"What is it? What is it?" Nepeta presses right up against his shoulder to get a better look.

"It's a cassette." Karkat is dumbfounded, "Where the shit do you even get a cassette?"

"Is there a note?"

"No, nothing." He checks the packaging one last time. There's not even a return address.

"Any idea who would send you a cassette?"

"Fuck if I know." Karkat says, "Definitely not John or Jade, though I guess Jade might have access to one. But she would have covered it in stickers or something, not just left it blank. Sollux would have sent a disk, if anything. He'd probably have just emailed me a file instead of going to all this trouble anyway."

"Well, whoever it is, they really don't want you to know that it's from them." Nepeta is inspecting the tape, "This is crazy. This is like..." Suddenly, her big, brown eyes seem to light up, "This is just like a rom-com! A mysterious tape... From a lover!"
It all starts on Friday morning, when Kankri drops a package on the table in front of him at breakfast. It's a smallish package, rectangular, and Karkat swears to God it better not be a prank from one of his so-called "friends". He swears they're competing to see who's the biggest idiot or something—either way, he's not prepared to open another package filled with three hundred and sixty four gummy worms from Jade, each of which with smiley faces drawn on them in permanent marker.

"Parcel for you, brother." Kankri announces, cheerfully, in case he had turned blind in the last five minutes and hadn't seen him putting the fucking thing down in front of him.

"From John?" Their dad looks up from his newspaper, "If it's another package of confetti, don't open it at the table."

"Dad..." Karkat rolled his eyes, "I made John swear that he wouldn't do that ever again or so help him. Besides, this isn't his handwriting."

John writes in blue, messy longhand, whereas the writing on the front of this parcel is printed neatly in red ink.

"Maybe he got somebody else to address it, so you wouldn't know that it was from him." Kankri suggests, "Or maybe it's from another one of your friends."

"Sollux doesn't know a mailing system exists outside of his computer inbox." Karkat says, "And Jade wouldn't have send such a bland parcel. She'd have covered it in fucking glitter or something."

"Language." Kankri scolds.

"Perhaps it's a gift from Nepeta." Their father folds up his newspaper and lays it on the table, intrigued now. He's always looking for excuses to invite Nepeta over because Karkat's dad has the biggest crush on Nepeta's Mom. Unfortunately, Karkat's dad possesses the flirting abilities of a platypus.

"What would be the point?" Karkat raises an eyebrow, "She lives about five minutes away. She could easily come over and hand it to me in person."

"Mailing it seems somehow more romantic." Karkat's dad says, "We all know that Nepeta isn't exactly subtle about her-"

"Dad!" Karkat groans.

"Father, I believe your discussion of Miss Leijon's romantic attraction to Karkat is making him feel highly uncomfortable."

"Oh my god, shut up already!" Karkat is ready to throw the package at his stupid brother's head, "I'm going to Nepeta's!"

He abandons his breakfast and gets to his feet, tucking the parcel under his arm. Before anybody can argue, he hurries to the door and slams it shut behind him.

It's hot enough outside to fry not just an egg but a whole damn breakfast and Karkat's sweater is quickly stuck to him with sweat. He takes his time walking down the street, waving to Kanaya and
Mrs Maryam, who are relaxing out in their front garden.

So is Rufioh Nitram and Horuss a few houses down and they wave at him too; Rufioh a little more cheerfully and Horuss a little more awkward. Not because Horuss doesn't like him but because Horuss Zahhak is just a weird kid that always seems to be awkward and smiling too wide and wearing thick goggles. Since their neighbourhood is pretty small, Karkat knows everyone on the street and he's known most of the kids since before kindergarten.

Nepeta doesn't live too far away and he knocks on her door, looking forward to taking full advantage of the Leijon's air conditioning. It's been a hot and sticky summer this year and Karkat has spent most of it hiding out at the Leijon's.

It's Meulin Leijon, wearing her trademark cat ears, that answers the door.

"Hey Meulin." He mouths.

"Hey Karkat!" She shouts, (Meulin is deaf), "It's nice to see you again! Are you here to watch Love Actually with me and Kurloz?"

"Fuck no." Karkat does not want to spend too much time in the same room as the easily excitable Meulin and her creepy boyfriend, Kurloz; he'd lose his mind, "I'm here to see Nepeta."

"She's in her room!" Meulin closes the door behind him and goes back to her computer, presumably to write some fanfiction.

After being friends with her for years, Karkat knows the way to Nepeta's room like he knows the back of his own left hand. It's up the stairs, third door on the left, the one decorated with glittery cat and fish stickers. When he pushes open the door, he's immediately leapt on and tackled in a hug by Nepeta Leijon. She isn't exactly subtle about her crush on him and holds him for way too long. But she finally lets go and stands back, grinning at him.

"Karkitty!" Nepeta jumps up and down with excitement- literally- and lets out a stream of other random words.

If he had to describe Nepeta to a police officer, Karkat would probably say something along the lines of: short, olive skin, freckles, short dark hair, brown eyes, normally wearing boy's clothes, and with a case of Tourette's. This means that she is constantly twitching her left eye, her hands move jerkily, and she involuntarily exclaims random words completely out of context. (The words are normally cat-related). Karkat guesses that if anything, he'd probably compare her outbursts to hiccups. Word hiccups.

Over the years, he's kind of grown used to her tics and barely notices them anymore.

"Sorry, Karkitty." She purrs, "What's in the package?"

For a second he's confused, until Karkat realises that he's still holding the stupid thing.

"Treats fur me?" Nepeta asks, hopefully.

"I don't know, dumbass, I haven't opened it yet."

"Well, open it already!" She urges, gesturing for him to sit down on the bed, next to where he's sat with her legs neatly crossed.

He decides to sit on the floor instead, (leaving Nepeta to slide off the bed and crawl to sit next to
him on the floor instead), and tears the package open. Thankfully, there is no sudden explosion of confetti or a million gummy worms falling onto the floor. Instead, a small, red, unlabelled cassette falls onto his lap. He shakes the packaging; there isn't a letter or a note or any kind of explanation.

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"It's a cassette." Karkat is dumbfounded, "Where the shit do you even get a cassette?"

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"Well, whoever it is, they really don't want you to know that it's from them." Nepeta is inspecting the tape, "This is crazy. This is like..." Suddenly, her big, brown eyes seem to light up, "This is just like a rom-com! A mysterious tape... From a lover!"

"It's not from you, is it?" Karkat is suddenly suspicious.

"I would have just given you a tape, dumbass." Nepeta nudges him.

"How do you even play one of these things?" Karkat takes the tape back from her and inspects it. He's seen one before, he knows that his brother plays them in his minivan (it's not a car, it's a minivan, no matter what Kankri says), but he doesn't know what you play them on. Definitely not on a computer, that's for sure, this wouldn't fit in his disk drive.

"On a Walkman." Nepeta says, as if that much should be obvious, "Meulin has one, we can just ask to borrow it. She won't mind- she doesn't really use it."

Karkat blinks. "Your deaf sister has a Walkman?"

He doesn't know what surprises him more; a deaf girl owning a music player or a Walkman still being in existence.

"She likes to wear it so that people know she can't hear them and don't just think she's being rude." Nepeta explains, "So people think she's listening to music and don't try to talk to her. So she doesn't have to explain that she's deaf. Clever, huh?"

