond their help, and, more importantly, their use.
It was quickly established that Hine Snow was both a prodigy and a fucking mad-woman. After that, she rose quickly to become the chief of her sector. When she clashed with another chief and in a nearby sector and that woman ended up literally losing her head, Hine Snow was moved to a more remote outpost, but one with a secret mission, as it were. This was a series of labs with some extraordinarily rare creatures: a djinn, a dragon and two Basilisks, to name the most prized specimens.

There, she once again established herself as a contender. She was a fierce, but fair leader and gathered herself something of a cult following. For some mysterious reason, most of the technicians she now led were men. The kind of manly men that challenge each other to bar fights and have to use straight razors, because their beards are just too manly to be tended by anything else.
These, she quickly subjugated to her rule, and for the most part, they did not mind. To say that she was their Queen would be a sexist comment and largely irrelevant to what she actually did around the place.
She was their General, and they admired her as any troop admires and fears a competent General. So, when word got out that the programme was being shut down, Hine Snow was not happy. This had become her life’s work. This was where the only group of people she might call friends in this life all came together to work, to talk, to enjoy each other’s company. Alright, so rather than talking around a water cooler like an ordinary office, she talked over the opened rib cage of a skin-walker, but it still meant a good deal to her.
So what does a General do when their army is threatened? They gather the army up and close ranks.
And what does a General do when their army is wiped out? Well, then they are out of the job. But of course, this is not any ordinary General- or, for that matter, a General at all. This is Hine Snow, whose diagnosis is that of a psychopath, and whose creed is that of a murderer, and she is not yet ready to give up her kingdom. She accepts that she has lost all that was once good and kind to her; that which gave her purpose and meaning and joy.
But she does not accept that there should be survivors of her kingdom. After all, it is the mark of a successful General when not one of the enemy army has survived to challenge them again.

Dave Strider: wake up =========>

Your name is Dave Strider, and John’s probably the warmest, most cuddly thing you have ever been cuddled up to. God, but he’s a comfortable body pillow. Maybe it’s not actually true. Maybe, in reality, he’s bony and poking you in every soft spot and he’s actually feverishly hot and making a sauna of the space under your wing.
You wouldn’t know. You’re not in reality at the moment. You’re in one of those pockets of time where utter contentment descends and it is impossible to feel anything but validated as a person and good and at peace.
John’s in love with you.
Fuck yeah.
John is in love with you. And you saw that- he thinks you didn’t, but you saw him and Vriska split, and now he’s in your bed, under your wing, sleeping next to you. And he’s in love with you. It’s no wonder you can’t sleep, even though this is probably the most tired you have ever been.
You beat up a giant green wolf today, to save your (what even is John?) friend’s life. You did it with the help of some other friends, whom you owe your life. Not because they helped you save John’s. Because they saw you as you really are and they didn’t flinch away. Because Karkat let Basilisk pick him up and fly him around to scout for John, and all he did was scream about heights and speeds. Because Tavros wasn’t afraid to risk himself for you and John, even though he had just gotten back on his feet and his life was suddenly a gallery of possibilities, he was willing to do as you asked of him. Because Kanaya was a badass and because Rose was a voice of reason. Because Sol managed to forget that he was a coward for you, and Eridan managed to forget that he doesn’t really care about you. Because Gamzee wrenched his own disguise off and leapt to your defence.

And Equius? Well you think he burned the wolf to death, but you’re not going to think about that. And Vriska shot a few men to death.

You’re not even going to pretend she did that for you, but you understand that she doesn’t want you to die. In some small way, Vriska has to love you. She’s your friend at the end of it all, no matter what she is in between that; a rival for John’s attention; a mastermind manipulator; the one who crippled Tavros and the one that sometimes makes you reluctant to go to school, from just the thought of seeing you.

She went in there. Not graciously, but she did it.

Your friends did a lot for you today, and how are you repaying them for it? Cuddling up to John? Nope. Not good enough.

Trying your hardest not to bump John, you replace your wing with a warm blanket and, after a brief and brutal internal debate, give him the softest kiss on the cheek that you can manage. For some reason, you can’t help but think back to that little-boy romance you had with Tavros. This kiss, for John, is much more mature and meaningful, but it feels as innocent as the kisses you used to give him.

You really shouldn’t be thinking about your ex right now.

Creeping over to your dresser, you put on something warm, but light-weight, and sneak downstairs. Whatever the adults are talking about, they discuss it under their breath. If their topics are really so secret and scary that they have to whisper even while you and John sleep, you really should pause to listen.

But you don’t. You doubt you would understand what they are even saying in the first place.

With practiced stealth and ease, you sneak out of the front door. The wind gives a shriek as you sneak around the door, but you can hear no lull or disruption in the conversation in the kitchen that suggests they heard you.

Once in the snow, you glance around to make sure that the street is empty. The street is always empty. Still, never can be too careful.

When you have confirmed you are alone, you unfurl your wings and zip up your coat, and take off. The wind would feel like razors on your skin if your body temperature weren’t keeping you safe from the effects of the cold. It is times like these that you wish that you still had a blood relative knocking around to explain to you why you work the way you work. Why you can stand the cold with ease, even when it whips past you in razor sharp winds laden with frost. Why you can take a hit like a punching bag and keep coming back with a vengeance. Why you are sometimes stricken by the urge to eat something small and rodent-ey even when you’re in your human form.

You had a brother, once. You’re going to need to talk to Equius a little more about that brother, when you get the chance.

Haven’t had that much time to think about him, with all that’s been going on.

Gamzee is, of course, asleep when you reach his house. He is not too excited to find you balanced precariously on his windowsill with a shit-eating grin that he just knows is going to get him into trouble, but stumbles out of bed (wearing pyjamas- on the way over you entertained a vivid fear that he sleeps in the buff when in his own home) and opens the window. In you tumble, along with a gust of snow and cold wind.

The thud is loud and noticeable, and you cringe at the thought of summoning Mr Makara to
investigate.
Gamzee picks you up and allays those fears “My old man went huntin’ ‘bout half a week ago.”
You’re surprised at the thought that some people will just leave their kids to their own devices. It’s
not neglectful, you guess, just weird to think about because Jamie would never do that to you and
John. He’s a hover-parent. He’s concerned that you and his son will burn the house to the ground the
moment he leaves it in your hands, and you’re inclined to defer to his judgement on that one.
“What’re y’all doin’ over here?” Gamzee rubs his eyes “Did John get his ass napped again?”
“What? No. No, I just need some back up.”
You get a suspicious glare through Gamzee’s fingers “We ain’t killin’ nothin’, are we?”
You shrug “Occupational hazard of being a monster, Gamz. Whenever we go monster, something
goes ape-shit on us.”
“That ain’t me. I’m too scary for that shit.”
“I want to go back to the labs and see if I can remember something.”
Thankfully, he doesn’t argue.

The labs are covered in flowers. Like, drenched in flowers. It looks like a fairy queen sneezed all
over everything or something.
And what’s weird is that there are flowers that would never really grow together. Sunflowers and
orchids sticking out of cracked beakers. Bowing stalks of morning glory and flowering ivy hanging
from the few prongs of the rafters that remain, jutting from the sides of the crater. Daisies underneath
pansies beside chrysanthemums next to geraniums and crocuses and lilies and irises and one big heap
of petals that look like that pink stuff that’s always blowing around in the air in anime. How did
sakura petals even get here without a tree?
This is just too weird.
Gamzee, hunched over and black as the bottom of the ocean again, rasps “Wolf’s blood makes
flowers grow. We bled her pretty good, brother.”
You shudder at the memory of that second, desperate scramble with the Lycan.
With Gamzee on your side, it was a whole lot easier and you have managed to walk away with little
more than a few superficial scrapes. Still, she was fucking determined to cripple you and make a toy
of you.
You’re still not sure what she thought she was going to do with you. Somehow, she thought it was
totally kosher to attack, maim and cripple a potential ally, and when that didn’t work, drag
their…let’s go with dear, dear friend for now…into the woods kicking and screaming, and then she
has the FUCKING GALL to expect you to roll over and play dead so she can take you away?
You’re not sure how Equius killed her, but however he did it, it probably wasn’t nearly painful
enough.
“So y’all really don’t remember a thing?”
“No.”
Basilisk keeps his answers short.
This is about the closest that you have ever felt to Basilisk. Usually, if you want to see him, you have
to squint into the darkness of your mind and hope to see a smudge of bright, violent colours standing
out next to your phobias and obscure memories. Right now, you only have to turn to see him
standing at your side. In your side, sometimes. In you entirely so that there is no distinction. But not
often.
The smell of blood- you blame its smell and taste and the wicked satisfaction that came with spilling
the blood of those who had wronged you.
“What you think that is?”
You shrug- or Basilisk does. Even though these are now your human shoulders again, you don’t
know if it’s you piloting the meat-sack, or Basilisk, or both.
“I guess I hit my head.”
He snorts, which looks really strange through the nose of a creature like a Wendigo “I reckon it was
a mighty smack, then, brother.”
Before you can begin the tricky climb into the crater, he wraps one long, bony hand around your waist and jumps to the bottom, landing with a light crash on top of a table full of chlorophyll and blood stained lab equipment.

You try not to scream, but the tiniest little squeak of alarm squeaks up. Gamzee acts like you just let loose a little girl-screams and laughs this weird laugh that reminds you of the dying shriek tree trunks make as they’re just about to fall to an axe.

“See anythin’ y’all know?”

You shrug “This is just a lot of flowers. How am I supposed to find my traumatic past buried under a bunch of flowers.”

Gamzee turns around and points to a part of the lab that you had not previously noticed properly, in the chaos of the fight and Equius’s surprise rescue. It looks like the throat of a series of deep, winding passages that must reach- well, God only knows so far. Something is in there, you think.

You are not certain.

Basilisk, on the other hand, is absolutely certain that he wants to go down there. This is unusual for him, being that he’s all about the instinct to fly and wheel about the sky and spread your big wings as far as they will stretch.

Why, you ask him, why do you want to go down there?

You gotta, he says simply.

You try to retort, but why-

You gotta, he repeats, you gotta do it, get in there, go do it.

Why does he sound like your own train of thought these days? You miss the stiff strain of merciless ponderings and musings that used to play like a song that got stuck in your head all day.

Gamzee turns back to you “I reckon we should- what are y’all doin.”

He has found you down on one knee, offering up a lily framed in sprigs of holly and lilacs “Marry me, dude. Let’s consummate our bro-love.”

He rolls his eyes, which looks like a maggot doing an elaborate break-dance in his Wendigo-face “Get up, ya dumb goose.”

Still, he lets you pop one of the lilacs behind the spikey juts on either side of his head that you assume serve as ears.

And then you go to investigate, and hope that if you stumble over anything frightening in there, it’s going to be a long-buried memory.
Your name is Nepeta Leijon, and you wish you could drive safely and sleep at the same time. Not possible.
You know. You’re tried it a couple times- not on purpose, but it’s just one of those things that happened. Like, you had had a really long day of busting up a drug ring and Equius was nodding off as well and you just closed your eyes for a second, and the next second Equius was screaming for you to open your eyes and there was a tree in the middle of the highway- because you weren’t driving on the highway anymore, you were driving on the shoulder.
So, yeah, no, it didn’t work and Roxy has strict orders to keep you awake by babbling anything she can think into your ear until the drive is in sight and the house is close enough for her to carry your unconscious corpse up the front steps.
For once, Roxy actually has a topic to talk about. Normally, conversation flows from her like water from a broken fire hydrant, and pity on the poor, brave bastard that comes over with their wrench and tries to fix the thing.
But tonight? No, she’s got something grave and sad to discuss.
“Dave saw me crying over the pictures. Remember the ones I showed you, of those dead men?”
She nods “The technicians from the programme.”
“Equius identified two of the bodies for me. He said they were part of the team that worked him and Dirk and Terezi over. The rest of them- I mean, you’re totally not going to believe this, but the good old sultan of the mountain himself appeared in our very kitchen to let me know that the rest of those dead men were technicians just like we thought.”
Roxy frowns “Is that why our rice pot is broken?”
You smile, ashamed “Uh, yeah. I kinda freaked out when he, you know, fucking teleported in a gust of brimstone fire into my kitchen and threw the first thing I had on hand to defend myself.”
“Why didn’t you throw the egg pan? That thing’s a piece of shit, but no, you have to go throw my nice rice pot. So, back to the important shit…what the fuck are we worried about if only one of them is left alive?”
You shudder involuntarily at the thought of the woman that Roxy refers to, and wish there were some way to make her understand “She was the worst out of them all. Their ring leader.”
“Ring leader. Fucking circus.” She starts to hum circus music under her breath, and to sway back and forth in her seat as if she is dancing to it.
Roxy has been dry for about ten years, which is longer than you have known her. However, whenever she gets sleep deprived in a big way you image her behaviour draws pretty close to the things she used to do when wrecked on hops and vodka.
“Rox, listen. The woman is big time dangerous. I mean, like, if bombs could be people, then she’d be an A-bomb. She’s going to fuck shit up.”
“God, why are you cussing so much?”
“I’m almost twenty seven years old I will cuss as much as I want to.”
“Yeah, well I think you only do it because you can’t think of anything clever to say-” the rest of Roxy’s retort is drowned out by the sound of glass shattering and her own scream of agony.
Now, the glass of a windshield is thick and sturdy as hell. As a kitsune, in your younger years you loved nothing better than testing their strength by springing out in the middle of the road and rolling up on the windshields of the cars speeding by, to see if you could get your claws through. Never once have you managed to make anything larger than a gigantic scratch down the middle and a noise like nails on a chalkboard. This means that the car has been shot at. If it were your patrol car? Big fucking whoop. So it ain’t bullet-proof, not on your department’s budget, but the glass is made tougher. With this dainty little second-hand Toyota you and Roxy still share, the bullet blows through the windshield like it’s tissue paper, and crinkles what remains in the frame in much the same way. In the half second before you are showered with fragments of glass, you see Roxy’s face frozen in a grin, and you see that grin cave in as the bullet enters her mouth and exits through the back of her head. The taste of blood fills your mouth, leaving no room for a scream. With your last shred of rationality, you slam on the brakes. Too quickly, so the car turns and is soon moving horizontally down the street. Roxy’s side of the car is angled up, and only the wheels of your side of the car are in contact with the ground. The car screeches to a halt with a jarring thud. You stay where you are, your mouth full of Roxy’s blood. Ahead of you, the flickering headlights illuminate a patch of woods. By turning your head slightly, and producing a twinge of pain that is going to become a full-blown case of whiplash later on, you see that your assailant is actually standing in the middle of the road.

Your headlights are not strong. They didn’t reach far enough to reveal the danger before it was too late. Some part of you does not register the fact that you have just been sprayed in a fine mist of Roxy’s skull, vaporised and spattered all over her head-rest.

“Are you ok?” asks that part, spitting her blood down your front. And you’re thinking, Jesus Christ, she is dead, she is gone she is dead that is her brain hanging out of her mouth and half of her skull is gone.

The seatbelt feels like a giant crocodile clip on your heaving chest. Fumbling free from it, you open the door and stumble out into the road. Fragments of glass fall from your lap like crumbs and make a magical kind of sound as they scatter and break again on the tarmac. You wheel around, intending to throw up or to confront your attacker. Where is your gun? Did you leave it in the car? Yes, yeah, you did. You’ve got a problem with wearing a gun while you sit down. The holster pinches your side and boob, especially when you’re driving, so you laid it out in the backseat, well within reach. You need to go back and get it. But the thought of reaching around Roxy?

No. No, you can’t do that. Without a conscious order from you, claws slide from the backs of your knuckles, each one the size of your forearm. The woman is not impressed “Kitsune? I thought you would be something a little less…pedestrian, to be the playmate of a djinn.” She’s going to shoot you, isn’t she?

But no, she flings the gun to the side of the road and pulls a knife from her pocket, allowing it to catch the light with an expression of relish.

“What’s your name again? Officer Leijon?”

“You,” you croak “That woman…you killed him? But it was-”

“No, that was your dragon friend. I just discovered the body. You can imagine how annoyed I was when I did. He was not one of my brightest, but he was still a member of the crew. The family. Oh, you’ve got something right here, on your cheek.”

You can’t help but brush your cheek, the way she instructs. Your hand comes away with a string of grey gristle caught under the nail. Flicking away the twist of Roxy’s brain, you assume a battle-stance. When your kind is ready to destroy, they crouch, they hold their hands up like a boxer does
and growl. The growl pouring out of your throat is the meanest you have ever heard out of yourself. “You fucker.” if only there were stronger words in the English language to communicate how much pain you want to cause this woman “I’m gonna…I’m gonna kill you.” She steps forward, further into the weak bath of light that the headlights cast. The grin on her face is paralysis “Please, try.”

Dirk Strider: how are you doing? =========>

Your name is Dirk Strider, and you’re doing just fine, thanks. Not that good, not that bad. Somewhere in between, straddling the gap that separates a shit day and a good day. Everything exists in extremes in this place. If you’re having a bad day, then you’re having the kind of day that breaks minds and dissolves the will to survive. If you’re having an alright or a good day, you just haven’t been cut open yet.

So, yeah, it’s been a good day so far. It is only twelve in the afternoon, so there’s still plenty of time to get fucked over by one of the technicians.

As you walk down the main passage of the facilities, you try not to look back. Back, behind you, is a pair of heavy double doors with an alarm attached that divides the actual labs with, like, test tubes and scales from the living quarters of the subjects of the trials. You have just come out of what they like to call the recreation room (so called because there’s a table in there, and a piece of furniture is what passes for entertainment around here) in your search for Terezi and Dave.

Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to entrust Terezi with Dave, even though you desperately needed the extra sleep. Not because she’s blind or anything- she’s a fucking lunatic, and some of that might get rubbed off on Dave. Would it have been more sensible to leave him with someone who doesn’t have a sense of fun or crazy, like Equius? Sure, the kid would be bored, but he would also be safe. Besides, he loves Eq. Those two? They’re like a pair of brothers or close cousins or something.

Dave Strider: look around =========>

“What do you think this room was for?” you gesture to a dingy, moss-stained room that contains nothing but a stainless steel table and a few chairs, lying on their sides.

Gamzee has by now changed out of his Wendigo skin. He realised quickly, after shifting the rubble aside so they could explore, that his big ass body wasn’t gonna fit in this little hall, let alone in the rooms. Apparently, the cold doesn’t bother him. You have so far managed to resist the temptation to make a ‘Frozen’ reference. So far.

“If y’all gotta ask, then I’m figurin’ you ain’t havin’ no flashbacks yet.”

You shake your head, trying to conceal your disappointment. You were kind of hoping that a wave of memories was just going to mow you down the moment you had a visual cue, but no.

“Not yet. Let’s stay positive about it, though.”

You pass a row of cells on your way to Terezi’s cell, which is at the far end of the hall, beside the arena where subjects’ strength and abilities are tested.

Through small square windows, designed to let in as little of the halogen light from outside as possible, you see the subjects squared away for solitary confinement. The windows work so that you can look through from the outside, but from the inside, the poor bastard can’t see a thing out. Cells are soundproofed so that the only noises are the sound of the subject’s own heart going nuts with panic.

You earned a two day stint in there one time. It was the lack of noise in the place that kept you up. Sleep was impossible without the reassuring rustle of sheets, without Dave mewling underneath his covers and complaining at his dreams, and the faint screams of your neighbours having their own night terrors.
Most of the people in solitary confinement haven’t done anything wrong. You ended up there because you failed to beat your former times on the track, when they had you doing sprints through the air. Well, of course you didn’t. They didn’t let you fucking sleep for three days before that, so by the end of your confinement you had been awake for five days. The moment you saw your bed, you fell asleep. You didn’t even have the energy to get into it. Equius had to tuck you in.

Terezi’s room is the third to last on the left. You pop your head around the door, even though you already know she isn’t in there. She would be telling Dave a story, if she were, and her crackling voice would carry all over the halls.

They must be in Equius’s room.

To get to his room, you have to take a hall that runs parallel to the training arena. On one side of the hall, the arena runs past, visible through a line of small windows so the subjects can see what they’re in for each time they pass the area. On the other, the cells.

At this time of the day, most of them are open. An open door means whoever owns the room is ready to talk to anyone who wants to walk in and socialise. Too much time is spent behind tightly locked doors in this place, so when people around here get the chance at some freedom, the doors are all thrown wide open.

Sure enough, you can hear Terezi’s voice issuing from behind the open door of Equius’s cell.

“Check this door out, look, look.”

Gamzee ducks inside “When I look through this window,” he waves and you wave back “I can’t see shit, but I can see inside the room alright.”

You bite your bottom lip. Something about the arrangement feels utterly sinister, but not enough that a memory is triggered by it “I bet that’s some kind of punishment room. Don’t get locked in there.”

He scoffs “I’m not stupid, Dave.”

“Your accent says otherwise.”

“Just ‘cos you ain’t never seen a smart Southern brother on the TV, y’all think we all as dumb as shit? Brother, don’t make me pop you in the face.”

Unlike your previous arguments on this exact topic (ie; whether or not Gamzee’s thick Southern twang makes him sound like a dumb-ass), this feels light-hearted, good-natured and just plain friendly.

Maybe it was never Tavros standing (or sitting in his wheelchair, as it were) in the way of the two of you having a good friendship, but Gamzee’s hidden species instead that put you off him for some reason. The territorial instincts of a creature who does not yet know their enemies from their friends.

“Anything yet?” asks Gamzee, as he returns from the room.

“Nope.”

“Well, dontcha go gettin’ all dis-en-couraged by this or that not poppin’ back in yer brain on cue.”

“The word is ‘discouraged’.‘”

“The word is, fuck y’all, I can say it how I want.”

Again, you are forced to smile.

Terezi has claimed Equius’s bunk. Her limbs are flung out at strange angles that would mean every bone in her body was powder, if she were a human. Equius and Dave are on the floor. The older boy is stretched out on his stomach to be on the younger’s level, and they are drawing busily with a piece of charcoal on the floor.

Because Equius is older and a djinn, he is afforded special privileges. There is a general understanding that he might snap at any given moment and explode into a column of angry flame, so to keep him from losing his shit too early in the game, they give him charcoal to do with as he wishes. The walls of his room are covered in drawings. Some of them, abstract. Some of them, schematics for ancient and modern technology you could never hope to decipher, with your
pathetically limited education. Some of them are grinning flowers, which Dave has scrawled right alongside Equius’s stuff.

He likes to come in here and draw. You imagine if he had crayons, then he’d have tagged half of the facility with little-kid doodles by now.

He looks up as you come in, and smiles, and points “I drew you.”

You follow his finger to a large patch on the wall that is surrounded by an older drawing. Yesterday, Equius was trying to show Dave what ivy looked like, so he drew the plant out carefully and even labelled a few things. Dave’s rough approximation of how you look to him is surrounded by these plants. The sharp contrast in quality sort of serves to make you look like even more of a lumpy monster that Dave has drawn you to be.

The lines are wandering, the shading is weird, and your eyes seem to be mounted in your collarbone rather than a face- you don’t really have a face.

“I think it looks exactly like you,” says Equius, with the stiff loyalty that he always affords to Dave “Especially your facial features.”

You would snark the hell out of him if it didn’t mean bashing Dave’s drawing. So the kid is no Monet (who happens to be the only fine artist you know at a glance and can name confidently). Everybody has to start somewhere.

Terezi chimes in “I drew you too.”

Beneath Dave’s attempt is a stick figure mockery of what you look like, with mad, bulging eyes and a mouth full of sharp teeth.

“Well, Dave, I think it’s clear that only two of you guys have talent in this room.”

He falters, glancing between Equius and Terezi, trying to figure out which one of them is the talentless fool. Or, if, God forbid, it’s him?

You scoop him up without warning and blow a giant raspberry on his chubby belly. He shrieks with laughter and folds his little arms around your neck for a handhold.

“It’s Terezi!” you tell him “Terezi is the talentless fool.”

“Because I’m blind?” she challenges.

“No, because you’re stupid and have no talent.”

She sticks a long, forked tongue out at you. By now, Dave has gotten his breath back from the scream of laughter and is squirming to get down. You don’t let him go, for a second, and enjoy the downy softness of his little baby wings pressing into your chest. Then you have to let him go, because he starts kicking and is in danger of driving a tiny heel into your most sensitive man parts.

“Oh, wow. Looks like a lunatic lived in here.”

Gamzee follows you in “What?”

“I mean, it looks like a fucking madman lived in here. Madwoman. Madperson.”

He squints, uncomprehending “What’re y’all seein’ that I ain’t?”

You wonder if Gamzee’s night vision is poor or something- but no, otherwise he wouldn’t be seeing things in front of his nose. The hallways are actually a pitch, inky black, subterranean and lightless as they are. It is only the strength of your night vision and the weak pools of moonlight that chases you and Gamzee down from the now roofless labs that allows you to see an inch of where you are going at all.

You point, and he understands.

“Oh. That looks like a kid’s drawin’ to me.”

The walls are covered in them. In some places, the plaster has bulged and sagged from moisture and made swollen grey stains of the drawings that once covered them. In other places, where the plaster has survived the moisture and the harsh ageing process, there are incredibly detailed, meticulous drawings interspersed with the sprawling doodles of a child and a few manic stick figures you can’t explain. Honestly, the stick figures look like they were drawn by a person who was blind, didn’t care about what they were drawing, or both.
The drawing you pointed out to Gamzee is framed by what seems to be—no, no, what you know is ivy. A diagram of ivy.

“Because I didn’t know what it was…I’d seen some plants outside, but Dirk never told me which one was which, ’cos he just wanted me to know what the sun feels like on your skin. He didn’t care about teaching me the flowers.”

Unconscious of even moving your legs, you have crossed the room to the drawing. You press your palm to the clammy surface of the drawing.

Dirk. His wings look more like shovels with fringed edges. His eyes seem to be on his collar bone, and he has no visible nose. His hair is a scribble, as are the feathers, marked by a furious scribble on the edge of the shovel-wings. But at least he is smiling.

Beneath it, in neat, cramped hand-writing, is a date and two signatures. The date has been destroyed by the plaster cracking over it, but the signatures are still legible. One of them is Dirk, the other, obviously guided by the hand of a more experienced elder who actually knew how to spell your name, is Dave.

Gamzee lays a hand on your shoulder softly.

You’re grateful for his support— the physical as well as the emotional, because without his hand there, you might collapse.

“Equius drew. He doesn’t anymore, but he used to draw. Used to get charcoal from the people here and cover the walls of his room. I think it was because they were scared of him. He’s really good, isn’t he?”

You pass a finger over a tendril of ivy creeping just above your brother’s misshapen head.

“I reckon he shoulda gone to art college, ‘stead ‘a the police.”

“He…you think he joined that to watch out for me? For himself as well?”

“How you figure?”

Your hand passes along the crazy contours of the blind/uncaring person’s drawing, and you realise it has to be Terezi’s “I don’t know. Why else would he still be here?”

“His brother.”

“His brother…on top of the mountain. I don’t remember him at all.”

“Maybe y’all never met him then.”

You shake your head “There…there’s gotta be some way that I know him. I just know there is.”

“Dave.”

“What?”

“Y’all ever think ‘bout how y’all ended up at yours and John’s fort, jus’ when John was goin’ to play there?”

“Are you better, Dirk? Eq told me that you were sick.”

You give him a cool look “Oh he did, did he?”

You’re trying to instil an idea of your immortality into Dave. He needs to think that his brother is invincible and fearless, to give him peace of mind and a sense of security. You’ll teach him what he hasn’t already learned from this place about mortality later, if you ever manage to get him out and to a safer place.

“What did you have that made you all sick?”

Your mind works quickly to invent a lie “Oh, just a little sniffle.” And snuffle in his hair to prove the point, making him scream again “I think I got it from Terezi,” you stage whisper, conspiratorially “You know she’s full of germs.”

“I am not,” she retorts “I am excellent at grooming and general personal hygiene. Don’t listen to him, Dave, your brother’s a nut bag.”

“Nut bag.” echoes Dave happily “Dirk’s a nut bag.”

You would scold him if it weren’t so damned cute when he parroted Terezi’s poisons.

“And Dave’s the little nut bag,” you swing him over to Terezi “Here, Rezi, have an infant. The big man and I need to talk about something.”

“Are you and Eq gonna kiss?”
“Dave, you don’t even know what kissing is.” says Terezi sharply “You know nothing about the world of adolescent affection. Besides, Eq is thousands of years older than Dirk.”

He furrows his little brow, where worry lines have begun to form prematurely “But they look as old as each other. That’s what matters, right?”

“We are not going to kiss,” says Equius, stoic as ever “And I assure you, if your brother makes an attempt on my chastity I will scold him mercilessly.”

You smack him on the arm, which is about the same as slapping a steel wall. Dave has no idea what a chastity is, but giggles anyway, because he knows enough about sass to understand when you’re getting some.

Equius follows you from the room. With no clear destination in mind, you start ambling for the end of the hall. Today, the crowd is thin on the ground. Doors hang open on the rooms where creatures have chosen to group.

Glancing in a few as you pass, you see a kitsune and an elf playing a board game improvised from cardboard and duct tape. There’s a naga telling an animated story to an enraptured group gathered around their bunk, and just as you go by, they have obviously reached a punchline, because the whole group erupts into a cacophony of laughter. In another, a woman who looks entirely human but for a giant set of spider’s pincers hanging from her jaw sits patiently still while a dog-headed child braids her long black hair.

Folks around here do what they can to take care of each other and pass the few free hours they are permitted between tortures.

Honestly if it were not for Equius and Terezi, you would have lost your mind so long ago. You can barely remember what it was like to be outside, let alone, what your own father looked like. That life is gone from your reach completely. No matter what you do, you’ll never be able to return to the wild with peace of mind. Always, you will think about what will happen if you are kidnapped, of how long it will be until the next group like this facility comes along and takes you and Dave away from each other.

If you do escape as you plan, then you’re going to need Terezi and Equius with you to help you out. You need them. And you know very well that they need you.

That’s why you feel secure in asking Equius what you’re about to ask.

“They’re going to kill us all in two months.” you say.

“Now, I ain’t sayin’ he did it. I seen the man ‘fore as well, an’ believe me, he’s a mighty motherfucker. I jus’ reckon he mighta had a hand in it. I mean, y’all live right at the foot ‘a his mountain.”

You don’t respond.

“Dave?”

He catches you just before you fall.

“My head.” you mumble “S’killin’ me.”

“Oh my God, yer bleeding!”

Quickly, Gamzee staunches the flow of blood from your nose with his own sleeve, and sits you on the floor before your legs can try to give out again. He has you tilt your head back and thumps you on the back a couple of times.

“I’m fine,” you mutter uselessly “I’m fine.”

Basilisk wants you to get the fluttering Wendigo ninny off, right now. You tell him to shut up, and, remarkably, he does.

Then he says something very strange.

He says, something is coming undone.

“What? Basilisk?”

Gamzее gives you a quizzical look “Dave? Dave, can you see me?”

I think it’s me coming undone Dave, says Basilisk, I don’t think you need me anymore.
“But you’re me.” you retort “You’re myself. You’re a part of me.”
I’m the better part, agrees Basilisk with his typical haughtiness, and it’s time that that better part of you went back to yourself.

“Why…why are we different things in the first place?”
Because we’re dangerous, says Basilisk dismissively, because you weren’t ready as a child. You didn’t know what you were and it was scary, so you needed your bird-part to be a separate one. And now you don’t.

“Don’t die.” you insist.
Gamzee lowers you into his lap. Clearly, he thinks you’re having some kind of flashback or violent hallucination.

He says nothing, though.
I’m not dying, says Basilisk, I’m being born again, if anything. As a piece of you. We’re going to be the same person now.

“Will I be different?”
No, Dave. I’m just you. Why do you think you call me Basilisk? You know I’m just instinct. I’m the instinct that makes you a basilisk.

“But you love John. Instincts don’t love.”
Love is an instinct.

“I don’t understand anything.” you say miserably “I act like I don’t need you. I act like I’m scared of you, but I actually want you there. I want you inside my head to tell me how to do things right. I don’t want to be alone in my own head.”
You always were. I’m just another part of you that was independent for a little while. Just let me come home.

“How did I get like this?”
I think Gamzee may have been right, as much as it pains me to give the buffoon any credit. We should go straight to the top of the mountain from here. I, I mean. We’re going to be an I after this.

“I…I…I’m losing you, though.”
You’re becoming me, says Basilisk impatiently, and the only reason you’re afraid to lose me is because you know I’m strong. And since I’m you, that means that you’re strong. You like me, don’t you Dave?

“No very much.” you have to laugh.
Yes you do, he insists, which means you like yourself. Which means you don’t hate yourself nearly as much as you think you do. Listen, you’re not going to notice this on your own, Dave, but there’s somewhere we know John from.

“Before we met him?”
Before you- me…I…before Dave Strider was born, Dave Strider was himself somewhere else. We knew that Lycan from somewhere.

“I never saw her before in my life, before she attacked me.”
Yeah, not in this life. I think I’ll figure it out. Can I come in, now?

“How am I supposed to let you in?”
Just let it happen. Feel that tremor?
You look down to see that your hands, cupped in Gamzee’s, are shaking. Your whole body is shaking, in fact.

That’s you trying to hold me down because you know I’m about to come in, and a big part of you still doesn’t want that. So just take a deep breath and let me in.

“Ok. Will it hurt?”
I think so, he says, and that is the last thing that Basilisk ever says to you.
You take a deep breath. Let it out.
Let him in.
And your hands stop shaking.