Without waiting for a response, Nepeta leaps to her feet and grabs his hand, pulling him along despite her protests. She is wearing thick blue gloves but that doesn't change the fact that she is holding hands with him. He hates how embarrassed it makes him feel to hold hands with a girl. But there's just something... Uncomfortable about it. Awkward.

Meulin doesn't notice them until Nepeta taps her on the shoulder. This means that Karkat gets a good, hard look at her Draco/Harry fanfiction before she closes her laptop with a snap. It's not too bad actually, he decides at first glance, but her writing style could definitely use some work. She's used a few too many exclamation marks.

"And why is Draco top-"
Nepeta elbows him so hard that he swears she dislodges one of his ribs. She's got a lot of muscle on her for such a small kid.

"Meulin!" Nepeta signs, "Can we borrow your Walkman?"

The older Leijon blushes, obviously aware that they both read her horny drarry fanfic session over her shoulder.

"What for?"

"School project." Nepeta lies.

"It's summer vacation."

"We have to work on it over the summer... Uh, class project."

"You don't share any classes. You're not even in the same grade."

It's true; Nepeta is a sophomore and Karkat is a junior.

"Okay, if you really want to know..." Nepeta gets a coy smile on her face, before she starts signing far too fast for Karkat to be able to read. Evidently, Meulin can read though because it's not long before they both start giggling.

"I ship it." is the only part of Meulin's reply that he can read, "Take the Walkman, it's on my bookshelf. Don't touch any of my... Uh, notebooks."

Nepeta just waggles her eyebrows and runs back up the stairs, bouncing up there like a cat. Offering a kind of shrug to Meulin for lack of explanation, (who just smirks and signs "lover boy" at him), Karkat hurries after her and demands to know what the hell she said.

Nepeta has to jump to grab the Walkman off the top shelf. "Just that you'd made me a romantic mixtape for us to listen to together."

Karkat rolls his eyes. "You and your sister are both bat-shit crazy."

"Cat-shit." Nepeta corrects.

Back in Nepeta's room, he slides the tape into the Walkman. They both press either side of the headset to their ears so that both of them can listen at once. To accomplish this, they have to sit shoulder to shoulder, which is enough to make Nepeta grin and waggle her eyebrows. She presses right up against him, her head practically resting on his shoulder.

"Shush." Nepeta says- even though he wasn't fucking talking- and she presses play.

For a few moments, he can only hear rustling. He wonders if the Walkman even works anymore or if it was broken long ago and they're just wasting their time here. He's even trying to come up with a Plan B, when he hears somebody clear their throat.

"Hey." It's a boy's voice.

Nepeta bursts into a fit of uncontrollable giggles.

"So, you probably don't know me. Probably. What I mean is that it's highly unlikely you'll know me because we've never actually met. Our paths have never actually crossed. It's kinda like, y'know, you're Pluto and I'm Mars. Is Mars the hot planet? I can't remember. But man, I am that hot shit. I
"am that hot planet with the nice ass."

"What a dick." Karkat mutters.

Nepeta covers his mouth with her hand.

"So, anyway, you're the only person I've sent this tape to. I wasn't sure who I wanted to listen to this at first because who cares about the asshole with the mix tapes, am I right? But my best bro said you'd dig this. Find it romantic or something." The boy on the tape pauses, "Karkat. He said your name was Karkat. Do you mind if I call you that? I think it sounds pretty cute myself."

Karkat's face flames.

"I wonder who his friend-" Nepeta muses.

"Shut up!"

"So, here's the deal, Karkles. I have recorded fourteen of these tapes. Or I will have, by the time you hear this. It's gonna work like this: side A has me rambling about my life. And... Yeah. Side B has some sick tunes that you can play on your road trip. You're going to need some beats to keep you sane while you go looking around town for the other tapes. They've all been carefully planted where you can find them. You gotta catch 'em all, to reference a popular Japanese anime. You dig?" He breathes, "That's all from me on side A, flip over for some sick tunes, and proceed to the Noir statue for your second tape. Peace!"

Abruptly, the tape clicks to a finish.

"So." Nepeta says, after they've registered what they just listened to, "This guy has planted mix tapes and we have to go find them?"

"There is no 'we'." Karkat tells her, "You are going to stay here with your sister and her creepy boyfriend and watch movies and not tell anybody about this."

"No way am I missing this!" Nepeta grins at him, "Besides, you can't go alone anyway. The Noir statue is in the heart of the city and you can't drive. It will take you all day to get there if you walk and you'll probably get heatstroke."

"You can't drive either." Karkat points out.

"But you know mew can?"

"Who?"

"Kankitty, duh."
I really hope this lives up to people's expectations. (I don't have a beta reader, so there's probably a whole bunch of mistakes >:P)

I was gonna draw some fanart but honestly, I can't draw very well. So... Eh.

Karkat has to explain the story first of all to his brother, (who takes a lot of begging and pleading until he comes round), again to his brother's boyfriend, (Cronus- he just nods and asks where they got a Walkman and could he borrow it sometime?), and a third time to Porrim and Kanaya Maryam, (who have agreed to cover for them until they get back).

Only once all that's done does Kankri unlock the minivan and make them all buckle themselves in, checking at least three sure to make sure everybody has their seatbelts on. Since Cronus was quick to call shotgun, Karkat sat behind his brother with Nepeta pressed up against his arm. There are six seats in this car, discounting the front ones, and she choose the one right next to his. This is completely typical of Nepeta.

Regardless, Karkat doesn't let it bring him down because he's actually buzzing with the excitement of it all. Nothing interesting ever happens around here- it's a field-day for local reporters if a nice butterfly is spotted in a field- and this is the first exciting thing to ever happen to Karkat. Honestly, he didn't realise how boring life was up until now.

Not to mention, he's never gone into the city before without close supervision from his dad and has never actually seen the Noir statue in person- which is something that he's always wanted to see. He can't wait to actually see it; it's a statue of infamous criminal Jack Noir, situated in the heart of Skaia City, and Karkat is pretty sure he did a project on it in fourth grade. He did it because he thought that Jack Noir looked an awful lot like his teacher, Mr Slick. Needless to say, Mr Slick had not been amused, (but he never was).

After Kankri stops fussing around and actually starts driving, Karkat feels something in his chest jolt with... Excitement? Definitely either excitement or indigestion.

Nepeta clears her throat. "You have a tape player in here, don't you, Kankitty?"

"You really want to listen to that pretentious piece of shit again?" Karkat raises an eyebrow.

"The guy on the tape said that side B had music on it." Nepeta says, popping the tape out of the Walkman and handing it to Cronus, "Here, Mr Ampora! Put that in and make sure you put it in the right way up!"

"Thanks, Cat Girl." He puts the tape in the stereo and fiddles with a few buttons to get it working. For a few moments, there's crackling and the faint sounding of breathing, before the music plays much too loud and Nepeta squeaks. Cronus turns it down. For a moment, it's quiet as they all listen.

"I don't know this song." Karkat mumbles, "It's nice, I guess."

He'd never been of a music person but this wasn't like a lot of music that he'd heard before.
wasn't the old music that his dad played or the classical that his brother played or the bubblegum pop that Meulin was constantly playing, even though she couldn't hear it. This was a different kind of music. It didn't sound like anything anyone he knew would listen to. He liked it.