Equius does not react with the hysterical surprise you were hoping for. Unrealistically, you know,
but just once you would like to know something before Equius does.
“I know.”
“Of course you fucking do.”
“Language, young man.”
“Hey, you look like a 17 year old. Don’t start lecturing me.”
He wants to retort, to tell you that appearance is no indication of age and where you should stick your assumptions about his age in the politest way possible. Thankfully, he holds his tongue.
“Why don’t we discuss the problem at hand? The liquidation.” he rolls his shoulders back, as if bracing himself for a cold bucket of ice-water to the face “I would assume that means that all of us will be destroyed to prevent our sharing information on the programme. Also, we would be a substantial threat to national security. A bunch of traumatised and disgruntled monsters-”
“Hungry for revenge,” you finish impatiently “How the hell did you know? Did you eavesdrop on the same conversation that I did?”
Equius shakes his head and taps his right temple “My brother. He finally thought of a way to get me out of here that wasn’t going to end in his capture as well.”
“Capture Rus? Now that’s something I’d like to see them try!”
“I would remind you that they managed to get me, for all of my power and strength.”
“Yeah, but aren’t you still a teenager?”
A flicker of irritation crosses his features “Irrelevant. The point is that the programme is going to be closed down. I have the details from Rus, and you’re right to say that they will kill us soon. It was agreed under the table that a few ‘accidents’ were going to be arranged.”
“You mean your fucking brother agreed to let us all die?” you hiss, wary of any ears that might be listening for something juicy to report to the guards or the wider gossip community.
“No, he didn’t. He had no idea that it was going to happen, and he can’t change the other djinns’ mind.”
“There are more of you?”
Equius rolls his eyes “You thought my brother and I were the only djinn in the world?”
You had always assumed that he and Rus were something like the last survivors of their race. Their people are so ancient, like, old enough that they were on two legs and building crude batteries when the human race were still trying to figure out what to wipe on once they had finished shitting in the woods, it just sort of entered your head that the others had all aged and died, leaving their two youngest behind.
Apparently not. Jesus, there’s a terrifying thought, right there.
“Uh.”
“Never mind. Don’t answer that. I have decided that I don’t want to know.”
“Wait a minute. What’s going to happen to us?”
He shrugs. By now, you have reached the dead end of the hall. Unless you and Equius want to go into the training arena and get yourselves selected for some torture (hours early), then the only thing to do from here is double back. So, you do.
“I assume they will continue to behave as normal, until they slaughter us all. Gas in the vents. A flash fire. Simply shooting us in our bunks and saying that someone did it in a fit of madness, though that would not be the most convincing of excuses, if you think about it.”
Shuddering, you wrap your arms around yourself “I don’t fucking want to think about it. Man, what do we do? I can’t let that happen to Dave.”
“Well, wherever you plan to go in the world I would hope that you would agree to allowing-”
“Yeah, you are coming with me, man, no need to say it in fancy words. You and Rezi are my crew. I need you guys to help me parent Dave.”
You notice the ghost of a smile in the corner of his mouth, but you don’t mention it. No need to call him out every time he emotes. It might discourage future emotions and you actually like Equius’s smile.
“The first thing to do is to get out of here, then.”
“Well, what about the dome? Get it to open somehow. Get the hell out. All of us can fly.”
“Rezi hasn’t stretched her wings in years. She hasn’t done a proper flight for longer than Dave has been alive.”

Your head swims with the possibilities “Ugh, let’s just talk to her about it later, when the little man’s down for bed. She needs to be making the choices with us. In fact, we should get back right now. She’s gonna call us sexist for talking about stuff like this while we left her with the kid.”

Equius rolls her eyes “She’s the sexist one. When I’m taking care of the child, she complains that I’m going to ruin him. When she’s taking care of him, she complains of being made to play mother. She subscribes to both stereotypical gender roles even as she claims to oppose them.”

“Listen, you guys argue that out amongst yourselves as much as you want.” You grin “Just not while I’m in earshot….think this is gonna work out?”

Equius shrugs, and bumps you affectionately with his shoulder, which he almost never does “It either works, or we all die. Either way I would hope that we find some way of staying together.”

You wrap an arm around his shoulders briefly “Oh, believe me. Once I get out of here, I’ve got plans to live until I’m 500 and die happy and fat, surrounded by people I love.”

“Sounds like a plan.” says Equius.

You nod “Hell yeah, man.”

Your name is Dirk Strider, and if you know one thing, it’s that you’re going to find a way to survive this hell that has been your life for almost a decade.
You don’t know what your name is and you don’t give a shit.

Chapter Notes

Dave gets a mental face-lift

You don’t know what your name is and you don’t give a shit.
You know the guy chasing you down.
Why is Gamzee chasing you, anyway? What’s he screaming at you for? Doesn’t he know that you’re happy right now?
Probably the happiest you’ve ever been? Cos, fuck yeah, you got your instincts in the right place, you got the smell of blood in your nose and the woods, though they’re drenched in snow, is still full of prey. You won’t be able to hunt the way you like to, from the sky, but you’re not above jamming your hand down some hibernating animal’s hole and dragging them out.
You’re hungry, so you guess that is what you’re gonna do.
“David!”
Oh, yeah, that’s your name. Great name. Some dude named David punched a giant in the head in the Christian Bible. You think that’s what happened. But you’re not a Christian, so you honestly have no idea.
Oh my God, that thing, there’s a warm thing in that big hole. You have to go get it. This is going to be awesome.
Hey! You got it! Yeah, this is great! Now you’re gonna eat it and it will also be great and if only Gamzee would stop screaming-

“DAVID STRIDER YOU SNAP THE FUCK OUTTA THIS RIGHT NOW!!”

Your name is Dave Strider.
You know. You care.
“Ow.”
Gamzee stands over you, snow-stained and panting. One hand on his knee to keep him from falling over, the other one falling back to his side, still red from slapping the crap out of your face. And blood, because you have blood on your face.
Because there’s a fucking vole head in your mouth. At this point, your choices basically extend to spitting out your mouthful and screaming like a child as you wash your mouth out with snow, or finishing your meal. Vole is excellent. You should hunt more often.
You swallow, with relish, and wipe the blood from your mouth on your wrist. Then, you scrub the stain on your wrist away with a handful of snow. The rest of the twitching animal you have just fished out of hibernation also goes into your mouth. The crack of bones between your teeth is strangely satisfying, in the same way that the noise a chip makes when being eaten is satisfying. Except chips never squirt a tiny amount of juicy marrow into your mouth. Nice, but you are now fairly certain that you can never kiss John with this mouth.
Gamzee has regained control over his breathing “Fuckin’ hell, Dave. I’m guessin’ that you and that…that whatever the fuck thing was in there with you. Y’all’re one now, huh?”
“Yep. And you slapped me right off my feet.”
He grows sheepish “I didn’t know what the flyin’ fuck y’all were doin’! One minute, I gotcha talkin’
to yerself all serious-like an’ shakin’ and bleedin’ on me, an’ the next yer fuckin’ jumpin’ up and runnin’ out here,” he gestures around the crushed wreck of the labs, where you have lead him “Did what I hadta.”

“You enjoyed it.” you accuse “You’ve always wanted to hit me like that.”

He offers you a hand up “Well you’d notice, mister man, that I slapped ‘cha, not punched ‘cha. What the hell’re y’all grinnin’ about?”

“Well I just remembered everything, so, you know…”

Dave Strider: become Equius Zahhak ==============>

Equius Zahhak: investigate scratching at the door =============>

Your name is Equius Zahhak and you barely know where your feet are going. Gods, are you tired. You have done so much in the way of death and violence today that, honestly, if you have to confront something else horrible and twisted today, it will probably be the death of you. Not the literal death. A small figurative death, from which you will recover after you have had the time to put some sleep in between you and the brutal murder you have committed and witnessed today. Well, looking at the clock, you would now have to say that it was yesterday that you watched all of those things.

The scratching at the door has grown increasingly frantic.

This is how Nepeta asks to get inside your house. As a result, the bottom of your door is torn up and scratched to ribbons with the occasional stripe of the blue of your door.

“I’m coming, I’m coming.”

Your fogged brain is trying to make sense of why it is that she seems to thin she needs to come by your house, after driving herself and Roxy back to their house. You have already said your goodbyes for the night, and she’s probably going to be the first person you are able to recognise tomorrow, with the amount of sleep you’re going to be limping into work behind you. You wouldn’t be surprised if you have to call her first thing in the morning, because you have either forgotten or grown too tired to remember how driving works.

“Jesus, Nepeta, I’m unlocking the door. Don’t destroy another one.”

Your foot lands in something hot and damp.

How did blood even get under the door?

Then things start to click in your head. Without bothering to unlock the door, you wrench it open. The entire thing, off its hinges and fling it into the hallway behind you.

“Fucking finally.” rasps Nepeta.

“Bismillah.”

Everything that should be on the inside seems to be contained in a sling, made by her arm and the crook of her elbow, wrapped tightly about her glistening chest. Her shirt is ripped completely open—it’s nothing you have not seen before, but it is disgusting to think of someone else seeing her without her permission.

Strangely enough, though she lies in a pool of her own blood and has a good deal of her own organs cradled in the crook of her elbow, the only question you can think to ask is “Were you raped?”

She laughs painfully, and a bubble of blood blooms on her lip. She crosses her eyes to regard it with disgust, but you pop it with your thumbnail and mop her up carefully.

“No, I wasn’t. I love that that’s what you ask me when I am actually holding my own…look, I think this is a spleen.”

Kneeling in the blood beside her, you begin to gather her up. She makes a sharp squeal of pain and protest, and you stop immediately.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Just stay here, I’ll call an ambulance.”

She knots her bloodied fist in your shirt “No. No, I’ll be dead by the time you get back.”

“No you won’t.”

“Eq.” her whisper is fierce and wet with blood “Eq, I’m already dead. I’m already dead no matter what you do. I just came because I needed to see you again before I left. Just sit with me. Just hold
me, for God’s sake. Just stay with me.”
You can think of no way to refuse that. No reason to either.
Nepeta may be a kitsune and stronger than the average kitsune at that, but she has left a trail of
reddened snow in your drive. In her staggering wake, you can see a shining lump of something
horribly crimson and organic. She has obviously not been able to hold onto everything trying to fall
out of her.
So, you move her head into your lap and do your best to pull her from the doorstep.
“What are you doing?”
“You shouldn’t die in the cold.”
“That’s not what I meant,” her smile is bloody and missing teeth “I can’t remember the last time I
saw you cry. Not even when we were burying Dirk.”
A tear splashes onto her cheek and makes her blink irritably. A glazed look has entered her eyes that
you really don’t like to see there. She’s going to leave you here, isn’t she? Right here, on your
doorstep, her arms full of her insides, and you here, unable to do anything but watch her die.
“This should be me.”
“Fuck off. I don’t have time for that talk.” she gasps around a hitch in her throat, and turns her head
to the side, spitting a stream of blood.
“Oh, God-”
“No, lemme talk. Lemme talk. The woman who attacked me- Hine Snow. Hine Snow…and you
gotta tell the boys where Dirk is. It isn’t right…their fucking fort, right over his head.”
She falls silent. For a moment, you are sure that she is gone, even though you can see her heart
twitching underneath the thin veil of flesh and cloth still stretching over it.
“Peta?”
“I’m here.”
You breathe easier, now. If only for a moment. The next time that happens, it’s going to be it. You
just know the next time she closes her eyes will be the last.
“Roxy’s dead too,” she says flatly “She shot her. But she threw her gun away for me…she wanted to
cut me. I was beat at my own game by a lousy fucking human…”
“I’ll kill her,” you promise.
Nepeta flashes that red grin again “I know that look. I believe you, big man. You love me?”
“Yes, I love you.”
“You’re my best friend?”
“I am.”
“Forever, right? Since before we were born. You remember it, right? We…we were on a meteor.”
You know what she is talking about and you also know that it is the last thing that you want to think
about right now. Those horrible memories, if that is what they really are…you’re not going to waste
your time thinking about the world where you died first and she died, straining for your hand. Not
while you have her here, still clinging onto life.
“Nepeta, you remember when we met?”
“I remember you were an asshole.”
“I still remember what you were wearing,” you cup her jaw in one hand, bringing her to head to rest
against your chest, so she does not have to support herself “A little slip that you’d stolen from the
village on the hill. Gods, the days when it was still just villages on this land. Do you remember that?”
“I loved those days. Do…do you think that’s what the afterlife is gonna look like?”
“Whatever it looks like, save me a seat.”
She frowns “Hey, you’re still young. You gotta take care of Dave and John and the other kids.”
“Then you’re gonna wait for me?”
“Only if you stop crying on me.” she chuckles “I’m kidding, keep crying on me. I like that you’re
emotional about this.”
“It’s fucking death, Peta. You think I’m gonna stay emotionless?”
“I guess not. Look, you got me crying too.”
She tries to reach up to touch your face, but she cannot reach on her own. You have to take her wrist
and guide her up, holding her hand to your cheek. Her fingers rasp over your skin, as fond and
gentle as ever. The corner of one of her sharp nails drags against your cheekbone, but not
unpleasantly. In fact, you wish that she would scar you somehow. The face would be good. That
way you could remember her every time you saw it in your reflection- which, is, of course, a wildly
stupid and passionate conviction, to get yourself scratched just to remember her.
She’s right. You’re not in your right mind at the moment.
“It sucks that djinns can’t resurrect people,” she says “Otherwise you could sic me on the bitch in
your showdown. That’d be a good twist.”
“She would never see it coming.”
“Eq, I’m really tired.”
A bolt of panic rips straight through you, but somehow, you keep a scream down “I know, Peta. I
know you’re tired. It’s alright to close your eyes.”
She bites her bottom lip, which was split during the course of her fight. Her mouth is covered in
blood. Her face is smudged with countless bruises. You’re going to wish, later on, that you had not
seen her like this last, because this is going to be your final memory of her.
“You know eyes closing means death?”
“Uh huh.”
Her eyes are really glazed now. As if the light is being sucked from them backwards.
“Can I have a hug?”
She gets one. As careful a hug as you can give her, with her injuries and your entire body trembling
from the effort of not breaking down into screaming sobs.
“I love you, big guy,” she whispers against your neck “I love you so much. Be a good, strong guy.
Hang around those kids. They’re gonna need you.”
“I love you too, Peta.”
She goes limp a little while after that.
You can only hope one of your neighbours will hear you screaming and think to call the police and
the ambulance.

Equius Zahhak: be John Egbert =========>
John Egbert: wake up ===========>

Your name is John Egbert, and you knew it was just a dream.
Just a creepy-ass dream that Dave cuddled up to you and hinted that he might, might, might just
accept your love. Nope. Not in this lifetime.
You don’t know why the hell you’re in Dave’s bed, but you assume he must be in your bedroom,
having given up custody of his bed for the night so you can live out your creepy dream in peace.
God and gods, you hope you weren’t talking in your sleep.
After that creepy dream, you had an even weirder one follow it up. Amnesia has already stole the
bulk of the details and the whole plot of the dream, but you do seem to remember jetting around- no,
panning around without the aid of wings or anything- with a big grin on your face, paying some kind
of game.
It wasn’t a fun game, as far as you can tell, but you were enjoying yourself. It was an odd
environment, but made familiar by the faces around you. Your friends were there. Eridan and Sol,
you remember seeing, except they both had grey skin and horns, and you think Eridan was some
kind of actual royalty. Feferi too, because everyone called her an ‘heiress’.
Some of the details are coming back, for some reason. As you lie in the dark of Dave’s bedroom, it
all comes drifting back to you. Not like it was lost to dream amnesia. But like it was just something
that happened to you that you’re forgetting because you are so tired.
Closing your eyes, you try your hardest to remember what was happening.
And you do.
A tea party on a meteor?
You have a china cup in your hands. And two people on either side of you who are not really
“Gamzee? What happened to your face?”

With a slightly sheepish and very pointy grin, Gamzee points opposite him on the table that you’re grouped around, at a familiar face. A very young version of a familiar face, at least. Nepeta wears a hat with what are either cat ears or small, ear-shaped horns protruding from the top. She smiles with her usual wicked, sweet expression and returns her attention to the guy next to her. Equius, who almost looks the same- again, just younger. Not like he eighteen year old he is often taken for, but like a fifteen or a fourteen year old.

He has got a china cup in front of him, but seems reluctant to pick it up.

You can hear them talking if you strain your ears.

“…I am telling you I will break that thing.”

“We won’t know until we try.”

“I know.”

“That’s because you’re a stubborn pull-beast, now gather your courage and pick up that cup, boy, or I’ll spoon feed the grub-juice to you instead.”

Gingerly, he pokes the handle of the cup. It immediately snaps off and falls under the table. From behind a pair of dark glasses, he gives Nepeta a look between smugness and disappointment. She shakes her head and rolls her eyes.

“Alright, you win.”

“I accept the victory with a heavy pusher.”

None of this makes sense to you, but all you can think about is, ignoring completely the horns, the grey flesh and the fangs that could open a can, you have never seen Equius wear a tank top before. Jesus, is he ripped.

Confused by the exchange, you look to your left, hoping to find something a little less concerning than Equius and Nepeta.

“John, dear, drink your grub-juice. It’s going to get cold.” says Kanaya.

“Kanaya, why is everyone grey?”

“I’m not grey.” says a voice from behind you, and a familiar girl pops a hand on your shoulder.

Jade. The wolf that attacked you.

Like Gamzee, she looks utterly sheepish as well “Sorry I went bat-shit on you. I didn’t really mean to do that, I guess. I just kinda lost my mind.”

“What the fuck is a mind?”

Your stomach turns a backflip in surprise when you look along the table and see Karkat craning out from behind Gamzee’s bony shoulder.

“It’s a pan, Karkat,” says a lisping voice next to him impatiently “Jegus. Try some cultural sensitivity, you weeping sphincter.”

“Be nice, Sol.” and that’s Feferi next to him.

“I’m not gonna be nice. He’s a jerk, Feferi, he’s a jerk who expect everyone to speak perfect Alternian.”

And at that point, you become distracted by the rest of the crowd. Everyone is here. Everyone you know. All of your friends, you mean. There’s Terezi, looking less battered and world-weary (but not by much) and Tavros and Rose and just fucking everyone, except for one strange, pale girl that you do not know. You mean, you do know her, but not in the world where your dreaming body lies.

“Hi, Aradia!” you call, waving to her.

“Hey, John! Like my hat?” she gestures to an Indiana-Jones style affair sitting atop some wild curls.

“Love your hat!”

“Great! I think I stole it from your dad’s corpse!”

“You what?”

But before you can confront Aradia and her possible grave-robbing, Dave falls into your lap. From out of nowhere comes Dave, decked out in a set of what you can only describe as red pyjamas. A long, majestic cape follows him down and flutters down gently to be draped over your face and head, plunging you into a red-tinted gloom. The vague outline of the back of Dave’s head is visible,
drifting in front of the cape as a shadow.
“Move over John, I need my tea fix.”
At no point does it occur to you to ask him what the fuck is going on. You just move over and give
the man the elbow-room he so desperately needs.
Jade. That was the name that was going to crawl out of your belly. Dave; the name you knew before
you even knew there was a boy in that red plumage and smooth snake’s tail at his waist.
As the cape falls from your eyes, so does a veil that has shrouded the truth from your eyes for your
entire life. For a reason, too, and a good one.
The truth is devastating. You survey the mostly familiar faces around you with a dread appropriate
for someone who has just realised he is attending a corpse party. A sensation of extraordinary
heaviness encases your heart, pulling it to the centre of the earth.
In some deep part of your mind, you have been waiting for this moment since your mind was
capable of conscious thought. In the part just a few layers deeper than that one, you were hoping that
the reunion would never come.
The truth may be a relief to have back, finally, but the profound grief that comes with it makes you
sick to the very core.
Blind from the screen of tears in your eyes, you grope for Dave’s hand. His palm meets yours
without a word, and he rests your knitted hands on his knees. He continues a snarky conversation
with Karkat as if nothing is happening underneath the table, but at the same time, his shoulder turns
to you, as if offering the support. Gladly, you take it.
With the voices of friends you have unknowingly waited to meet your entire life thick in your ears,
you shut your eyes.

And wake up with them full of tears.
What woke you?
More importantly, what were you dreaming about that was so sad it had you struggling back into
consciousness with wet cheeks? Your chest feels heavier somehow, as if someone has stuck a weight
in the place of your heart.
Before you can figure out what it is that has disturbed you so in your dream, you are startled by the
sound of glass shattering downstairs.
You may not know what has made you so miserable in sleep, but you know what is going to try to
do the same in the waking world. The cigarette glow is absent from the street outside, but not, you
suspect, the inside of your house.
The stalker has come for you, at last.
Enter: second Strider, finally

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Your name?
It’s a little bit of a weird twist, your name. If you informed the good people of your name, they might suffer massive cranial explosions from just the sheer, down-right outrageous shock of what’s really been going on. So instead of just saying ‘hello, here, boom, I am existing and you are so shocked by it’, you’re going to ease the audience into it. Wouldn’t want to injure the delicate feels of any one of these poor, emotionally tortured angels.

So, remember a way bunch of chapters back when John felt like he was being watched, even when he was inside his own house? And he figured, because he felt like the presence was extremely malevolent and evil and that shit, hey, it must be that weirdo that watches me on the street while they have a smoke.

What the fuck, John? How the hell is Hine Snow supposed to see through walls? And her presence, while, yeah, it is totally intimidating and unnerving, she’s not fucking Superman. She can’t see through walls with her X-ray vision to make small, sexually confused boys feel uncomfortable in their house.

Also, there was a specific reason John never felt threatened in the bathroom. Because you’re not a fucking pervert. You’re a fucking guardian of these dumb boys, and right now, you’re the only one of the dwindling host of guardians these lucky boys have that is doing their job.

Alright, you think you’ve prepared them enough for the big reveal.

Audience, are you ready? Grab those body pillows for comfort. Cuddle teddies. Warn any families, significant others and pets within ear-shot that you might be screaming like a fool in a moment.

Who are you, narrative voice?
Why, you’re Dirk Strider.
Dave’s big bro. Dave’s dead big bro. Yep, you’re dead, but that hasn’t really slowed you down.

If anything, it’s made your life a whole lot easier. Well, your afterlife.

Now, you can float through shit and watch people sleep without having to sleep yourself. The excess of spare hours has given you plenty of time to make nice with the house-cat, which is a good thing, since it means it won’t flip its furry shit every time it sees you drifting invisibly over John’s shoulder, or pecking Dave on the forehead when it comes time for him to bed down.

You’re invisible, for the most part.

And no one can hear you, no matter how hard you scream- except for this one, major break-through a few days that got your good friend Eq off his toned ass, to save the day. Ever since that moment, you’ve been doing your damndest to replicate whatever the fuck it was in those circumstances that allowed you to speak to him.

It has yet to work.

Still has yet to work, even though you are screaming at the top of your voice for John to stop what he’s preparing to do.

“John!” you scream “Do not! She’ll tear you to pieces! John, no! John, put your narrow butt back in that bed!”

“She finally came for me.” he mutters to himself, in a very grim, serious voice.

You try to punch him in the head, but your arm passes straight through his temple. He shivers, and rubs his arms as gooseflesh is raised.

“Goddamn these incorporeal digits!” you succeed in punching yourself in the head, and start trying to levitate something.

Anything.

If you could just pop the lamp at the bedside table or peel one of Dave’s stupid posters off, you might
give John cause to stop. When he is more afraid, you are more powerful. Being a ghost is kinda like being a fairy; if the humans aren’t willing to believe you’re around, unless you’re a pretty powerful entity then it is very hard to prove otherwise.

“John! John, believe in me!” you shout. Surprisingly, it doesn’t work.

“John, don’t you dare open that fucking door.”

He opens the fucking door. Gods-damn these poor, dumb kids. They have no idea how to survive even the simplest of survival experiences.

“Get under the bed!” you urge. Cliché, but effective.

Downstairs, you can see Hine Snow brushing the glass from herself. Her fingers are smeared with the gore from poor Nepeta’s throat, and her clothes are covered with it. With the glass strewn all over the folds of her clothes, she almost looks like a dragon.

Dragon.

Terezi!

That stupid cave-dwelling, justice-humping weirdo could beat the shit out of this Hine bastard in ten seconds flat! Maybe! As much as it pains you to give Terezi credit of any kind (honestly, what did she think she was doing, never making an effort to find you and Eq? The bitch!), she is much stronger than Nepeta is. Her chances of beating Hine Snow are much better. Not in ten seconds flat. That’s a bit of an over-enthusiastic assumption, but certainly, she could do it.

And then you could grab that weirdo Wendigo kid- oh, wait!

John has stepped into the hallway with a surprising stealth. He would look fearsome and prepared, if it weren’t for his trembling fists and his stupid Pokémon pyjamas.

“John!” you hiss “Call the Wendigo! Call Gamzee! C’mon, man, Gamzee’s cool. He’ll help you out.”

Suddenly, it strikes John that he is down one Basilisk. And just when they were getting all close and cuddly. You have to admit- you teared up a little bit when Dave finally let it go, relaxed, and fulfilled one of John’s dearest unspoken wishes. Then, in embarrassment, you had to hide yourself in another room, just in case they decided to make out or something. If you’re not going to watch John pee, then you’re certainly not going to watch him put the same instrument to use on anyone- much less your little brother!

“It’s alright, John, he just went back to the labs. He’s got Gamzee with him. I just checked on them a few minutes ago. They were fucking around in one of the old cells.”

“Oh my gods,” he whispers “She took him.”

Before you can even begin to fill his deaf ears with how dumb and wrong that presumption is, John creeps across the hall to his father’s room.

Jamie Egbert is not here tonight. He’s up on the mountain, conducting his business with Eq’s older brother.

Fucking great. Now John’s going to think Jamie has been eaten or murdered as well. This is just not your night.

Leaving John to do whatever he’s determined to do in his father’s room, you decide to try your luck downstairs. Maybe something will go your way, for once. Maybe you will be able to pick Hine up by the seat of her pants and throw her through the window she has just broken. The window actually scares you a lot- she’s given up being discreet. She has spent her patience, and her self-control is all but gone.

She really will rip John to shreds if you don’t get him out of here somehow. Melting through the floor, you find her already at the bottom of the stairs. The only reason she has yet to dash upstairs with the knife she holds, still red from her scrap with Nepeta, is because of the hissing, spitting wonder of nature taking swipes at her from the middle step.

Godcat. Bless his tiny, warped soul. Godcat has this fierce, blood-thirsty glint in his eyes. They fix on you for a moment, as you crop up behind Hine’s shoulder, but return to her quickly.

This cat is out to defend his kittens, just like you.
So maybe you won’t stop her cold. But you can exert as much terrifying pressure as possible in the meantime.

“I might have to flay you if you don’t get out of my way,” she speaks with such a menace you would think she’s facing down her mortal enemy, instead of an angry, arch-backed cat “I already killed one cat today.”

You step through her. Her insides are rotten and stink of years of violence.

To your incredible satisfaction, Hine shivers uncontrollably as you pass through her. A few strands of gore-stringy hair fall into her face, but she glares through the strands. Her eyes remain fixed on the cat.

“Hine Snow,” you say “I don’t know how well you can hear me, but you need to hear this. If you touch that boy upstairs, I will do everything in my growing power to ensure the rest of your short life is miserable. I’ll follow you almost every second of the day. The seconds I don’t spend on you, I’ll spend guiding Equius to you. Not a moment of peace. I promise that much.”

Hine Snow takes a step forward and through you. You don’t bother to correct her, even though the inside of her smells like things deader than you, and more rotted than the skeleton planted underneath the fort. She begins to shake. The shaking makes her livid that she cannot control herself. You resolve to stay inside of her, if you cannot help John any other way.

Sure enough, she starts shaking so badly she can’t even hold the knife. It clatters to the floor and showers blood all over the place.

John picks this moment to appear at the top of the stairs.

He has a gun, the beautiful, dumb bastard.

Right. A gun. Jamie keeps a gun in his sock drawer. Given his political stance, guns are not really something he enjoys. But given his ethnicity, he’s been on the receiving end of more than a few hate-crimes in his time. Also, his adopted kid is a fucking bird monster.

He needs some kind of insurance around.

And now that John’s found it, you’re thinking of every cringe-worthy PSA you ever watched over their shoulders and every horror story you ever heard on the radio about a kid shooting themselves in the face with their parent’s firearms.

Knowing John, though, he’s going to end up blowing his dick off instead.

“John!” you bark “Put the gun down! You’re not fucking Rambo!”

“Put the gun down.” growls Hine through chattering teeth “You’re no hero, kid. You don’t know how to fire that thing.”

“Get out of my house!” shouts John, with such anger that even you jump.

Godcat lets out a strangled hiss in agreement.

“I will shoot you!” he continues “I’m not stupid, ok? I know I fucking aim and fire! That’s how it works!”

“You’re not going to hit me.”

John pulls back the safety “I might get lucky.”

“You are so stupid.” you say.

Hine’s legs are trembling so badly she is having a hard time staying on her feet. To counter this problem, she seizes the banister and begins hauling herself up the stairs, one painstaking step at a time. You stay in her rotten insides all the way.

“You’re not going to get this boy,” you mutter, more to yourself than her “I’ve got him. I’m keeping him safe. You’re going to die in pain. I will kill you.”

She doesn’t seem to be getting the message.

Godcat no longer scares her. In one, vicious swipe, she shoves the cat from the stairs. He rolls with the punch, scuttles a little ways up the wall and ends up unharmed at the bottom of the stairs. Godcat charges up after Hine as John shouts: “I will shoot you!”

“Kid, I can tell from the way you’re holding that thing it ain’t even loaded.”

How the fuck does she know that?

You know for a fact that John has no idea where the bullets are, mainly because Jamie never actually bought any. He figured waving a gun around menacingly would be enough to deter any invaders
until the police arrived.

Dammit, Jamie.

And damn Hine even more- she’s just too experienced. John has this unfortunate realisation about
the same time as you. And, the brave little bastard, he throws the gun at her. It glances off the side of
her head, nearly knocking her down.

John runs. He does not scream, though, and by the time he has disappeared around the corner,
Godcat is back on Hine again. He latches onto her leg and bites for all he is worth.

She lets out a growl of frustration and flings him from her leg with a powerful kick. This time, the
effort does knock her over, but not down as you hoped. At the same time, you slip from her. She
moved too fast when she fell.

Finding herself suddenly in control of her faculties again, Hine leaps to her feet and runs to the top of
the stairs. John whips around the corner and kicks her square in the jaw. His leg is at chest-height,
and he puts his entire body into the kick.

From a combination of shock and indignation, Hine is stunned. She tumbles to the bottom of the
stairs and lands next to the cat, who is not pleased with her at all. He immediately leaps onto her face,
tending to make a meal of her bloodied nose.

John jumps onto the banister and slides down it, hopping off it smoothly and making for the door.
Hine wrestles with the cat. The kick flung him far and dazed him. The poor cat has not quite
recovered, so Hine is able to dislodge his stubborn claws. She attempts to throw him, but his claws
are hooked in a sleeve.

And then you catch up with the programme and jump back into her insides, making her shivering
and sluggish again. She lets out a scream of rage.

At the front of the house, you hear the door crash open. A moment later, John’s shape whips past the
window.

What does he think he’s doing? Running into the cold night, for Dave? For Gamzee? For Equius?
No one will be able to help him!

Equius’s arms are full of the remains of his best and for a long time, his only friend. Dave is having a
trip down memory lane with Gamzee, and now that you think about it, even if you do summon them
from a phone or whatever there is no guarantee they will find them or get there in time.

After all, Dave let John get taken away by that Lycan.

Dammit.

Same for Rus and Jamie- you’ve got no way of contacting them, save shouting down their ears,
which you have tried before without success.

Dammit, dammit.

That leaves only Terezi who might offer any kind of help.

With no other choice left to you, you snap from Hine’s insides and rise to the top of the house. Just
before you go for Terezi, you catch a glimpse of John’s retreating figure, heading for the woods.

“RUN, JOHN! RUN!”

Dirk Strider: be Vriska Serket========>

Dirk Strider: be Vriska Serket: fuck that, I want to stay here! I’ve got to save John! =======>

Dirk Strider: dammit, Dirk, this is a pacing technique. Just fucking do it. The sooner you do it, the
sooner you save John.