"Do you know this?" Kankri asks his boyfriend, who's nodding steadily in time to the music with his eyes closed.

"Nope." Cronus says, without stopping, "Vwind the vwindovws dovwn, chief."

Kankri did as he asked and Cronus turned the music back up.

As they finally twist out of their small town and onto the main stretch of road that leads to Skaia, Karkat can't help feeling... They've escaped. They have escaped the grey confines of their boring town and they're free, free in this new world that he's only seen a few times before. Cronus leans out of the window, whooping, and Nepeta cheers.

"We're free!" She claps her hands together, "WE'RE FREEEEEE~!"

Karkat has to concentrate on keeping his scowl on his face. "God, this isn't a coming of age movie, would the pair of you calm your tits?"

"Lighten up, Kar." Cronus turns to smirk at him, his hair windswept, "It's the sunniest day of the year, you hawve a mystery boyfriend, and vwe're on our vway to Skaia. Dontcha feel happy for once?"

"Not my boyfriend." is the only response Karkat dignifies that with.

"Cheer up, Karkitty." Nepeta grins at him, "We can do whatever we want out here."

"Within reason." Kankri says, quickly.

The long stretch of road that leads into the city is rather similar to their town: hot, kinda dirty looking, and everything thickly covered with a layer of concrete. With the windows open, the air tastes like dust and old takeout, which makes Karkat scrunch his nose up in disgust. However, there's a thin breeze weaving through the windows, brushing against the back of his neck, which he has never been more grateful for in his life. It really is the hottest day of the year and he's feeling it, sticky with sweat. His hair is glued to his forehead.

Nepeta doesn't seem too hot because she's dressed sensibly in a pair of shorts that might have once belonged to Rufioh Nitram (their town is so small that things get passed around as if they're a close family) and a shirt that shows off the freckles on her shoulders. It's so weird to see her without her usual jacket that Karkat can't help but stare. At the tops of her shoulders, which are freckled and sweet. He can't help thinking that if he liked girls, she would definitely be in the running.

She seems to sense his eyes. "Hmmm?"

"What the fuck are you looking at?"

"Language." Kankri calls from the front seat because he's a smug bastard that hasn't dropped an f-bomb once in his entire life.

"I should be asking you that." Nepeta giggles, with a toss of dark hair, "Karkitty?"

His face is red hot. "I wasn't looking at you. I was... Spacing out."
"Oh, sure." Nepeta smacks her hands together in delight, "I totally believe you."

She looks so happy about him looking in her direction that he doesn't say anything.

Karkat turns so that he can look out of the window at the barren wasteland.

If this was a shitty coming of age movie- hopefully one starring Kristen Stewart or Nat Wolff- he would have some monologue now about when he realised that he was gay and how hard it was for him to come to terms with it. As it happens, that coming of age movie stuff is complete bullshit. Karkat has always been into guys, had no problems realising and accepting it, but decided long ago to keep it to himself for now. The only thing worse than Nepeta trying to set him up with her is Nepeta trying to set him up with other guys.

The song on the tape comes to an end and the next one starts playing, a more upbeat sounding song that Karkat rolls his eyes at. This sounds a lot more "sick" to use that shitty douchebag term than the first song.

However, the song does coincide with the appearance of Skaia City in the distance.

In the morning light, the city is lit up from behind and is painted different colours with the light. The shadows stretch out towards them, like hands, and Karkat can't help thinking about all the bad stories he's heard about the city. Rumour goes that Rufioh Nitram's brother was attacked by some girl on the street here and that's why he's permanently stuck in a wheelchair- but that's likely to just be an urban legend. Karkat has heard so many versions of that story that he's not even sure he believes it anymore.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Nepeta proclaims, practically leaping out of her seat with excitement, "Just look at it! You aren't looking, Karkat, look!"

"I'm looking, I'm looking." He mumbles because he is, leaning out of the window so that he can get a better look at the huge buildings in the city. They make the church- the biggest building in their town and the only religious one, which is why Nepeta's bat mitzvah was held in the synagogue in Skaia- back at home look pathetic. Karkat loves the city.

"Don't lean too far, Karkat." Kankri is always a buzzkill.

"Let the kid have his fun, chief." Cronus is pretty alright for a douchebag.

They come closer and closer to the city, until they are swallowed by a mass of black and grey buildings that are all light with bright lights. There's traffic and flashing neon signs and people on the streets and it feels like a whole other world. Karkat is ashamed to say that, like every other time he's visited the city, he's awestruck.

Nepeta has been a few more times and starts pointing out her favourite bits of the city, (with some help from Cronus).

"- that's where Meulin buys her manga from!"

"And that's where I used to hang out during-"

"- we get our cat ears! Meow!" That was an intentional meow.

"'Ey, vwhy don't vwe stop owver there and-"

"No." Karkat says, firmly, "We are going to the Noir Statue, so I can pick up the second cassette
and see what this asshole has to say. He better have something worth listening to on the next tape because so far, he really isn't selling himself."

The song changes again as they turn the corner onto Derse. It's some famous street that Karkat is also pretty sure he learnt about in elementary because the information comes easily to mind. There was some big battle between two places called Prospit and Derse centuries ago and the streets are named after the two separate places. There also a bunch of towers, (monuments), which are pretty much only visited by tourists and people intent on "finding themselves".

"Are we close yet?" Nepeta asks, eagerly, "Kankitty, are we nearly there?"

"Very nearly, Nepeta. Please sit in your seat properly."

"Nah." She's almost stood up, leaning right forward between Cronus and Kankri to stare out at the city in front of them, "Woah, is that the Derse tower? It's even bigger than I thought it would be. I've never been to this part of the city before!"

It's an old building that sticks out like a toothpick in the middle of the skyscrapers and city buildings but still bright and shining. It's the only entirely purple tower, even though there are several other plainer ones. Nepeta oohs and aahs in delight and Kankri is more than happy to tell her about the brick count, the architecture, and basically all the boring parts about it.

Karkat is preoccupied with yelling: "THE STATUE IS RIGHT FUCKING THERE, STOP DRIVING PAST IT AND PARK UP ALREADY."

But his brother keeps driving around the block until he's done talking. Only then does he park up, scolding Karkat about the language- before he can so much as begin, Karkat is bolting from the car with Nepeta hot on his heels. The statue is impressive, black, and terrifying. Maybe that's because Jack Noir was a terrifying man and the statue looks ready to disembowel somebody. Karkat, who has been looking forward to seeing it, flinches away from it. He can't keep his eyes on the creepy thing.

"Did he say what to do once we reached the statue?" Nepeta asks, as they approach the statue and stare up at it, shielding their eyes from the sun.

"The mystical fucker just said we'd find the tape here. What the fuck is this, Blue Clues? Does he seriously expect us to just look for it? Can't it just conveniently fall into our laps like the last one did?" Karkat is barely finished ranting, when he's tapped on the shoulder.

He turns to find a girl standing there. "Hey, Shouty, you're blocking my view of the statue."

The girl cackles, throwing her head back, and Karkat gets the idea that he was excluded from some kind of joke. The girl is a pretty girl with dark skin and a mess of dark hair falling down to about her shoulders. She is dressed in a way that would make Kanaya reach for a chainsaw, even wearing those lame shoes with the holes in them. Crocs? Karkat hates himself for knowing what they're called. The only defining feature is a pair of bright red sunglasses balanced on the tip of her nose.