Dirk Strider: be Vriska Serket =========>

Vriska Serket: who’s your friend, there? =======>

Her name is Terezi Pyrope, and she’s awesome.
Seriously, like, the most awesome person you’ve ever met.
You have never talked to anyone before like you’ve talked to her. When you first opened your
mouth, you planned to deliver one of your classic disses or some comment about her general
badassery back in that whacked-out storage facility. Or, at least, a feasible excuse as to why you
were in her cave.
She told you where it was on the way out in case you ever wanted to visit her or something, and you
asked if it was cool if you spent the night with her. Not because you were, like, scared or infatuated
with her or anything. Just because your mom wouldn’t really notice if you were gone, and since your
night was going to be sleepless no matter where you went, you might as well have a sleepless night
somewhere cool.
A dragon’s cave is definitely a cool place.
Not full of the skeletons of virgin princess, the way you hoped, but definitely cool.
She sleeps on rocks. That’s about it. The place is a nice, dry cave without bats or a noticeable
infestation of nasty insects. Or, for that matter, any creature comforts. No lighting, no furniture and
no clothing except for what she wears on her back.
The moment she gets back to the cave, she asks “I know we just met and humans are for some
reason afraid of the female body, but do you mind if I strip off?”
You said, no, no you didn’t mind at all.
In fact, given that it is pretty warm inside this cave and well-shielded from the snow, you said “Why
don’t I strip off with you? Let’s make it a thing.”
So this is how you have come to be sitting in a mysteriously lit cave, with a dragon in a human form,
with all of your clothing but the bottom half of your underwear folded in a neat pile on your left.
By now, Terezi knows your life-story.
Most of it. The last parts, you’re just finishing up.
And you are completely comfortable with it; being essentially naked, and telling a stranger what’s
wrong with you and why it’s that way and how badly you wish you could just drop all of this
bullshit and leave.
“I don’t even… I mean, I just went with him because it seemed like the thing to do. I know I like
guys. It’s not like John made me realise I was gay or bi or ace or whatever. He just made me realise
that I’ve got, like, no interest in doing things like that. At this age, it just seems shallow. I know when
you’re young you should be passionate and stuff, but I just don’t want to pour all of my passion into
boys. Or girls. Or being all on my own and liking it fine that way. It’s just- no. I want to be doing
stuff. I have so much energy and so much potential, and everyone tells you that, but instead of using
it, they want you to sit in a classroom five days out of seven and work with your head down. I mean,
what the fuck?”
Terezi lays on her belly on the flat stone the two of you are stretched out on. Her chin is propped up
on the heel of one palm, and her blind eyes seem to contemplate you with a respect that no one has
ever given you before- a respect not fuelled in parts by fear and awe.
“Sounds to me like you don’t want any part of it.” she concludes.
“Any part of what?”
“Of any of it. Of the way your people are set up.”
“Work to work some more, then work ‘til I get old and become hated and neglected? Yeah, no
fucking thanks.”
“Well, what about all the things you can get by participating in that system?”
“What kind of stuff?”
“Money.”
Your heart sinks a little- the eternal problem of money. How do you do anything without money? No
matter what you want to do, be it become a multimillionaire playboy philanthropist, a best-selling
author or an over-worked office bum, you gotta have money to do it.
You can’t even be homeless in this country without some money.
You hate it so much, because there’s no way to reject it completely. Short of becoming a forest
hermit on the mountain or something.
When you tell Terezi this, she smiles thoughtfully “Why do you think I stripped off?”
“Because you’re more comfortable in your natural skin? Like, without anything covering you or
something.”
Terezi nods, her tail flicking. The tail starts at the base of her spine (her butt) and it takes quite a bit of
willpower on your part not to stare open-mouthed. Even if she is blind and probably wouldn’t notice
or guess, that would be fucking rude.
“More because this is the only set of clothes I’m willing to own at the moment. If I don’t wear them
as much, then they don’t get as torn up.”
“So...so your skin is just easier to wear than your clothes, huh?”
“Yeah. That’s it. Know where I got them from?”
You can tell exactly where she got them, from the shit-eating grin in the corner of her sharp mouth
“You stole them.”
She blinks slowly “Yes I did. What do you think about that?”
“I think major corporations make so much money all the time that it doesn’t really matter if they lose
a few pieces of merchandise to the needy. Or thieving dragons.”
She lets out a bark of rough laughter “Think you could live like that, though? One set of clothes, and
naked apart from that? And stealing your food all the time?”
You nod firmly, realise she cannot see it, and say: “I’d rather do that than wait around to die.”
“You ready to give up all of that? When you say bold shit like that, you shouldn’t say it just to sound
dramatic and worldly.”
“Do I look- uh, seem like a girl who does stuff like that to you?”
She smirks “A little bit. I think it’s because you’re afraid of how genuine you can really be.”
If you were a cat, then your back would be arched and your fur, standing on end “What? I don’t
want a fucking 9 to 5 sucking the life out of me. I don’t want to worry about that shit. I don’t want a
college education or a real job or shit like that.”
“What are you going to do instead?” challenges Terezi “Be an artist? You sound like an artist.”
“No I don’t. My mom tells me I sound like a terrorist.”
“Encouraging.”
“She’s not the hands-on kind of parent. What do you think I should be?”
“Whatever you want.”
You think about it “Where are you going after this?”
Terezi seems to stiffen. So far, she has proved herself to be reluctant to comply when it comes to
answering personal questions.
“When what ends?”
“Well, when Dave’s safe.”
“I don’t have plans right now.”
“You and Equius talked like you knew each other.”
“We did. We were good friends in the labs.”
She turns onto her side and scratches the back of her neck absently.
She probably means to dissuade you from demanding further information, but this little break-
through only encourages you “So you’re gonna stick around? To hang out with him?”
“I don’t see why I should. Equius isn’t the type that needs to be surrounded by people all the time.
Nepeta is- always has been. She likes her pack but djinns and dragons are solitary animals. I guess if
I do leave then I’ll come back to see him once in a while. Maybe once every year. That sound fair to
you?”
“Hey, I’m not telling you to coddle him. I just want to know what a homeless dragon does when her
mission to...to save the damsel in distress is over.”
She smirks again “She moves on. Why?”
“Just wondering.”
“What about you? What does a girl who can execute three grown men do after the fight is over?”
Really, your stomach should turn at the thought of those brains exploding all over you. Instead, it
swoops with the same excitement you feel on roller-coasters and when someone dies spectacularly in
a good adventure movie.
“I don’t know. Go nuts, I guess.”
“You wanna come with me?”
There it is.
The two of you have known each other for a grand total of one day and half a night, and now she’s offering to winch you out of your stupid, pointless life and the stupid, pointless future attached to it. You don’t know whether to cry or scream.
So you settle for a very calm: “Sure. I haven’t got anything better to do.”
She cocks an eyebrow “Oh yeah? What about John?”
You scoff “John’s totally in love with Dave. I just went without him because he needed a distraction, like me. Also, he’s got a good ass.”
Whatever Terezi is going to say next is understandably choked off a in yelp when an invisible force grabs her by the hair and pulls her up to her knees.
A voice rings out from nowhere, raising goosebumps on your arms as big as mosquito bites
“TEREZI HINE’S LOST HER SHIT DO SOMETHING!”
“What?” she shouts, grabbing at the invisible fist around her hair.
She doesn’t seem to be in pain- just really fucking surprised to have been grabbed by someone that sneaked up on her. You get the feeling that not many people can do that.
“There’s no one there!” you shriek, a little more shrilly than you mean to “Oh my God! There’s no one there!”
“Dirk!”
“What?”
“I’m Dirk,” agrees the voice, speaking urgently “Now, move! Hine Snow, that woman is after John! She’s going to get him!”
“What?” says Terezi again “What’s going on?”
“Why are you naked?” demands the voice belatedly “Never mind! I don’t care! Get your clothes on or not and go, go go! You’re the closest! Your cave is right next to the fort!”
“I still don’t- eh, whatever!”
At record speed, Terezi starts stuffing herself into the ragged jeans, shirt and jacket. You follow suit. Suddenly, you’re beyond embarrassed at the thought of a stranger, a male by the sound of his voice, seeing your boobs. And then you’re not. Fuck him and fuck his stupid invisible body- he’s got boobs too, but yours are just swollen so- you know what? You’ll have that thought later. Sounds like an important revelation about how you want to be treated by society, but you’ve got to go do something else now.
Save John, it sounds like.
Even if you are broken up now, and glad of it too. If you kept going for much longer, you would have felt obligated to have sex with him, even though it’s totally obvious he’s head-over-heels in gay love for Dave.
By the time you’ve got your shirt on and you’re struggling into your jeans and jacket, Terezi is on her feet. A hank of hair still stands on end in a fist- and whoever the fist is attached to is very tall.
“Dirk…who’s Dirk?” you rack your brains, trying to remember.
You don’t have to think for long.
“I’m Dave’s older brother. Dead older brother.” answers the voice, suddenly, sounding giddy “Holy shit! Hey, I’m talking to people! I haven’t been able to do this for very long! This is awesome, isn’t it?”
“I-I guess- dead?! Wait, dead?!”
“Dead.” repeats Dirk Strider, Dave’s dead brother “I died on the day John found Dave. He told you that story yet?”
“Yeah.”
You didn’t really listen, though. You weren’t that interested.
“Come on, Vriska!”
“What the fuck do you think she’s gonna do?” demands Dirk the invisible dead man.
“Whatever she sets her mind to!” Terezi flashes you a crazy grin “You missed it, but earlier she shot three men in the head!”
“You what?” you get the feeling the invisible dead guy’s turning to stare at you “What the fuck? I missed that.”
“What’s going on with John?” you demand “I’m so confused.”
“John’s been chased into the snowy wilderness by a crazy woman that already killed a person.”
Oh.
Ok.
You follow Terezi to the mouth of the cave, but for some reason, it doesn’t get any brighter as it should, as you get closer to the moon.
“What’s going on?” you ask, feeling stupid for having to ask that so many times.
Terezi furrows her brow “I can’t feel the moon on me. Is it still dark?”
“I can’t tell where the exit is.”
“There’s something in your way,” says Dirk “I can’t wait for this. I’m sorry, but you’ve got to do this on your own.”
Terezi’s hair falls flat. She turns in a circle, sniffing the air curiously “He’s gone.”
“What- I don’t…what’s…ok, tell me what to do.”
“Stay here for a second.”
Terezi creeps forward, her hand extended in front of her “I can smell something. I can feel a heartbeat in front of us.”
At that moment, a gigantic, luminous pair of eyes turn to you, swivelling around on a giant neck.
“Oh my God!” you shout, grabbing her by the arm and dragging her back.
The creature in front of you has turned around completely.
Eyes with pupils as big as you are tall. Shining so much that it illuminates the disgusting teeth inside the monster’s head, which are even bigger. The entrance to the cave is huge and the face fills it completely.
“Oh, shit on my dick!” says Terezi “Oh, fuck me! Oh, hell! I totally forgot- shit! We should not have let Gamzee tear those labs to shreds! There was something under them! The sub-sub basement, Vriska, they had such weird shit down there. They had giants down there.”
“How are we going to go help John now?”
Terezi scowls “We can’t worry about John now. Whatever he’s got going on, he has to take care of himself.”
A massive hand thrusts into the cave and reaches for you and Terezi.

Chapter End Notes

And finally there's the other Strider. Just Strider-ing around, as you would expect
The penultimate struggles

Chapter Notes

Second to last chapter. The last chapter will have the epilogue rolled into it as well.

Your name is John Egbert, and you figure you’re about eight seconds of full-pelt sprinting from safety when the first monster rears up and out of the forest.

Seems like you should have had some warning that monsters like these can exist.

What you’re looking at—your brain wants to paste rows of windows and cement facades over it, to make a skyscraper of it, or to make it into one of the red ribs that juts out from the Golden Gate bridge.

It does not make sense, especially to a mind so panicked as yours, that something so huge has limbs instead of pillars and beams holding it up. The legs alone put the thing far above the top of the forest, so that the knees are being grazed by the tops of the trees. The tallest trees poke the monster somewhere in the thigh, so for it, walking through the forest must be how it is walking through the reedy seeds that grow up at the mouth of the forest in the summer.

When it stood, you did not see that much of the face or torso, and you’re glad of it. Trying to make sense of features of a size proportionate with those legs would probably short you out.

You consider your options without pausing in your escape.

You kind of already make it the moment you become aware that you’re either going to have to run straight towards something that looks like it just stepped out of Dave’s favourite anime, or back into the arms of the crazy woman who seems to be in the grip of some kind of seizure.

Just to convince yourself that you really want to run at the apparent giant, you spare a glance over your shoulder.

The woman is faster now, and has stopped shaking as far as you can tell. From one hand, Godcat swings, his teeth drawing blood that peppers the snow behind her. At the sight of your face, she lets out an animal howl of rage and possibly some of the agony her hand must be suffering, trapped in the cat’s jaws.

Yep.

You really wanna run at that giant. You’ve never wanted to run at anything more than you really, really want to run at that giant right now.

Dave was gone when you woke up, as expected. You figured out that this was not because the conversation on his mattress was not a dream of your unattainable hopes, but because it actually happened. You only figured this out because the sheets next to you were all mussed, like someone had climbed from them.

So there can be only two places he has gone, now.

Either he went to the fort, or he went back to the labs to try to remember something about himself.

The near-death experience with the Lycan had him in touch with a good bit of the stuff swimming forgotten in his neural soup—enough to know that there was a brother. Not quite enough, though, to stick, and to give him a cohesive idea of what the fuck happened in his early years.

So he must be there. In fact, you wouldn’t be surprised if he took Gamzee with him or something. Dave’s a herd animal, even though he’s a bird, and he likes to have his pack around him.

Great.

You’d bet your butt that they’re responsible for whatever the hell is happening with those giant knees over the forest.

Just before you zip under the snowy canopy of trees, you catch a glimpse of a shadow behind the
giant and realise there are two. Either that, or you’ve somehow managed to hit your head and are seeing double.
The smart thing to do seems to be to run to the labs. The footsteps of the giants shake the entire mountainside, but thanks to the snow everywhere, you barely know where you’re going, and you can’t see a hint of the greyish flesh of the legs you first saw. If Dave is responsible for the giants, then he might be near them somewhere.
It’s your best shot, and you know that there is no way you can keep ahead of the woman for long enough to get to the labs in one piece. She’s too fast, probably. There’s going to be no chance of losing her, thanks to the snow on the ground. Your footprints are deep and clear.
Behind you, there’s a yowl as Godcat is finally shaken loose. You hope with all of your hammering heart that he’s ok, but you can’t risk turning around to make sure.
Just gotta keep going and pray to the gods you don’t freeze before you find Dave.

John Egbert: be Dave Strider ========>
Dave Strider: remain calm.

Your name is Dave Strider, and fuck that!
You’re too excited to remain calm! After years and years of wondering, angsting, fearing, chewing your nails down to the quick over it, you finally know what happened to you to lead up to that afternoon that John found you crumpled at his fort.
Now you kind of wish you didn’t. Not wanting Gamzee to see you crying, now that your wits are collected enough to facilitate emotions, you mop your cheeks hastily on your sleeve and make a show of squaring your shoulders. Of inviting the world to take on Dave Strider, because he’s ready and he’s a badass and he knows where he came from, and all that shit.
Gamzee hasn’t really got the hint, though, bless his sluggish brain “You ain’t gone go all feral on me again, are ya?”
You shake your head.
He stiffens, seeing the tear-tracks on your face and the slight redness of your eyes.
Dammit, dammit, dammit.
And another dammit, as he reaches over and wipes your eyes on the back of his sleeve and you feel stupid for feeling stupid in front of him.
“What’s wrong?” he asks, gently, leaving plenty of room for you to tell him to fuck off and leave you alone.
“I’m shaking?”
“Yeah, brother, like a fuckin’ leaf.”
You want Basilisk back.
Strange, seeing as you have completely accepted that you are and always have been Basilisk. He was just something growing from you, in the same way that the snarl of trunks that might grow from one massive tree all share the same roots. Having him here would be a comfort. An obnoxious comfort, but a comfort all the same.
He would know how to phrase what you now know into convenient scraps of information which Gamzee can digest easily.
Might as well try your hand at it.
“Dirk and I escaped. We lived on the mountain for a little while…they weren’t going to look for us. The entire programme was a few months away from going belly-up, so we just…we just waited around and hoped that Equius would show up. Eq and Terezi. They kinda raised me- did you know that? The only reason Eq’s here instead of in the old country is because I’m here. He musta made some bullshit promise to my brother. And Rus settled up on the mountain to stay close to his little brother. I just- I fucked things up for everyone, and I had to go and lose my fucking memory of all of it to make sure I couldn’t even try to fix things.”
His hand has fallen to your shoulder “Dave, lissen, you ain’t fucked nothin’ up. Y’all weren’t nothin’ but a baby when you was lost. Yer still a baby right now. It ain’t like you plotted this shit. It’s just
how shit happened. Eq and Rus- they’re full grown men. They been around for so many years, it’s kinda shit-brained to think ‘oh I made them stay I’m such a scumbag of a person’. They’re big guys, yeah? They can make their own choices.”

You sniff miserably, wishing there were a way to scrub the evidence of your break-down from your cheeks “Sure doesn’t feel that way.”

“Ah, fuckin’ hell. C’mere. Give me a hug.”

This is new.

You have never hugged Gamzee before. Even if he had been mown down by a car or survived some other kind of near-death experience, you doubt you would have hugged him unless you knew about his true nature.

Ever since discovering Gamzee is like you and that your mutual, inherent dislike of each other was a territorial instinct, it’s just been so much easier to be around him.

Gamzee is a nice guy, but he probably wouldn’t be out here trying to squeeze the sad out of you in the remnants of a frozen hell if he didn’t know he was clasping a set of wings to him as well.

This place is a terrible place.

Awful things were done to many kinds of people, some of which had whole-heartedly earned the treatment, and others of which had done nothing but try to live quietly up until the point that they were taken from their families, friends, lives and the hopes for a semblance of a happy life.

Because you escaped, physically intact and a mentally sound, for the most part, you are one of the few lucky ones. Equius is another, and so is Terezi, to some extent. After spending more than three times your own short life in incarceration, you’re not going to begrudge her for losing whatever marbles she may be missing now.

“Dave, how didja get here?” he says close to your ear “How’d we end up with y’all, huh?”

“It’s not a nice story.”

“None ‘a this is a nice story, ‘cept for the part where y’all make friends with John.”

Pulling back, you give him a bitter smile. The story seems appropriate for the gloomy, dank and blood-smelling place you have found yourself in, so you see no reason why you should not just launch into it.

Telling the story may even make you feel a little better about the hand life has dealt you.

“I was so young when it happened. I still don’t know what happened, exactly, but one minute Dirk and I were alright. The day started out alright, you know? We were just dicking around and being birds. He told me he was going to hunt and I always had to stay at home when he went off to hunt, so I stayed put. I mean, we didn’t really have a home. He’d just find a place to stick me that looked safe and leave me there until he had caught enough to feed us, then we’d spend the day together.”

“And he went off and hunted like normal. I stayed in the hollow of this tree, just, being a stupid little kid or something, and all of a sudden he comes tearing back and he’s covered in blood. I think…I think he was dead when I saw him. There was so much blood on him. You know? Like, too much for him to be able to…I think he was dead and he just came back for a little while to make sure I was ok.”