"I'm blind." She adds, helpfully, when she's finally finished laughing her throaty laugh, "And I didn't actually come here to see the statue."

"So, you're screwing with me for no reason at all?" Karkat growls.

"Aw, he didn't mention that you were such a baby." The girl pats him on the head; it takes a few guesses for her to even find where he's standing, "And so short too! Anyways, you gotta be Karkat, right?" She doesn't give him time to respond, "I think I'm gonna call you Shouty McNubs instead."
"I'm Nepeta, Nepeta Leijon." Nepeta holds out her hand helpfully, shaking the girl's enthusiastically, "From what you said, I guess you know about our quest?"

"Huh, didn't know there was a cute girl involved." The girl tilts her head to one side, "Either way, you're right. I've got a tape for you if you want it."

"We want it, don't we, Karkitty?"

He shrugs.

The girl holds the tape out, only to pull it back out of reach when Nepeta makes a grab for it. "Nuh-uh-uh, it's not as simple as that, Cat Girl." She waves the tape above their heads, having about a foot or two of height on both of them, "First, you gotta do me a favour."

"What kind of favour?"

"Well...." The girl considers, looking sheepish for the first time, "There's a girl involved."

"Isn't there always?" Karkat says, thinking of his rom-coms.
This has a bigger following than any of my other fics, which is actually kind of scary. I will do my best to deliver!

The girl's name turns out to be Terezi Pyrope and she gives them clear instructions that they are to go over to Prospit Tower and find a girl named Vriska Serket. They are to give her the folded letter that Terezi tucks into Karkat's hand, (she says nothing about whether they are allowed to read it or not but Karkat presumes no), and return with Vriska's response. The entire task seems pointless and rather tedious but the more difficult it becomes to get the next tape, the more eager Karkat is to grab it. And if he gets to matchmake in the process, (something he doesn't like to admit to enjoying), even better.

After Terezi waves them off, wishing them luck and waving enthusiastically, he heads back to where they left Kankri and Cronus. Nepeta isn't too far behind, rubbing her hands together and looking deep in concentration. He doesn't want to ask.

"Where the fuck did they go?" Karkat demands, when they return to the minivan and find his brother and Cronus has completely vanished from sight. There is no explanation, no notice, nothing to say where they've gone. It's so incredibly un-Kankri that Karkat is left staring in shock and unsure of what he's supposed to do. When he voices this out-loud, Nepeta just grins at him.

"The mighty huntress-" God, he hates it when she does this, " - suggests that pursel and the small shoutbeast go looking fur Prospit tower on their own."

"But it's ages away on foot." Karkat groans.

"And the exercise will be good for you." She sounds disturbingly like his Mom used to sound, "Plus, we can't just hang around until the other two come back, right? They could be hours."

"It's not like we have a time limit." He points out, "It's not "find all the cassettes by dawn or the world will end". It's "hey, I've randomly planted tapes around the city and you can find them if you feel like it. Also, I've sent my creepy minion with the weird laugh to help you out. I hope you don't find this all fucking insane"."

"Purrezi will get tired of waiting for us if we take too long."

"But... It's so hot."

It's too late, Nepeta is already walking and she's twice as fast as him, twice as fit as him. She's the kind of girl that joins athletic teams and hangs around after school with jocks, generally kicking people's asses at pretty much everything. She's not just fast, she's strong, and it's not fair because he's unfit and incredibly asthmatic. He manages to catch up to her and tries to match her pace, as they hurry down the street. Though he knows Terezi won't wait around forever, he can't help wondering if they have to rush this much.

He'd really fucking appreciate a few moments to process what's going on properly but Nepeta
marches on, determined.

"Do you even know where you're going or are you just guessing? Because if you're guessing, I'd really like to know now, and not three hours from now when we're calling our parents from a payphone in a parking lot because some guy took our cellphones and-"

"This isn't Clueless and you aren't Alicia Silverstone, Karkat." She draws out the last part of his name so that he can tell it's a pun. Silently, he curses his parents for the millionth time for giving him such a stupid name.

"So, you don't know where the hell we're going?" He guesses.

She doesn't dignify him with a response, just picking up the pace so that he's too focused on keeping up and can't talk at the same time.

Maybe she does know where they're going or maybe she just gets lucky because it's only about half an hour before they cross over into the Prospit district of the city. Everything has a kind of glow in this part of the city and Karkat knows it's regarded as the prettiest district by all their local magazines- he knows this because there is very little in the town's newsagent and he finds himself flicking through all kinds of shit in there- and he can see why. The buildings are nice, he can kinda understand why architects travel here to study.

His friend, Jade, told him once that he was lucky to live near a city with such rich history and culture. Honestly, he finds the whole "war between Prospit and Derse" to be a little bit dull but that's probably because most of his school life has been spent studying it.

Nepeta breaks through his thoughts. "That's gotta be Prospit tower!"

One sticks out among many as the tallest and the brightest.

Staring at it is like staring into the sun, so Karkat stares at the sidewalk instead. "Jesus Christ, who builds a building that nobody can even fucking look at? How can you something that will blind you? Maybe Pyrope turned blind because she was looking at this piece of golden shit!"

Nepeta is narrowing her eyes.

"Maybe it's a little bright." She admits, "But it's beautiful, isn't it?"

"How come we can have gold buildings when there are people starving around the world?" Karkat grumbles, though he silently agrees that it's not exactly an ugly building.

Nepeta pushes open the twin doors and leads the way inside, looking around and then up, gasping in a way that she normally does when she sees a stray cat out on the street, (she always takes them home and her mom never lets her keep them). She says something about "Vriska Serket" and "that Vriska Serket?" and "I know her". She proceeds to dart up the stairs, leaving Karkat to race after her, gasping for breath and dying by the time he reaches the top. He nearly collapses at the top of the ridiculous stairs.

"Fuck." Being asthmatic is a pain in the ass and using an inhaler is embarrassing as shit. That's all he has to say on the matter.

"Karkitty, are you okay?" Nepeta grips him by the arm, even when he insists that he's fine, as if he needs some kind of support.

"Man, talk about freaking weak." comes a snide voice, before proceeding to mock them, "Are you
alright, Wheezy? Not dying or anything, are you? Geez, most people make it to the top of the staircase without dying on the welcome mat."

When Karkat looks up, he finds a smug looking girl leaning against a doorway.

"I don't see a fucking welcome mat anywhere." He retorts, "And frankly, you're a pretty shitty welcoming committee. Do you greet everybody like that or is it just my lucky day?"

"Wheezy's got a temper!" The girl sounds delighted. Since she's wearing a name badge- and it has Vriska printed on it because it is his lucky day apparently- it's fair to presume that she works here. She's also dressed in a gold that matches the walls. Probably one of those summer jobs that people get to pay for college- she definitely looks old enough to be going to college.

The only notable thing about her as a person is the fact that she is wearing glasses with a patch stuck over the right side and that she seems to be leering at them.

Nepeta just rolls her eyes before saying: "It's me, Nepeta, remember me? We were in LARP club together years ago. Skaia Recreational Centre?"

Apparently, Nepeta has been to Skaia City way more times than Karkat thought if she attended clubs here.

"Sorry, I don't remember any of the lame characters." Vriska looks smug.