His brow furrows “Like a ghost?”

“No. Just…just like…never mind.”

You fall silent. Gamzee has to prod you to get you talking again.

“What happened next?”

“He said we had to go. And when we started going, we had to walk. He couldn’t fly at all. His wings were just…torn. So we walked and we just weren’t fast enough. There were things behind us. Some of the monsters, I guess. They basically just turned the whole of the labs out into the woods because they didn’t have the funds to kill it, or the resources or they just wanted to spite us all. Dirk had gotten jumped by some of them, I guess. We ran. He told me he was going to lead them away from me, and all I had to do was be quiet until he came back to get me. I knew already if he left, he was going for good. So I screamed and I tried to hold him back, but even when he was dying, he was so much stronger than me.”

“He put me in another tree hollow and told me I needed to stay there. I was so scared I listened to
him. I watched him leave.”

You can see it in your mind’s eye.

Your brother’s back, hunched in pain. His wings, hanging limp and stirring every now and then in the winds of the storm brewing overhead, dripping a red that you couldn’t distinguish as either feathers or blood. His arms were covered in cuts. His head was tilted to the side as he tried to find some balance of holding himself that lessened the pain, if only slightly.

He looked back, just once.

And it was to give you a smile streaked with red, and a look that said more about how dearly he loved you than either of you could have hoped to put into spoken words.

When he was gone, you started to cry for the first time since leaving the labs.

“I stayed there for a long time. The whole morning, I was sure I was going to hear him screaming, or monsters roaring and tearing him apart. But I didn’t. He died quietly, wherever he died. A little bit past noon, I hear a crunching beneath me and I think it’s him coming back. I think, for some reason, he can’t call out to me because he lost his voice or had his throat hurt too bad to speak, so I leap out of the hollow and I’m ready to jump into his arms. Except, it isn’t him.”

“What was it? One of them technician motherfuckers?”

“No…it was like us. I don’t get that, do you? Like, there’s us, and we talk and communicate and use words when we try to kill each other. Then, there’s them, and they’re just these savage motherfuckers with no concept of mercy.”

Gamzee shakes his head “I don’t.”

“This thing, this 8 foot monster saw me and just started laying into me. I don’t know if I scared it when I popped out of the tree calling for Dirk, or what, but this monster went to town on me. It grabbed me and threw me around. I guess it was trying to break my head open, you know, the way birds crack open snail shells on rocks. My head was the snail shell. My brain was the juicy prize inside. Or it might have been doing it for fun. I don’t know. I thought I was going to die, but I didn’t. The monster’s getting ready to throw me again when this bright flash of blue light comes out of the thin air.

“I’m dropped on my back. I lay there, waiting to die. And when I don’t, I look up and there’s this man just looking at me. I thought it was Equius until I saw the look on his face. Ancient fury. Eq never pulls a face like that. He sure can get angry, but this guy was just…beyond angry, and it wasn’t at me, thank God and the gods.”

“So…so who was it?”

“The djinn that lives at the top of this mountain.” you nod vaguely in the direction of the mountain’s peak “Rus. Eq’s big brother.”

Gamzee ‘hmm’s over this, but does not interrupt you again.

“He told me I was going to be alright, but that I had to forget what had happened to me for the time being. I just wanted to go back to Dirk, so I asked him to take me back. All of a sudden, the anger goes away. He gets all gentle. He tells me that Dirk can’t come back for me just yet. I think he was trying to trick me into believing that Dirk wasn’t dead, but those labs had taught me that when someone goes away without saying where they’re going, then they don’t come back. Especially not when their skin looks like raw bacon.

He told me that he’d been on the mountain for a long time now, waiting for Eq, and that he knew a nice family that would love me for everything I was. He asked me if I wanted to go live with them. I asked him to kill me.”

“Holy shit.” breathes Gamzee “How old were you, nine?”

Tears prick your eyes, threatening to spill down your cheeks again “Yeah. Nine. I figured my life was over without Dirk anyway, so I asked him to kill me. That’s why he took these years out of my head- the years I spent in the labs, and the memory of losing Dirk. He just wiped it all right out of my head so I could live without it hanging over me, making me want to die.”

“Did he make Basilisk too?”

“No, I think I did that. MY mind had to find some way to separate the side of me that killed for sport and the side of me that was going to be the normal kid, just so I wouldn’t snap and kill John and
Dadbert. I had to grow up before I could be trusted with my own power. So, Rus plunks me under the tree. He makes sure that I’m in my non-human form so John has at least some idea of what he’s getting into when he takes me home, then he gives me my name. That’s all I get to keep. I’m Dave Strider, and I’m nothing and no one else. And then John found me, and you guys come in during the next fall.”

Gamzee contemplates you with the air of someone deciding if they enjoy a piece of fine art in a museum. He tilts his head this way, and that way, then straightens his neck again and looks you dead centre in the eyes.

“What’re y’all gonna do now that y’all got it all back?”

You shrug “Well I don’t want to die anymore. It’s sad as fuck, but I don’t want to die.”

“That’s good. Real good.”

You’re about to agree when a deep rumbling from underneath your feet cuts you off. Nature has not been kind to the floors, and the cracks that roots have spread grow wider underneath your feet. In seconds, great chunks of the floor are falling away where you stand.

Seizing Gamzee about his skinny waist (Jesus, this kid is so slim he belongs on a catwalk), you pump your wings and jump into the air. Hovering is not the strong suit of any bird with a massive wingspan. You’re not built to flap like a pigeon, much less with about 110 pounds of extra weight (God, Gamzee needs a good feeding up. Must be his Wendigo blood keeping him so slender), so by the time you have dodged through the crumbling, shaking halls and broken into the fresh night air, your wings scream for a reprieve.

Gladly, you grant this, collapsing at the first solid part of the lip of the crater that you see, and trusting Gamzee to take it from here.

The first thing Gamzee does when you have both touched the ground is to pull you back to his feet. He is silent as he tugs you, complaining and groaning in pain all the way, to the line of the trees and folds himself over you protectively.

You’re torn between asking him what’s wrong and what good he thinks his scrawny body is going to do when the threat reveals itself.

A hand, approximately the size of a yacht, reaching up into the night air. Groping. Searching for a handhold. Finding one in the cracked ledge, which turns to crumbs in its grip, but not fast enough to prevent it from heaving itself up and out of the hole.

A fearsome face rises from the hole. Takes its sweet time, too; moving with all the grace of an airplane, but none of the precision. It’s almost too big to control where it goes in an environment that is so tiny by comparison. If you were not clenching every nerve in your body in an ecstasy of fear, your bowels would probably let go.

And, just to make the moment better, when the first gigantic figure has planted its feet in the snow with a force that shakes every last snowflake from the trees over your head and channels them down the back of your shirt, the giant reaches down and helps a second out. This one is slightly smaller.

With a pang, you think of Dirk.

This could easily be a super-sized version of that situation; a big brother, doing his best in a world that would kill him and his little sib the second it saw him.

Try as you might, you cannot summon much sympathy for them when you think of the town resting at the bottom of the mountain. There is no way in hell they will be prepared to deal with this.

You’re not prepared either.

Mercifully, the giants do not even come close to realising they are not alone. The bigger one lifts a massive leg and takes a single step away. The foot crashes down a few hundred feet behind you and Gamzee. In the woods, there is the timber shriek of a tree falling.

When the second foot follows it, the tree you and Gamzee cling to is knocked from the earth.

Thankfully, it falls towards the second giant, so you don’t have to scramble out of the way to avoid being crushed to death. A heavy shadow lies over the forest. The second giant walks after its sibling, and soon the crashing rhythm of thunderous foot-falls is receding into the near distance.

Gamzee looks at you, his mouth open.

You look back at him, also with your mouth hanging agape.
“They had shit like that in there?” he wheezes.
“Musta been some top-secret basement I didn’t know about.”
“What the fuck.” The two of you say in unison.

Dave Strider: be Jamie Egbert ===========>
Jamie Egbert: what the hell is that? ===========>

You get the feeling Rus the djinn is about to tell you something crucial, related to the lifespan you can expect if you chose to use your powers when his words are cut off in a strangled yelp, and his composed face dissolves into a gape.
“Oh fuck me.”

This is the first time you have heard him swear in the time you have known him.
If he weren’t staring over your shoulder in amazement, you would have to wonder if he were extending an invitation.

Instead, you whip around and look in the same direction “What? Oh, Jesus Christ! What is that?”

“I…I thought those things were all dead!”

This is the first time you have ever seen Rus come close to losing his composure, and it frightens you so badly “They look like something out of Dave’s favourite anime!”

Rus rises from his seat and sprints to the mouth of the cave, stopping in the middle “Allahu Akbar. This is…this is so bad.”

“What’s going on?” you join him at the mouth of the cave.

It still doesn’t make sense, even though your brain is doing better than its best to figure out what is happening in front of your eyes.

A figure. A figure so massive you have got to wonder what the hell a creature like that eats to fill its stomach. Probably lots and lots of people, if Dave’s favourite anime is anything to class as an authority on the subject of the eating habits of giants- titans- whatever.

“Rus, what is that?”

“I thought they killed them in the purges…they must have put them in some kind of stasis, like those other creatures.” cursing, he scrapes the hair from his face in a nervous gesture and turns to you “Go. Get them.”

“Excuse me?”

“Jamie, we just finished making the contract. I can barely stand.”

As if to prove his point, Rus’s legs give out and he slumps against the cave wall, grasping the edge to keep himself upright. His brown face has drained completely of colour, making his skin look like a washed-out coffee stain.

“I don’t even know how to use this stuff…” you protest, but not with much heart.

You did ask for this.
And Rus did give it to you, even though it meant weakening himself for a time- a time when everything seems to be going wrong, and when his own baby brother’s life is under threat. He just understood perfectly, the burden you carry by being utterly powerless in a situation where your adopted child is turning into a giant bird and your biological son is getting abducted by green wolves that bleed flowers.

It’s a very specific kind of burden, to be so powerless in the kind of world that Dave has slowly introduced to you.

Thanks to Rus, you are no longer completely powerless, and at his own expense.
So, really, if he says go and get them, then that’s what you’re going to do.

As it turns out, this conviction is enough to literally lift you off your feet. You are about to ask Rus how you steer these things, when a fire lights under your feet, engulfs you in a pleasantly cool glove up to your ankle, and launches you into the air. At the slightest shifting of your weight, you can steer yourself. You can push yourself forward.

You spend a few precious seconds figuring out which way for left and which way for right, then look back to Rus.

Rus sits in the mouth of the cave, still leaning against the wall. He waves you off without much in
the way of good-cheer or hope, but that’s fine by you. You know you can do this. 
You pick the biggest of the two as your first target.

Jamie Egbert: be Vriska Serket =======>
Vriska Serket: flip your shit =============>

Your name is Vriska Serket and, fuck that, no, you are not going to flip your shit. You’ve got more important things to do. 
For example, evading the grip of this massive fucking hand that just poked itself into the cave. Also, doing your fly up. You didn’t have much time to dress yourself, so your bra is on inside-out and your shirt is on backwards and your jeans are also a mess, probably buttoned in the wrong holes as well as unzipped.
Terezi has some kind of plan, you think. Right now she’s in front of you, defending you with her own body. You don’t like that. Did she miss the part where you killed three grown men like a fucking badass? You know she’s blind, but come on! People notice when they’re in the same room as that kind of action, right? Just when you’re thinking ‘well, this is it, I’m going to be crushed by a giant hand’, the hand is suddenly withdrawn.
Outside, there is the sound of some gigantic beast being hit over the head with its own bones. That is the only way you can think to describe the unexpected, guttural cry that rattles your teeth inside your head. Covering your ears, you fall to your knees in an attempt to escape the noise- it’s awful. It is the most horrible sound you have ever heard. And it is accompanied by the most disgusting stink as well. The stink of rotted, fetid flesh being burnt.
Moonlight floods the cave. As your eyes adjust to the glaring light, you see something of a bright, angry blue flitting around the dark shadow and the lantern eyes of whatever it is that just tried to grab you. Your eyes must be deceiving you, because you could swear that within that dancing halo of fire is a human figure.
And you could swear that that human figure is John’s dad.
But what business does Jamie Egbert have, wearing a halo of fire and pummelling the craggy face of a monster too ugly for words? None whatsoever. That ain’t stopping him. Terezi pulls you back to your feet, looking a little calmer “Rus came to save us. About fucking time he did something useful.”
“That’s not Rus,” you still can’t quite believe it yourself “That’s Jamie Egbert.” Terezi’s face falls. Her hand tightens around your wrist, scratching the skin “What.”
“That’s not Rus! That’s John’s dad.”
“He…are you sure? This is very important, Vriska, are you absolutely sure that’s Jamie Egbert in the middle of that djinn fire?”
“Yeah! I told you, like, five times! It is him! That’s 100% Jamie Egbert in that fire up there!”
“Stay here.”
“Hey, you can’t just tell me what to do.” Instead of snarling at you, she just asks you more softly. So softly you have to strain to hear her.
“Please just stay here.”
“Fine.”
For the next two hours, no matter what you hear, you don’t move an inch from the spot where Terezi has left you.

Vriska Serket : be Terezi Pyrope ================>
Terezi Pyrope: panic ===============>

Your name is Terezi Pyrope, and you’ve got to be sure that it’s not Rus. “Rus!” you shout, as you join him in the air.
The giant makes a swipe for you at the sound of your voice. But it is moving slowly now, and smells like most of it has already been burnt past repair. You dodge so easily you almost don’t have to move at all.
The fire in front of you wobbles in mid-air. It’s an uncertain fire. It’s a nervous, self-conscious fire. It’s not Rus at all.
“No,” says Jamie Egbert “It’s me.”
“What the fuck did you let Rus do?”
“It’s alright. It just weakened him. He’s in his cave right now, watching the battle.”
His arm moves in the air, towards the direction of the peak. There is something so earnest and innocent in this man’s voice that your anger with him just dissipates. He really doesn’t know what Rus has done, does he?
And you’re certainly not going to be the one to tell him.
The ghost- Dirk, it was definitely Dirk- he told you to go and save John, or Dave first, you can’t remember which one anymore. They can save themselves. Right now, Equius is about to lose his last living family member and you’ll be damned if he isn’t there for it.
Gods, where could he be at this hour? He has to be either at his home or Nepeta’s and Roxy’s. You know they left in separate cars, so you’ll check his place first.
And then something occurs to you “Oh, Mr Egbert? Don’t worry about this bastard. He’s nearly dead. Your boy is in some deep trouble right now.”
“Deep trouble?” he repeats in alarm “What deep trouble?”
“He’s being chased by a mad-woman named Hine Snow. She’s going to gut him and wear his intestines for a scarf if you don’t do something. Go, get him. He’s at the fort.”
He needs no further encouragement.
The heat of his blast-off is searing, even for you, as a dragon. When their tormentor disappears, the giant has lost the will to keep fighting. They collapse to their massive knees. You hear dozens of trees being crushed under the body as it falls flat onto its face. In the near-distance, a cry of pain and what might be sorrow echoes around the mountain.
To your right, where the town lies, you feel the heat of thousands of lights in hundreds of houses flicking on at once. The few who were not already roused by the earth-quake will be gathering on their porches now, and looking to the mountain to investigate what the hell made that noise.
 Plenty of them are sure to notice the winged girl zipping over their houses and shattering through the bedroom window of one (like you’re going to knock and wait for him to open the door), but you don’t care at this point.
Let them deal with their troubles. You’re going to deal with your own.
The trip across the town is easily the fastest flight you have ever taken. It is no easy feat, to steer yourself into the wind and the driving snow. Clouds loom all around you, filling your nose so that it is almost impossible to use it to figure out where you’re going, even though you fly so low that your foot clips a few roof-tops. Every now and then, a scream reaches your ears faintly before being snatched away by the wind. A few car alarms go off, and at one point you hear some asshole screaming for his guns, like he thinks he’s going to climb the mountain and slay the beast.
At one point, when your wings are screaming and just refuse to lift themselves any further, you drop onto a roof. Perching on the seam between the sides of the roof, you double up, catching your breath.
Underneath you is a human family, chattering amongst themselves. One of them screams. You wonder if they’re pointing at you as well, because almost immediately the rest of them are screaming. Almost.
One of them is shouting: “TEREZI!”
You know that voice. Not well. You just met its owner today, but you know enough to guess “Eridan?”
“Yeah! It’s me! Lissen, somethin’ real bad happened at Eq’s house!”
A man’s voice says “What the fuck is going on? Do you know that gargoyle?”
“She’s a dragon, Pa,” he says impatiently “W-what’s w-wrong with the mountain?”
“Giants. What’s wrong with Equius?”
“Mr Makara just called me! He wants me to pass it on to Dave an’ John, ‘cos no one’s pickin’ up at their house! Nep was murdered!”

Your blood would run cold, if you hadn’t filled your quota of deep shocks for the night already. The only thing you can summon up is a vague feeling of sadness and discomfort.

She was Eq’s friend, not really yours. You only met her a few days ago, but Equius told stories about his and her escapades in the old country all the time. You’re not sure if it’s true, but Roxy once told you the whole reason Nepeta came to this country at all was to look for Equius.

And now he’s lost her too?

This is going to be a cruel night.


“You too!” he calls, then says to someone next to him “Cronus, for fuck’s sake, pull yourself together. Yer embarassin’ me!”

Now that you know to look for a disturbance, it is not that hard to find Equius’s house from up here. By now, half of the town are screaming on their lawns. You can hear the low buzz of electronics, and guess that at least one out of every three is filming what they can. Frigging humans. They are so weird with their social media. Hasn’t it occurred to them yet to hide for their lives?

You hear a little girl shouting: “It’s coming this way!”

Soon, the cry is echoed from nearly every street. All of them, each in different ways, telling each other that the monster is coming this way. And yet, you have yet to hear a single engine being fired up for a quick escape.

Has it not occurred to them to run for their stupid lives? Stupid, stupid humans.

Finally, you find the right disturbance. In a knot of warm bodies is another body, much warmer than all of them put together although his audience would not notice. Two of the warm bodies are loading something ice-cold into what you assume is an ambulance, getting ready to ship Nepeta’s weird corpse off to the morgue.

Throwing caution into the wind, you land among them.

On top of one of them in fact, as a sudden gust of wind knocks you off balance. You grapple for a handhold and find one in what feels like a headscarf underneath a police cap that you knock askew.

The woman underneath you starts to scream.

“Terezi.” says Equius, not surprised at all. Instead, he sounds tired.

Very, very tired.

He must be, to so freely reveal his association with you- some weird, random monster, in front of a group of his colleagues.

“Is she dead?”

“Yes. Obviously. I’m covered in her blood. Put your gun away, Al-Abbas, she’s no threat to you.”

The officers back away from you, leaving Equius to whatever his weird business is. You hear one of them running to a car and shouting into a staticky device for some back-up.

They must already know about the giants on the mountain (how could they miss those massive bastards?), as you can hear several other officers demanding that men be drawn away from the mountain to deal with the situation over here- there’s an officer dead, for Christ’s sake, Leijon was just eviscerated and she died in Zahhak’s arms!

“Your brother is dying.”

He doesn’t respond, so you continue.

“Rus finished the contract with Jamie. I felt Jamie in action, Eq, and he’s got it all. He’s got every last scrap of Rus’s fire in him.”

You reel back as he jumps to his feet “He told me it was only going to be a partial transference!”

“Yeah, well, he lied! Jamie’s a fully-fledged djinn now and he doesn’t know it! He could burn the whole mountain down! Also, John’s being chased by Hine Snow and she’s got a knife. Dirk told me so.”

Amazingly, the only thing he takes away from that little speech is ‘Hine Snow’.

“Hine Snow,” he repeats, his voice growing deep with anger “She killed Nepeta.

“I know.”
“And you left John to her?”

“Jamie’s going for him. We gotta go. You gotta see Rus. It’s just not fair if you don’t get to see Rus before he goes.”

Equius takes a deep breath. Then he lets it go, and there is the sound of fabric falling from his shoulders- they must have put in him a shock blanket.

He blasts off right in front of you, prompting screams and shouts of surprise all around. And, once again, blasting your hair back and giving you the sensation of being burned senseless.

These djinns.

It takes almost all of the strength remaining to you to get up in the air and stay on Eq’s trail. This has been a long, hard day, and you should have really been resting instead of talking to that human girl. Vriska.

You do hope you survive this, for her sake. You know her kind. You know the smell of cabin fever from the labs, where people slowly lost their minds as they went through unspeakable suffering, pain and cruelty. Now, maybe Vriska would assume the position of a lab technician rather than one of the test subjects like you were, but you still cannot summon any feeling for her that is not sympathetic or admiring.

She’s done well, to survive this long in a society that is clearly not equipped to handle her. If you make it through this, you’re going to take her away from her pain. As far away as she wants to go, and as far away as you can make it.

You are worried about getting back to the mountain, but by the time you and Equius are once again over the trees, the giant is at the bottom of the slope. It seems to be heading to the town to avenge itself upon those people, rather than the actual culprit. The smell of charred flesh and broken trees bleeding sap tells you that the body lies where it fell, and that whatever consciousness was trapped within that misshapen head has vacated the premises.

Jamie isn’t around either.

Equius gets to the cave before you. He does not have to look far to find Rus- he doesn’t have to look at all, in fact, because Rus is stretched out in the very front of the cave. He smells like the cold. Like the snow around him, as it steals into his bones and his blood, and kills him.

When djinns are robbed of the fires that fuel them, then they do not have that long to live. However, in your experience, those who have chosen to lose their fire live at least long enough to squeeze out some last words.

You hang back, to let them have their last moments in private.

Terezi Pyrope: be Equius Zahhak===========>
Equius Zahhak: hold your dying brother ====>

The audience knows your name well by now. Why do they need constant reminders?

What they do not know is a thing about this man you’re holding in your arms, whose fire has drained from him. They have never known him, and now they never will.

“Rus,” you say, just in case he does not know you are there.

His eyes are closed. The look on his face might be peaceful, if he were not now the colour of sand and as cold as anything has ever been.

He answers you, but makes no effort to open his eyes “I was hoping you would make it back to see me off.”

He is settled in your lap, held close. He does not seem to be in pain, nor is he crying from anger or sadness or whatever else runs through the mind of a dying man.

This is all you can do for him, really, and it’s just enough to hold him.

“You know you used to be the most annoying child there ever was.” his voice is so weak “You were so arrogant and conceited. If it wasn’t exactly the way you thought, you didn’t want to know about it. But that’s the way children are. I was so lucky to have you. So many of us end up alone. We djinns- we have this bad habit of thinking we’re too good for the company of others. I never had to think that way because I always had you….young man, are you crying on me?”
Rubbing your cheek on your shoulder, you sniff “No, of course not.”
“Good. Good, I hate it when you cry. What I’m getting at is…well you understand why I did this.
I’m not going to waste my last words on that.”
“I love you.”
“I love you too.”
“Yes, but I said it first, so it means more.”
“That’s terrible logic. I’m older, so anything I say is automatically more important.”
“No, first. I’m first, so I apparently love you more.”
“You are being so immature. And you are definitely crying on me, you liar.”
Somewhere in the background, a chorus of screams goes up, followed by a series of deep crashes
and booms that echo through the city and bounce all over the mountain.”
“That sounds important,” says Rus “You should go.”
“I’m staying here until you go.”
“I better hurry up and die then.”
He takes your hand in his. It’s smaller than you remember it being, but maybe that is because your
own has grown, with the rest of you. And anyway, it has been a number of years since he last held
your hand, so you’re not surprised it feels so strange.
The wait is not long before the urgency of the situation outside the cave finally drives you from your
brother.
It is only when you are flying towards the destruction being wrought on the town that Terezi says
“I’m so sorry.”
You had forgotten she was there.
An end, and an epilogue

Chapter Notes

Last chapter. I couldn't resist posting it quickly after the last one.
Alright then. Here we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Your name is John Egbert.
A couple of seconds ago, the giant stepped over your head. It seems to be aiming to cause some destruction in the town now, but you’re not sure. All that you are sure of is that you are no longer going to be able to find Dave and Gamzee at the giant- even if they reach it, there is no way you will be able to double back and somehow evade Hine Snow to reach them.
Hine Snow is no longer trembling. Godcat is not going to appear conveniently from the snow to save you from this fight and you doubt that there will be any miraculous appearance of friends to save you this time.
It’s so unfair. Why do you have to have two near-death experiences in the space of the same damned 24 hours? What god decided that this was a good day to totally kick the shit out of John Egbert and John Egbert’s life? A sadistic one- that’s who. Assuming, quite realistically, that you don’t survive this, you’ll make it a priority to seek out the asshole who decreed that so many things should go so spectacularly wrong and punch them until your knuckles bleed.
You are hiding right now. Probably not for very long.
The rotted log you have crawled underneath offers minimal protection. Just about enough to hide yourself if you double up and pray that your ass isn’t poking out at a weird angle, and low enough to the ground that to find you, Hine Snow will either have to crouch and stare, or spot your ass poking out at a weird angle. You would have corrected the ass-angle by now if you could still feel the damn thing.
At this point, you are so cold that the sound of your teeth chattering might be what gives you away. To mask the sound, you have cupped your hands around your mouth. This means that you might not be able to defend yourself quickly enough, should she find you and attack immediately. But in your experience (which extends to watching a whole lot of action movies) most villains like to monologue about how just their cause is before they kill their victims.
You’re relying on that monologue to give you a window of time to throw your hands up in front of your face, and maybe grab a rock to give her head a good bashing when she grabs you.
It’s a faint hope, but it’s all you got.
That, and the irrational hope that Dave will spring from somewhere to save your ass.
Wherever he is, be it the labs or just flying around, whether he’s with Gamzee or not, he’s not going to make it in time. Not unless he knows exactly where you are. You don’t even know exactly where you are.
“Come out!” she barks, not so far away “Come out and make this easier on yourself! The longer you make me spend out in this bitter cold, the longer it takes for you to die!”
Hopefully, the cold will kill you before Hine Snow has a chance to touch you.

John Egbert: be your dad =========>
Your dad/Jamie Egbert: how the hell does flying work anyway? =======>

That’s what you would like to know.
You know you’re doing it, but you don’t know how to stop it. Nor can you figure out how to slow
yourself down for long enough to scan the surrounding areas. Heaven only knows how the hell you’re going to help John without the faintest idea of where he might be right now. And while you’re dealing with this crisis, Rus is weakened and unable to defend the town while it is literally being attacked by a giant. You need a miracle.

Jamie Egbert: be Dirk Strider ===========>
Dirk Strider: be that miracle ===========>

Your name is Dirk Strider and you may have just killed your tiny brother. That was definitely not your intention. What happened is this: you looked for him, you spotted him, you were beside yourself with excitement at seeing the little man and knowing you would be able to communicate and approached without fear. However, at some point during the time it took you to get to the cave from the labs, you became visible. You are not sure if it has something to do with growing in strength, because you were finally able to solicit an acknowledgement from someone, or if it’s another matter entirely. Frankly, you don’t really care. It worked. Dave can see you. Dave is looking at you right now.

Not with the wonder and the joy that you hoped for. You can’t really blame him though, since you sprang from the middle of a tree, shouting his name. Neither can you blame yourself; you thought you were still invisible. At the sight of a dead teenager launching himself through a tree and bellowing for his attention, Dave reeled back. He knocked into the Wendigo-kid, who just managed to catch himself and catch Dave under the arms to keep him from cracking his head on the icy ground.

The two of them stare at you in open-mouthed shock as you search for something to say that will calm the situation down. You can’t come up with anything, so they get: “John’s gonna die.”

Gamzee nearly drops Dave “The fuck you talkin’ ‘bout?!”

“I mean what I said! John’s gonna die! He’s hiding underneath a rotted log not too far from here! Jamie’s looking, but he’s not gonna find him! I’m sending him over to burn the crap outta that giant monster bastard that’s about to total your town-”

You stop as Dave struggles to his feet.

Now, there is some of that wonder you were hoping for. Tempered with fear, though, not joy. Not a trace of happiness at all, at being reunited with his big brother after all this time. Instead, his eyes well up “I couldn’t remember your face. I…I know who you are, but I wasn’t really sure how your face looked. It looks like mine.”

You touch your face, praying that it has not rotted or been disfigured in some way through the filter of death “Yeah, little man. We look a lot alike, don’t we?”

He nods “But your eyes are orange. Mine are red.”

“My wings are orange.”

He wipes his eyes on the corner of his sleeve “That’s…that’s really cool…but we should talk about it later, ‘cos John’s apparently dying, or something?”

“Uh, yeah, that sounded pretty motherfuckin’ important,” adds Gamzee.
“Come on, follow me, Dave. Gamzee, follow us from the ground.”

“Hey, Dave,” says Gamzee, as he sheds his human mask “Find out how this motherfucker knows my name.”

Dave’s wings are beautiful. He spreads them without hesitation, without fear. In the corner of his mouth is a little crust of blood, so you suspect he must have taught himself how to hunt as well as polished his flying. All by himself.

God, Dave always was that kind of kid. He was tough, calm, in control. And, underneath it all, much like you, a quivering mess of nerves and the urge to sob uncontrollably. He has grown into a fine young man. One who knows how to navigate a deadly situation without pausing to sob at critical
moments.
You love him so much it hurts the place where your heart would be if it still beat.
“That way.”
Dave nods, and sets off to the slope you have pointed him too.
John ran up a slope to get away from Hine. Not a bad idea for evading a knife, but if she had a gun she would have easily picked him off the slope.
Dave doesn’t notice that you aren’t behind him. You don’t call him back.
Already, you can feel yourself fading away. Now that your task seems to be complete, as that task was basically just ridding Dave of the threats of the old technicians, there’s no real need for you to hang around.
“Jamie!” you bark.
A blue light appears a few hundred feet beneath you, and rises quickly from the forest floor. Too quickly. He shoots right past you and continues on into the cloud-cover. You watch his fire wash the belly of the clouds a violent blue, and try not to think of Rus, and of whether or not Rus has expired yet.
Whatever Equius does after this, you sincerely hope he bears no grudge against Jamie.
Your patience is wearing as thin as your grip on this reality, but Jamie manages to bring himself back down. He hovers a few dozen feet above your head, uncertain of who you are and what he should do.
Then, something clicks.
Before you can introduce yourself, he says “Dirk Strider, right? Equius told me about you. Specifically, he told me you were dead.”
“I am dead.” you gesture down at yourself, calling attention to the fact that your legs have faded up to your knees.
Faded is the wrong word, actually.
What your body is doing is becoming brittle and hard, like sand. Separating itself into tiny flakes and grains, and being torn away in the swift winds. You’re going fast.
Not so fast that you won’t be able to say what you want to say.
The two of you regard each other for a few, precious seconds.
Then, aware of the time slipping away, you say “John is safe.”
You’re lying, of course. Jamie does not realise this. He does not know you well enough to know when you are lying; Eq or Terezi would have called bullshit on that the moment the words left your mouth.
“Dave and Gamzee got to him. Hine Snow is dead. Nothing to worry about, from now on.”
At some level, you suspect this is true.
After all, you are crumbling into the wind. That must mean that your task is done, so there are two possible outcomes, either of which ultimately results in Dave no longer needing your care.
One: Hine Snow kills him and the others, and he joins you in whatever after-life it is you have to look forward to.
Two: he kills Hine snow, the last of the technicians, and lives as good a life as he can. Hopefully, with John at his side.
If those two don’t start dating, you may have to come back with the new objective of getting them together.
“What do I do now?”
You wonder why he’s asking you. Must seem like some kind of authority, you being dead and naturally mysterious with your orange eyes and all.
Nodding at the hulking figure that has just reached the edge of the town, you say “Kill that thing. You killed the little one, now finish off the big one before it flattens your people.”
Jamie squints through the swirling snow. John definitely got his eyes from his father “I feel that I know you. That we played a game once.”
Something stirs at the back of your long-dead brain, but you push the thought away. Whatever hallucinations or deja vu this man wants to entertain about you, he’s not going to use up your last
seconds doing it.
By now, you are mostly gone. Basically, you’re a bit of torso, a collar-bone and a head.
“Tell Dave I love him. Tell Dave I was always there, looking out for my little man until the end. Tell him Equius loves him and Terezi loves him and all of his friends are going to be there to support him, no matter what happens. He’s got some good ones. I know. I watched them grow up. Oh, and tell the skinny Asian one that he’s not going nuts.”
Jamie’s eyebrows knit together “What did you do to Sollux?”
“Never mind that.”
You want to add more, but you no longer have a mouth.
So there is nothing left to do but turn your eyes to the forest, in hopes for one last glimpse of him.
Your efforts are rewarded with a scrap of red. Glistening in the snow and the moonlight. Stretched wide, proud and strong.
Dave is gonna be alright.
And that’s the last thought you have before all that you are and all that you ever would have been is removed from the world in which you lingered for so long.