"There is nothing lame about the mighty huntress!"

Karkat can't help thinking she could have come up with a better name.

Before this can descend into an argument, he steps forward and thrusts the piece of paper at Vriska Serket.

"Ooh, another love letter for me?" She acts like this is a daily occurrence, "Wait, wait... Is this from Pyrope?" Karkat nods and she howls with laughter, as if this is the funniest thing she's ever heard, "A love letter from Pyrope! Man, some people never let go!"

"She's asked for a response." Nepeta sounds as she is struggling to keep her voice even, which is strange. Between the two of them, Karkat has always been the angry one and she has rarely lost her temper, having a much calmer attitude. It's odd to hear her sounding so irritated but Vriska clearly rubbed her up the wrong way.

"A response? Oh my god!" Vriska has to wipe tears of laughter away, "What an idiot. Can you tell her... Tell her... No, I'll write it down." She turns the piece of paper over and pulls a pen from her pocket, scrawling something on the back before folding it up and handing it back to Karkat.

"How'd she convince you to come all this way anyway? Isn't she hanging around the Noir Statue waiting for those idiots following the cassettes to turn up?" Vriska's eyes widens, "Are you one of the idiots following the tapes?" She socks Karkat on the arm, smirking, "What number are you on?"

"You know about the tapes?" Nepeta frowns, "There are people other than us following them?"

"Nobody's explained this to you?" Vriska looks delighted, "Allow me to take the liberty, as darling Terezi would say."

She waits until Karkat gestures for her to continue.
"It's a tradition that's been happening for years." Vriska says, as if they're idiots, "Nobody knows if it's a prank or something but it always happens in the summer. It all started a few years ago when some kid called Dirk Strider sent a bunch of tapes to Rufioh Nitram. Fourteen tapes, to be exact."

"Rufioh?" Karkat echoes, thinking of Rufioh Nitram and how he saw him lounging in his front yard earlier this morning. Had he known, when he'd seen Karkat holding a rectangular parcel? When he'd waved, had he understood what Karkat was going to do today? Had he turned to Horuss Zahhak and said something like "doll, looks like the Vantas kid got a tape in the mail"?

"The year after that, Roxy Lalonde sent some to Latula Pyrope- Terezi's sister. Always fourteen tapes." Vriska is ticking people off on her fingers, "Jake English sent them to my sister. She wouldn't let me listen to them. And last year, Jane Crocker sent tapes to Meenah Peixes."

For a moment, Vriska stops to breathe. "The point that I'm making is that every year, people get sent tapes from complete strangers. I've watched people follow them around, I've worked here a few years, and I watch people... Live." She adjusts her hair, "Everybody that got those tapes are happy. And some of them were real sad before, trust me."

"So, people send these tapes... To absolute fucking strangers... For basically no reason?" Karkat summarises, "Every year? And it's always fourteen? And I'm the fifth person to be sent on a ludicrous trail?"

"Basically, yeah." Vriska says, "What number are you on?"

"Terezi promised us the second one." Nepeta pitches in, "We really should get back to her."

Vriska seems to have really gotten under her skin.

"Only the second one?" Vriska tuts, "At this rate, it will take you weeks to complete the trail."

"How long is it meant to take?" Karkat is curious, "Is there a time-limit? Does the world explode if we don't finish all the tapes in time and find the cage that the creator is being trapped in?"

"You chat to Pawl lux too much." Nepeta digs him in the ribs with her elbow.

"It takes people different times." Vriska says, "There's no limit or anything but... I guess you don't want anybody to find the tapes before you do. I mean, anyone could pick cassette tapes up off the ground or wherever they are." She nods to the piece of paper in his hand, which he didn't realise that he was clenching so tightly, "Your loser girlfriend is right, you should get back to Terezi. It doesn't take long for her to get bored."

They don't say goodbye but mutually nod to each other before leaving, Nepeta leading the way down the staircase and muttering something under her breath. When they're out on the streets, Karkat lets his curiosity weigh in and nudges her.

"You seem pissed."

"I am pissed." Nepeta says, as they cross the street, "What kind of person laughs at a love letter?"

"A bitch?" Karkat says, "A bitch like Serket that seems to have no regards for other people's feelings?"

"Exactly. And poor Terezi seemed so nice." Nepeta can't meet his eyes as she says this.

"They seem to have a history that I really don't want to get involved with."
"Hm."

Neither of them speaks again until they get back to the Noir Statue. At the end of the street, Nepeta suddenly turns to Karkat and looks at him with a very serious, very sure look in her dark eyes. And, before he can protest, she snatches the paper from him and says that she should go swap this for the tape, while he goes to see if Kankri's come back. He's not about to argue with her, not when she's staring him down like this, so he agrees and goes back to the minivan. Kankri isn't there but Cronus is, lounging in the backseat with an handheld fan.

"Alright, chief? Kan's out lookin' for cha."

"You weren't here when we came back. So, we just went to Prospit without you." Karkat sits himself back in the middle row of seats and leans back to get within range of the fan. He swears that he's going to pass out from heatstroke, he's so hot. Cronus seems to understand this and directs the fan at him.

"You ewver considered takin' that awful svweater off?"

"Fuck you, Kanaya bought this for me."

"You must be dyin'."

Karkat considers. "I can't take it off. I just can't."

"Maybe if ya-"

"I can't!" He snaps and Cronus flinches, "Don't fucking ask me to because I can't and honestly, I don't even want to talk about it. So just shut that greasy trap of yours and call Kankri because we might need to drive to the next stop."

Cronus does as he's told.

Kankri returns, scolding Karkat for wandering off (hypocrite), long before Nepeta does.

She knocks on the window, grins, and Terezi presses her face up against the window too, pulling faces at them. Then, Nepeta opens the door and climbs in, scooting up to make room for Terezi beside her.

"Howdy, boys." Terezi says, "I'm Terezi. I agreed to help out with the tapes because a pal of mine asked me too. I haven't heard them, I don't know the guy personally, so please don't ask me for any answers. Speaking of tapes." She throws Kankri one, "Put this in and get driving, we're headed for the Recreational Centre."

Looking flustered, Kankri pushes the tape into the player and adjusts the volume.

"Hey." There's a pause filled with static, "It's been minutes since I recorded the last tape but I guess it's been hours since you listened to it, huh? Time is freaking weird like that and trust me, I don't understand anything better than time. Time is pretty cool, dude."

"Dave, I hope you aren't telling that poor kid about Doctor Who. You can't just ramble on about things that he probably doesn't care about." It's a new voice, a female one, and it sounds like it's a short distance away from the microphone.

"Everybody should care about Doctor Who. Ironically or not ironically."
"Whatever you say, darling brother." The voice is sarcastic and grows closer, as whoever it is approaches the microphone, "Dear listener, you have no way of knowing this, but Dave is clinging to a figurine of David Tennant."

"Dave." Karkat says, just to taste the name in his mouth. Tastes like douchebag.

Three people shush him.

"Rose, get outta my room! Fuck, how many times have I told you not to come in here anyway?"

"Ugh, I just wanted my laptop back. Can you hurry up?" There's the sound of footsteps and the door slamming.

"Where was I? Oh yeah, time is cool. Speaking of time, Rose says that stories have to be told in the order of start to finish. Stories are all to do with time. But fuck that shit, I ain't gonna go from start to finish. We're going to go all over the place. Starting with where we are now."