Dave Strider: kill this crazy bastard ==============>

Your name is Dave Strider.
Her name is apparently Hine Snow.
John stumbled upon one of her murders- he told you with the tears barely concealed of how the body was lying in a pool of blood, organs and excrements. No way in hell you’re going to let that happen to John.
You see her, but she does not see you.
She is the first thing you see in the white- all of that white glittering, thanks to the moon, and her fuzzy black shape, twisting this way and that as she screams for John to come out.
You come up behind her, knowing she will not see you. Gamzee is not far behind.
Hoping to make this as quick as possible, you keep your human shape. With the basilisk instincts finally at home in your mind, it shouldn’t be as hard to fight as it was before.
Then, just because this is that kind of night, Hine Snow turns. Of course she sees you, with your wings spread like sails, less than ten feet above her. By now, it is too late to stop yourself from landing right on top of her. She knows this, and has raised her knife in anticipation.
Oh God, it’s already bloody.
But you can’t smell blood anywhere but on her. So that means John isn’t hurt yet?
You can’t think about it anymore, because you’re folding your wings and dropping from the sky, falling hard to the snowy earth. You roll. The impact is still dizzying and it robs you of the few seconds of a head-start you thought you were going to have on her.
No sooner than you have set about struggling to your feet does Hine Snow strike her first blow. Cursing, you let yourself fall back again. Flat on your back. The knife swings over your head.
Seeing the vulnerable position, Hine-stabs down, aiming to gut you.
At the same time, you kick up with all your strength, bringing your knees to your chin. When her knife thuds into the ground, you turn head-over-heels and get to your feet.
Still crouched, she glares up at you with murder in her eyes. You bring your foot down on her head.
She doesn’t so much as flinch.
Instead, she seizes your ankle and drives her knife into your leg. The entire limb erupts into a pain so fierce that it warms you completely. You forget the cold. You forget the snow. In that second of blinding pain, you even forget to defend yourself, so she manages to sock you good in the other leg, bringing you to the floor with a crash.
She wrenches the knife from your leg, drives her knee into your chest, and raises the knife above her
head with one hand. With the other hand, she gathers together your wrists to pin your arms down. Ok.
This did not go to plan.
“DAVE!”
Hine doesn’t even notice she’s under attack until John slams into her and sends them both spilling down the steep slope. In spite of the pain in your leg, you manage to reach out and grab John by the arm before he can fall to far.
Hine, on the other hand, keeps rolling for a good 15 feet before crashing into a low, rotting log.
“C’mon! We haven’t got much time! She’ll get up soon!”
John hauls himself up and attempts to do the same for you. With no chance to warn him of your leg, all you can manage to do is not scream down his ear when he sticks you on your feet. He starts back in alarm. Without his support, you collapse again.
“My leg!”
“Oh my gods! I’m so sorry, Dave, I didn’t know!”
John stoops and picks you up. Literally, like, just picks you up. Adrenalin must have given him some crazy strength. He carries you away like a newlywed getting ready to fling their spouse on the marriage bed, and then he does actually drop you in the snow.
Crouching beside you, he wraps an arm around your shoulder “What do we do now?”
You wrap an arm about him as well “Gamzee’s coming.”
Hine Snow rears up over the edge of the slope.
“No. This has gotta end now.”
In the distance, an explosion sounds.
The explosion is so unexpected that even Hine turns to look with you and John.
The second giant is falling. Its head has been turned into a smoking crater, a clutch of blue embers fizzing and dying where you presume brains used to be.
“Two of them.”
“Two of them.”
With a finger red from the cold, John points out one speck of blue light, then another beside it “There are two djinns.” he glances over his shoulder “Rus must be out of the cave, fighting too.”
“God and gods bless that reclusive weirdo.”
As the corpse falls, the shock of it shakes even the mountain so hard that rocks and even a few tree trunks are knocked loose. John notices one tree trunk barrelling down the slope towards you. Rather than dragging you to the side, he flattens himself over you and presses you into the snow.
For a very, very quiet moment, it’s just you and John. Staring at each other. Each of you are flushed from the snow and from fear, and your teeth are gritted from the unbelievable pain in your leg.
On another hand entirely, John’s eyes are so pretty.
“Thanks.” he mutters.
Wow. You must have said that out loud. Dammit.
The log does not crush you and John. Instead, it hits a curved rock and zooms off of it, like a skateboard coasts up a ramp. The two of you watch it go sailing over-head.
“If there’s a God, that thing will hit her.” says John under his breath.
The log misses Hine Snow by miles, who has also flattened herself in the snow for shelter.
“Fly us out of here!” hisses John.
“No. This has gotta end now.”
“We can’t beat her!”
Hine Snow gets up and shrugs the snow from her body. She stoops. When she straightens again, her knife has been mostly cleaned of blood. Ready for some more of the fresh stuff.
“John, she’s just gonna keep coming after us. We got her now. If we run for help, she could kill somebody else.”
“Should I tell you who I’ve killed?” she offers, and points to what remains of the dried blood on her knife “This was your officer friend. Not the djinn. The kitsune. And that blonde woman. I would have cut her open too, but I had to get the car to stop somehow.”
She mimes shooting a gun several times. Her aim seems to be on John specifically. “I also killed your four doctors, Dave. Sneaky, arrogant men, thinking they could keep a secret like you for very long. That room that was off the blueprints…that was a clever twist, I’ll admit, but it was not a satisfactory one for me. I just didn’t think they had been smart enough to survive, you understand? That’s six people you loved dearly. Well, perhaps not so dearly as you love the seventh. Seven is a good number, don’t you think?”

The information she has just rambled off doesn’t really register in your mind as something that could be true. Whatever grasp on reality she had, tenuous or firm, is completely gone. Her eyes are glazed with a heat like fever heat, but the heat is a sort of sickly anger. They wander this way and that. They are no longer focussed on you.

It seems to you that she doesn’t really know if you and John are real, corporeal things, or if she’s about to kill a symptom of her madness.

“Get up, John. Help me up.”

He obliges.

“Stay back,” you say “I’m just gonna go for it.”

“What do you-” starts John.

You dive from his arms and by the time you land on Hine Snow, you are what would have been Basilisk. Now it is just you.

“…mean.” finishes John.

Of course you land on the knife. You went in knowing that was going to happen.

Some of that part about her killing six people in your life must have sunken in. Otherwise, if she hadn’t told you that, you might have accepted John’s idea of running the hell away whole-heartedly.

You are not sure where Hine Snow has stabbed you, but she keeps doing it.

Once, twice, three times.

Then, you find your claws and use one to push her down, flat on her back. When you landed, you broke just about everything there is to be broken. But she did not fall.

She’s probably not human, but not a monster in any way that you, a Basilisk, would recognise.

Hine Snow screams as she struggles against you. The sounds are definitely not what sane people make. You scream back at her. You’re sure the screams are echoing all the way down the mountain.

As if the giant wasn’t giving the people enough to worry about.

By the time you finally manage to get one of your claws into her stomach, she has stabbed you about five or six times. Each blow to the stomach causes amazing pain. You seriously didn’t know it was possible to feel this much pain.

She tries to hold you back, but her strength is not enough. She’s only a human, after all.

And you’re a basilisk.

The claw pierces her stomach. Blood soaks through her clothes. You imagine dark, clear blood filling the curve of her stomach and the next thing you know, her skull is crunching between your teeth.

There’s a gentle cracking noise, and something gristly, swimming in fluid like a weak gravy sauce squirts into your mouth. Tilting your head back, you swallow it all in one gulp. Then you drop the body, plucking your claw free from her stomach.

Rising to your feet with an effort, you look towards the town.

All of the lights are on.

Screams, the wail of alarms and of glass being shattered drifts up the slope. They’re really losing their shit down there.

“They know all about us now.” you say, and are pleasantly surprised that your voice still sounds like what you were accustomed to hearing from Basilisk.

John approaches you cautiously “Dave, don’t move. You’re…you’re really hurt.”

You do move.

That is to say, you fall flat on your stomach. Cold shoots into the wounds as snow comes into contact with your open wounds. The sensation is far from pleasant, but it’s also a helluva lot better than getting stabbed again.
As John runs over to you, you hear him shouting a name. A few names. It sounds like your friends made it over. A little late for the party, though. It would be really cool if Dirk were with them.
You want to talk to him so badly.
Your last thought is how the hell John and the others are going to fix you, if your doctors are all dead now.

(ten years later)

Your name is John Strider.
“I can’t believe this place is still here.”
“Of course it’s still here. It’s made of cement. Cement, like diamonds and true love, is forever.”
Dave doesn’t seem as interested in the fort. What he wants to do is wander around the forest, checking his old roosts and favourite hunting spots, and seeing if he can scent Gamzee somewhere.
Since graduating from high-school nearly killed him and wrung his brain out, Gamzee decided that human society wasn’t for him. He took to the woods a few years ago.
During college, you would sometimes get the fright of your life when Gamzee turned up in the middle of the night for a catch-up chit-chat. Since the campus was attached to a deep woods, much like the one that grew on the mountain of your home town, it was simple matter for Gamzee to stroll across the lawn and climb in through the window whenever he was in the area. Your roommate quickly adjusted to this. After all, he said, he had some cousins who were wood nymphs and he totally understood the relative struggle of having some monster friends.
Somehow, Tavros and Gamzee are still together. Tavros is one year away from becoming a fully-fledged vet, so you guess having a Wendigo for a boyfriend is good for practice.
“No, but look. It looks almost exactly the same as the last time we were here.”
Crouching, Dave squints at the foundations, looking for signs that the structure might fall apart. The slabs you used when you built it, about a hundred million years ago, are still as firmly in place as they ever were.
It’s hard to believe. And at the same time, it is the only condition for the fort that makes any sense.
Dave knocks his fist against it experimentally. His wings fluff up in discomfort as his knuckles bounce straight off again. Evidently, he was expecting a little more give than he got.
“Ow! Dammit.”
“Got a boo-boo?”
“Yes. Look, I’m dying.”
He shows you his lightly scraped knuckles. You kiss them and pat him on the head reassuringly.
“Another scar to add to the collection,” he says breezily.
You notice a hand going to his stomach, where there is a ruin of scar tissue that keeps him from taking his shirt off at the beach. Sometimes, he grows shy about them around you. As if the scars he walked away from that night are something to be ashamed of.
And while you do agree that they are hard to look at, you don’t want him to hide them. He does not believe you when you say this, but your first thought, when looking at those brutal scars, is not thinking about what it looked like when Equius got to work on him.
There really was no other choice. Either he died right there in your arms, or Equius burned the wounds shut.
He did a good job of it, even though his hands were kind of shaking. To the point that Terezi had to hold his wrists steady to keep his hands from slipping, and burning something that did not need to be sealed shut.
Terezi.
You wonder if she’s going to show up today. And Vriska, too. It’s not like you and Dave made a big deal out of it, going back to the fort, and back to the house to visit your father (who is apparently happy to have Dave as a son-in-law as well as kind of a fostered son?), but your friends have a habit
of gravitating back to the area when they know that you and Dave are back here. God, you hope they’re far away right now. Vriska’s only become more insane and acerbic since she set off with Terezi. Every time you see her, she’s always wearing the same set of travel-worn clothes as well.

Sollux and Eridan probably won’t show up- they’ve been in Japan ever since graduating from college. When Sol said he was going back there to help out with the family business, the only way to stop Eridan from following him would have been to kill him.

Every day when you collect the mail, you look for an invitation to a wedding in Japan. Dave is telling you not to hold your breath. You’re telling him not to be a non-believer, because true love always wins. Generally, when you say this, you wave your left hand around in his face and point to your wedding ring with your tongue out.

“Have you talked to Feferi this week?”

Dave straightens up with a daisy in his hand “Yeah, I did. I don’t think she’s gonna show up, if that’s what you’re thinking?”

He pops the daisy behind your ear.

You smile “No, that’s not what I’m thinking. I just haven’t heard if she got her dan yet or not.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah. She sent me an email about it. Didn’t you check your inbox this week?”

“Oh.”

“See, that’s why you don’t know these things, baby. Because you don’t check your darn emails.”

You give him a gentle punch in the shoulder “How did she do?”

“Scarily well. Best in the examination.”

Apparently, running through a monster-infested woods with a stick gave Feferi a taste for adventure and for sharing it with other people. She is about to become qualified to teach martial arts, and she has been talking about trip to Japan (she’ll stay with Eridan and Sol, of course, to save money) to perfect her techniques. Sounds very Mulan to you.

Whenever Dave points out that you’re talking about the entirely wrong culture and country besides, you launch into ‘I’ll make a man out of you’ and won’t stop singing until you have completed the entire song.

“Yeesh. She’s gonna be a monk on a mountain top before we know it.”

Dave shakes his head “You’re thinking of Shaolin monks.”

“I was close though, right?”

“You keep confusing Japan and China.”

“Oh, well. I was geographically close. Hey, think I’d still fit in there?”

Dave shrugs, tilting his head to the side to contemplate the space “Well, you haven’t grown that much since you were fifteen.”

You want to protest, but it’s true. You have remained at a dainty height of 5 ft 6in, despite your hopes and a few prayers that you might at least get another two inches, just so you don’t look like a hobbit next to Dave’s Gandalf. His species are very good at growing very tall. When the monster world revealed itself in such a spectacular way to the human world, there was no hiding it. Too many people on the social media; too many video clips. Those who wrote it off as a hoax were soon convinced, by the massive volume of monsters that came forward too.

As it turns out, there were plenty of families living like yours had, hiding a monster in their midst. Some of them had fished their monster-family members from terrible situations in a similar way to the way Dave joined your family, others had married them, and others still had had their children with them.

There was an entire world of non-humans just waiting for an opportune moment to introduce themselves. It has not been easy. Those who didn’t know about the second world are not always happy to accept its existence. There are those crazy political groups demanding segregation in schools, nullifying the marriages of monsters and humans (fuck that, you say, fuck that sincerely), banning them from public places and even a few who think extermination is the way to go.

They don’t get that much support.

A surprising number of people have friends and family that are non-human in some way, and who
won’t stand to hear a word said against their races.
You think the best part about this new society is Dave being able to walk with his wings out.
These days, if he doesn’t feel like walking, it’s a simple matter of unfurling his wings and taking off
from the window of your tiny apartment. He is far from the only person who chooses to commute to
their work-place by wing-power. The charming middle-aged couple that live next door are non-
human and human, like you and Dave. The wife is some kind of vampire, you think. She has bat-
wings, so that is what you are basing your assumption of her species off of.
“Are you two vagrants going to move along, or should I arrest you for loitering?”
You spin around at the sound of a very familiar voice behind you.
“Equius!” cries Dave.
It’s like he’s fifteen again. He launches himself into Equius’s arms for a hug. Forgetting that he is
now a twenty-five year old man and 6ft 3inches, and knocking the djinn right off his feet.
The two of them struggle to their feet, laughing like idiots.
You go over and give Equius a much gentler hug “Oh, it’s so good to see you!”
“You too, John.”
“How’ve you been?” Dave’s eyes are bright with excitement- he still turns into a child whenever
Equius is around “How’s policing? How’s the town? Have you arrested any meth cooks this week?”
“Meth cooks? Where did you get that from?”
“He spent the last weekend in a ‘Breaking Bad’ marathon.” you whisper.
Equius nods “Ah. No, nothing like that. My job is kind of boring these days. You wouldn’t think it
would be, what, with those horrible monsters running all over the place.”
As he says this, his blue eyes flash with amusement. Now that monsters are out of the… the monster
closet, as it were, Equius has given up his shades. He no longer has to worry about one of his
colleagues figuring out that the glint in his eyes is a literal fire.
“Did you see Karkat on the news last night?” you ask “He looks so professional, doesn’t he?”
“Yes. It’s unnerving, isn’t it? When he is expressing his opinions in a calm and mannerly fashion.”
“I know, right?” Dave laughs “It feels like he’s about to whip out a gun or something!”
Karkat, being the opinionated person he is, decided he needed to be on the front-line for the non-
humans. He’s become a very charismatic figure, which you find hysterical. The media thinks of him
as a kind of young, albino Martin Luther King Jr for the non-humans.
You just want to crack up every time you see your tiny, angry friend standing up for the rights of the
little guys. There is no doubt that his work is excellent and invaluable to the non-human community,
but for some reason it reminds you of how he used to look when throwing a tantrum, except he’s
wearing a tasteful suit and doing it on Letterman.
“He owned his opponent on that schooling issue.” says Dave, just to prove that he was watching it.
He wasn’t.
He stopped in the tiny living room every now and then to look over your shoulder and make a
comment like ‘wow, Karkat’s side burns are insane’ and ‘man if Kat were having this debate in the
school playground, he woulda just kneed the dude in the face and walked away like a badass.’
“Anyway, I’m afraid I do have to take you boys in,” says Equius “Jamie just finished a batch of
cookies. He needs some help eating them.”
You groan “Let’s box ‘em up and send them to Rose and Kan.”
Dave has already started back “C’mon, John! No way! Jamie’s cookies are the best! I’m not sending
‘em to Kan and Rose! They’re so damned rich off Rose’s books and Kan’s fashion between them
that they wouldn’t accept peasant cookies like your dad’s anyways.”
You set off after him.
Then, glancing back at the fort, you stop. Removing the daisy from behind your ear, you lay it on the
cement roof of the fort.
Equius lays a hand on your shoulder “He’s still down there, you know. He’ll keep the fort safe.”
“I hope so. I’m gonna bring my children here some day.”
“Why, John. You didn’t tell me you were pregnant.”
“Oh don’t get fresh with me, old man, or I won’t let you be godfather.”
“John! Eq! Come on, I need some cookies!” shouts Dave. Equius walks after him. His uniform is shiny in the sunlight, just like Dave’s wings, still as red and as glossy and as gorgeous as they were the day you met him. You follow them, leaving the fort behind.

Chapter End Notes

I want to extend a sincere thanks to everyone who read and enjoyed this story, and made their enjoyment apparent by leaving kudos and comments. The comments, especially, really got me fired up to work at it and make the story as good as I possibly could. Sorry about that epilogue. I just couldn't think of how to top the final battle, so we ended up with a marriage, and a 10-years later scenario? Jeez, it was weak, but somehow fitting at the same time. Again, thanks so much for coming this far. Your support means the world. Long live John Egbert.

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