There's a crackle of breath.

"My name is Dave. I was going to keep that as a big secret but I guess Rose completely ruined that for me, huh? She's my sister. My younger sister by a few minutes. I was born first because I fought my way out while she just tutted at me and waited for me to finish. It's still a lot like that now. I pull dumb shit and she just waits until I've fucked up before hitting me with psychoanalysis. Having a genius sister sucks."

He pauses for so long that Karkat wonders if the tape is broken.

"I'm seventeen years old, senior year. Bro said I had to make these tapes in senior year because once I start college, I'll forget to do it. I don't know if Rose will ever make some tapes but hers will be neater than mine. Printed with purple instructions on the side: 1. Read, 2. Understand, 3. Live. Something real poetic like that."

He laughs and it makes Karkat feel like somebody hit him in the chest. In a good way.

"Anyway, I'm an amateur photographer, a DJ, blah, blah, blah. Some other stuff too but who cares, right? I'm not just making these tapes because I have to. There's a lot of stuff I need to say but first... I need to work out how to say those things. I feel like dumping a bunch of stuff on you at once will just make you turn the tapes off and throw them in the garbage."

"The point of these tapes, I should probably cover that: I get to vent and you get an epic roadtrip. Seriously, I hope you brought some food with you because you're going to spend days on this. There are fourteen spots, each of them minutes or hours apart. I hope you've got some company because it would be pretty lonely otherwise."

"Wrap it up, Dave, dinner's nearly ready and I'm not waiting just because you were too busy rambling to eat."

"Sounds like I gotta go. Good luck with your quest and Terezi will have already told you where the next spot is. Never met her myself but she sounds like a cool kid."

Terezi beams with pride.

"And Karkat, I want to-"

"Dave!"
"Fuck, okay, I'm coming, I'm coming. Flip the tape, Kitkat.
Wordlessly, Kankri ejects the tape, flips it onto the other side, and pushes it back into the player. Karkat, staring at his feet, lets the music wash over him and tries to hide his frustration. He wishes that Dave would just get to the point, instead of fucking around; they're two tapes in and he's barely told them anything.

No. No. He's barely told Karkat anything. He's keeping stuff from him but why? What's such a big deal that he can't even bring himself to say it into a microphone for a total stranger to hear? Karkat kicks the seat in front of him in frustration.

"Karkat!" comes Kankri's sharp tone.

"Sorry." He mumbles, even though he isn't, "Can we find a convenience store soon? I might actually fucking pass out of dehydration soon, it's so goddamn hot in here. Shoving ice cubes up my own ass would be a million times more efficient than this shitty air conditioning."

"I'm hungry." Terezi adds, helpfully, "D'you think the convenience store would have Reese's Pieces? I would kill for some right now. Actually kill." She could have stopped there but she chooses to continue, "I have a sword but I left it at home. My sister trained me to use it as soon as I was big enough to hold it without falling over."

Kankri sighs. "Okay, already, you've both made your points. I'll pull over when I see one."

"Do you really have a sword?" Nepeta asks, looking intrigued.

"Yeah. Tulip says that swords are where it's at right now." Terezi continues to chatter on, filling the silence, and Karkat is grateful because it means that he has time to think about what the fuck he's signed up to.

Dave, he thinks, wondering why the guy chose him of all the people. Who is this guy's "best bro" that told him Karkat would like the tapes? It would have to be someone that knew Karkat very well but- and he glances around as he thinks this- everybody that he knows is here with him. Present company excluded, his only friends exist halfway across the world and he sincerely doubts that Dave would befriend any of them.

Jade is definitely out, as she lives on an island with a very small population and none of those fifteen-twenty people are called Dave. She's the youngest there, despite being a little older than Karkat, but the Dave said he was seventeen. He also said that he attended high school, so Jade and her small island are out of the picture.

He supposes that Dave and Sollux could have been friends but he knows for a fact that Sollux wouldn't like the guy. They would have clashed horrifically if they had met and definitely would not have become "best bros", not in a million years. Besides, Sollux is far too caught up in some coding project or another to have time to help organise road trips around Skaia. He simply wouldn't
bother. Sollux Captor is incredibly apathetic when it comes to other people.

That leaves John, who Karkat isn't so sure about. He's in junior year, just like Karkat, and is his only friend that actually lives in the same country. He just lives several states away, much too far to drive just for a quick visit. But there is no way he could ever hang out with someone as cool as Dave. Did Karkat say cool? He didn't mean cool. He meant insufferable douchebag. Either way, Dave Insufferable Douchebag No-Last-Name seems way too far out of dorky Egbert's league.

And then, Karkat is stuck for an explanation.

Kankri pulling over spares him from his thoughts, as he scrambles for freedom and ends up caught in a struggle with Pyrope to get out of the door first. There's a few moments of squirming, fighting to get free of both her and the stupid minivan, before the girl wrestles her way free, landing on her butt on the sidewalk, and he falls headfirst on top of her. Honestly, he never wanted to be this close to a total stranger and it makes him flush a furious shade of red.

Much to his annoyance, Terezi just cackles like a mad woman.

"Jeez, take me out to dinner first, why don't you?"

Her comment causes his flush to reach the tips of his ears.

"No fucking chance, you goddamn-" He searches for an insult worthy of Pyrope, "You bat-shit crazy bitch. Get your fucking claws off me before I rip them off!"

She grabs at him to pull herself up and he pushes her hands away, scowling. She falls back onto her back with a thump and he's swallowed briefly by guilt. Pushing blind girls probably isn't a morally correct thing to do.

They're starting to cause an obstruction on the sidewalk and on a sweltering afternoon like this, people aren't happy to step around two grappling teenagers. Karkat growls at her and finally managed to scramble to his feet, hating that he stumbles backwards in effort to catch his balance. If there's one thing he hates more than intimate physical contact, it's intimate physical contact with stranger. And there is nobody stranger than Terezi Pyrope.

Kankri grabs him by the arm to hold him up. "Are you okay?"

"Sure, I'm fine." He is surprised that he's not breathing fire out of his nose this point, as he huffs and yanks his arm free of his brother's grip, "Let's just go inside because you assholes decide to blow this entire situation into something newsworthy."

"It was only an accident, Vantas, I didn't mean to trip you or anything." Terezi calls after him but he is already storming into the convenience store, shoving the door open with such force that it bangs against the wall.

If it weren't obvious already, Karkat doesn't cope well with embarrassing situations. Or sad ones. Or happy ones. Or any kind of situation really; he just tends to mask his emotions with anger most of the time because he knows that if he lets people under his spiky surface, they could get to him. They could hurt him. He knows this from experience. So, instead of... Laughing it off like a normal person, he'd screamed at Terezi like an idiot.

He lurks, waiting for the rest of his group to catch up, and adjusts the collar of his sweater. He hopes Terezi didn't... Figure anything out, during that... Intimate moment. He barely knows her, honestly, but he feels as if she might be super smart. Like Sollux. Those two would make a good team.
Eventually, Nepeta wanders over. "Purrezi didn't mean to piss you off, I'm sure of it."

"Will you stop calling her that? Just drop the puns already, they're the lamest."

"The mighty huntress thinks that her puns are-"

He gives her a look.

"Alright, alright. I think you overreacted a little, that's all. She didn't trip you, you fell on top of her. And I know that you don't like getting too close to people." This is ironic because she's standing as close as she can, almost brushing hands with him, "But she didn't mean anything by it."

"Yeah, I know. The heat is just getting to me, I guess." Karkat wipes the palms of his hands on his pants to reiterate his point. Sweat leaves faint damp marks there. Gross.

"Take your sweater off." Nepeta urges, (not her too), "Nobody will notice... You know. What you're worried about."

"I just need something cold to drink. I'll cool off." Karkat turns away from her and their hands bump, which makes Nepeta's cheeks tint a bright pink. He heads down the aisle, since hanging around by the magazines isn't going to make him feel any cooler, and she's close behind.

To fill the gap in the conversation, he says: "So, Pyrope... Not exactly ugly, is she?"

He's not an idiot; anybody knows a ship when they see one and he knows that Nepeta was staring at the other girl like she'd stumbled upon a unicorn. Or an entire warehouse of fluffy baby kittens that were hers to keep. Or a-

"She's pretty cool." Nepeta shrugs nonchalantly, staring intently at the floor, "I... What Vriska said. I mean, what she wrote. You didn't see how Terezi crumpled when I read it to her. It was... Scary. Love is dangerous, I guess."

"Love is dangerous." Karkat agrees, thinking back to a long time ago. Well... Freshman year wasn't actually that long ago, even if it does feel that way. He puts it out of his mind before any memories can float to the surface.

"Karkitty..." Nepeta purses her lips like she wants to say something.

"What?" It comes out harsher than he intends.

"Nevermind." She looks up at smiles at him. Her smile is sort of crooked and mischievous most of the time and so is this one, even if he can tell there's different feelings behind it. Before he can ask her what's wrong, she catches sight of the others and drags him towards them.

Everybody wins. He gets his drink, Terezi gets her candy; everybody returns to the minivan looking a little different.

It's a game of musical chairs: Karkat slips right into the back, Terezi and Nepeta sit in front of him, and Cronus calls shotgun once again. Luckily, he ends up with the handheld electric fan, which he turns on and uses to cool the next film of sweat forming on his forehead. Kankri gets back on the road towards the Recreational Centre, his boyfriend directing him from his phone. Thank God for Google maps, is all Karkat can think.

During the drive, Terezi decides to inform them all in her loud, loud, loud voice, which Karkat doesn't seem to be able to block out- no matter what he tries- about her and Vriska Serket. It's a
typical best-friends-for-life-falling-in-love romantic trope that Karkat knows from his movies that turns sinister towards the end. After Vriska blinded Terezi- she dared her to stare into the sun in fifth grade and Terezi actually did it, what the shit?- they began a lifelong rivalry and complicated relationship. Now, they're more like enemies with benefits.

Luckily, Kankri shushes her before she can tell them any of the juicy things that she gets up to with Vriska. Karkat is glad because he really, really, really doesn't want to know. Freaky shit, he'd guess.

It's quiet for a while after that, aside from Cronus telling Kankri which way to turn.

Eventually, Nepeta pipes up. "But you can't date somebody that you don't really love. You'll just get an unhappy ending that way."

"What?" Terezi sounds curious.

"Well, you can't just settle with Vriskers hate-dating you for the rest of your life just because it seems there's no other options. She'll probably just break your heart slowly. Bit by bit. You don't deserve to get hurt like that, Purrezi." Nepeta pats her in the arm, "You can do better."

"But I love her." It sounds like Terezi is being strangled, "I love her."

Nepeta has no response for that.

When they reach the Recreational Centre, everybody gets out of the car, since Terezi suggests that they may actually need to look for this tape, (she doesn't know for sure), and they'll cover more ground that way. Nepeta leads the way, Terezi falling back in step with Karkat behind her so that she can elbow him to get his attention.

"Hey." She says, a grin on her face, "Your friend up there... Nepeta. She's pretty cute, huh?"

"In her own way." Karkat says. From here, he can see the freckles on Nepeta's shoulders again and he wonders if Terezi is staring at them too. Then, he remembers that she's blind and nearly facepalms right there. "She's beautiful too."

"I can only imagine." Terezi looks like she can imagine pretty well, judging by the content expression on her face, "What she was saying about love... Was that meant to be flirting?"

"Fuck if I know." Probably.

"Should I flirt back?"

"Give it your best shot, Pyrope."

Given the seal of approval, Terezi bounds forward and slides her arm through Nepeta's. Karkat tries not to hear the bad jokes and puns but it's difficult to block them out. Something about the two girls leaning together like that, something about Cronus and Kankri talking in low tones behind him, makes Karkat feel strangely lonely.

For a few years, he's thought about dating but he's never felt outright lonely before. He's never wished for a... well, I might as well think it a boyfriend before. He wonders if Dave has a boyfriend or a girlfriend or anything- before quickly pushing thoughts like that out of his mind.

There's a girl working in the reception of the Skaia Recreational Centre and she looks up as soon as they come through the door, beaming at them with a mouthful of white teeth. She can't be much
older than them, proven by the pink braces stuck to her teeth, and like Vriska, she's most likely working there just for the summer. Her hair is bright, cotton candy pink and curling down her back in neat waves. Her name label reads "FEFERI", which Karkat doesn't think is a real name but who's he to talk?

"Hi, can I help you?" She says, flipping through a turquoise notepad in order to make herself look reasonably busy, "Today, we have several clubs and sessions-"

Kankri coughs. "Actually, we're here for a more personal matter than that. You see, my younger brother here-" He gestures to Karkat, as if it weren't obvious that they were related, "- is looking for a cassette tape that we believe may be hidden here. Have you seen anybody holding a cassette tape, most likely a red one?"

"I know it sounds completely insane," Terezi says, quickly, "But honestly, it's completely true. We're on a roadtrip, looking for cassette tapes."

Feferi, the girl behind the counter, looks bewildered between her huge glasses. They are huge, pink-rimmed glasses that make her eyes look much bigger than they actually are, and Karkat finds that they make her look vaguely geeky.

"A cassette? I can't say that I've seen any cassettes." She thinks for a moment, before brightening suddenly, "All visitors have to sign in! Anybody that delivered a tape would have to sign in?" She bends down and digs out a couple of folders out from under the desk, dropping them onto it with a thump, "Any idea what this person would have put their reason of visiting as?"

"Somethin' stupid if it's that Dawve kid."

It occurs to Karkat that he has no idea if Dave is placing these tapes around the city or if he's coerced other people into doing it for him. Either way, he wonders who is responsible for hiding the tapes. He takes a blue plastic folder and begins to flip through it, scanning the names and dates, even though he has no idea what he's looking for. It could be any of these people.

"Any luck?" Feferi chirps, after he's only looked for a few minutes. He glances up, annoyed, and realises that his brother is hunched over another folder, scanning a million names for any that stand out. There's a lot that Karkat could say about Kankri but he's a good brother when it counts.... He's still a pompous dick, though.

"No..." Karkat's eyes drop down the page and he starts, feeling like he's stuck his fingers in a plug socket; a sharp electric feeling shoots through his veins, "Wait. Yes. Yes, I think I found it.

There are probably a million Roses in the world- each as genius sister as the last- but this one has written her name in bright purple ink. Her number is scrawled, alongside the date, (a week ago), and her reason for visiting: Karkat Vantas. This means that Rose- Rose, Dave's sister, and by extent, Dave- lives within driving distance at least. Karkat could have bumped into her before. Fuck, he could have bumped into Dave before, on the street without knowing it. He's bumped into so many assholes over the years that he could forget a face easily.

*But Dave said they had never met.*

Karkat wishes that he didn't feel disappointed.

"Rose." Karkat breathes, staring at the name like he can't quite believe it's there.

"There's no clue as to where we go next." Kankri is reading over his shoulder.
"Rose..." Feferi considers it, "Rose..." She snaps her fingers, "Rose! Rose Lalonde. You guys should head towards... The computer room, I think. I've seen her go in there before, I think she has a blog or something. I didn't see her holding a cassette at all but she does come here sometimes. Nice girl; creepy looking."

Karkat makes a note of that description. "Right."
Upd8, hooray! Usual disclaimer that there are probably a trillion typos because I beta my own work.

"Guess we gotta get to that computer room then." Terezi is standing a while back, hands stuck in her short pockets, "looking" a little to the left of Karkat, "Can I borrow somebody's arm? I left my cane at home."

The idea of Terezi Pyrope with a cane is somehow terrifying, just like the idea of Terezi of a sword- the thoughts aren't too different actually, now that Karkat considers them.

Quickly, Nepeta loops an arm through hers.

Smooth, Leijon, Karkat thinks, shaking his head.

"The computer room is the third door on the left." Feferi points them in the right direction, "I hope you guys find your... Tape thingy!" She gives them a double thumbs-up of encouragement and urges them to go quickly.

Karkat leads the way.

The computer room is dismal looking, chunky computers like they have in high school and plastered with bright posters on how to accurately use a shift key. Clearly, this computer room is rarely used and Karkat suddenly gets an image of Rose Lalonde, a girl that he imagines to be dark-haired with thick eyeliner, hunched over a computer and updating her tumblr. He pictures her as serious, as retro, as moody, sarcastic.

One of the computers has gone to sleep, animation of a cat flashing on the screen that makes Nepeta grin widely, and Karkat waggles the mouse. There is a document on the screen, words typed in light purple, which Kankri reads aloud for everybody's benefit:

"Karkat (and accomplices, if you have any),

My brother instructed me to leave this document open in hopes that you will find it and read it. After all, nobody but me has used his computer room what feels like half a century. It's definite that nobody has used it since the 90s left and I find that it's quite a serene place to work.

I would like to congratulate you on reaching the third tape. As a sort of well-done for getting this far, I have decided to reward you. There is a gig at a nearby club, Damara's place, which isn't too far from here. It's in the next district. The next two tapes are located at the venue and will be handed to you by an accomplice of mine- a very close accomplice, in fact.

I, myself, will also be attending said gig. I'd rather appreciate it if you came and introduced yourself. Just because my brother is in hiding from you (I fear that he's embarrassed) does
It's Terezi that drops to her knees and retrieves the tape from under the desk, peeling the tape off before popping up again, victorious. She punches the air with excitement.

"Ladies and gentlemen, gals and pals, we are going clubbing!"

If she's hoping for a whoop of enthusiasm, it doesn't come. All that comes is a grin from Nepeta, a sort of mumble from Karkat, and complete radio silence from Kankri. Cronus is the one that claps her on the shoulder and says it's cool.

Kankri clears his throat. "Karkat. Come here a second." And he pulls Karkat aside so that he can mutter to him, "I will not be accompanying you any further than this. You know that large crowds make me... Very uncomfortable. I understand if you want to go without us however."

"Us?"

"As much as I hate to leave you without adult supervision, Cronus will be accompanying me. After all, I am his "ride", remember?"

"You're our ride too." Karkat reminds him, "You can't just ditch us, you dick."

Terezi, who wasn't even pretending not to listen, butts in. "My big sister can pick us up from here and drive us to the... Uh, venue. That way, you and your boyfriend can head back home for sexy times. I'll make sure that Karkat is home by midnight, Mr Cherry Sweater."

"If that's okay-" Kankri looks a little flustered.

"It will be fine. My sister will be totally cool with it!" Terezi assures him, "I'll text her. You go right ahead and go home, we'll be cool here until she turns up."

"Right." Kankri turns back to his younger brother, tentatively ruffling his hair as a sign of affection, "Don't stay out all night, Karkat." And he smiles at him in an awkward Kankri-esque way, his words sounding as strained as if somebody's mom was saying them, "Have fun."

"C'mon, Kan."

When his brother has disappeared alongside Cronus, any air of authority vanishes with them and Karkat suddenly feels like teenagers are probably meant to feel: unstoppable. For a moment, he wants to do something stupid like stealing a car or getting ridiculously drunk or kissing some guy in a game of Spin the Bottle like something straight out of a coming-of-age movie. He doesn't do any of those things but he does meet both Terezi and Nepeta halfway for a high-five.

"We have escaped the clutches of our boring town at last." Nepeta says, "We can be whoever we want to be. This is it, this is freedom."

She's right, it's like Karkat has been holding his breath for years and can finally breathe. He can be whoever; he doesn't have to be the town freak anymore.

Terezi just laughs, a sharp cackle that pierces his eardrums and tickles them. She slings an arm
around both of them, reconsiders, and lets go of Karkat.

"I've messaged my sister." She informs them, "She'll be here soon enough. We should go wait outside." She's already leading Nepeta towards the door, hanging off her, and looking smug about it.

"Why don't the pair of you get a goddamn room? That way I don't have to witness you awkwardly fumbling your attempts to flirt with each other." Karkat calls after them but either they don't hear or they don't care. He hurries after them anyway because Terezi still has the tape that they've come so far for tucked into her fist and he really wants to listen to it. It's only as he walks past reception, offering a half-shrug to Feferi, and back out into the late afternoon that he realises: he doesn't have any way of listening to that tape. He left the Walkman in Kankri's minivan. The realisation makes him groan loudly.

"I don't suppose your sister owns a Walkman, Pyrope?" He says, when they come to a stop on the sidewalk.

"Why?" For a moment, Terezi looks confused and then seems to realise the tape that she's holding in her hand, "Oh, yeah. Well, I guess she might." She pulls out her cell phone and starts typing a message, even though she can't see what she's doing. (If Karkat didn't know she was blind, he wasn't sure he'd be able to tell. Terezi is good).

"Why does everybody around here seem to be stuck in the fucking nineties or something?" Karkat grumbles, "I didn't even know Walkmans still existed and yet both your sisters own one. It makes me wonder what the world is coming to. Wait, let me guess, these tapes have somehow transported us back in time to the nineties and we're stuck in a crappy time travel movie. Any minute now, somebody's going to bump into their Mom from ten years ago and she'll fall in love with them, corrupting time so that-"

"Karkitty, that's Back to the Future." Nepeta tells him, "And it's an eighties movie, not a nineties one."

"It's a great movie though." There's a wall running along the sidewalk, which Terezi hops up to sit on, "So, you guys never told me where you were from."

"You never told us where you were from either." Karkat points out, "I imagine you crawled out of a cave somewhere, Pyrope."

She cackles. "You're not far from the truth. I'm from Alternia. You guys know it?"

"Isn't that a district?" Nepeta guesses, "We aren't from the city."

"Knew that already, you kids are clearly from some small town. You don't know shit about life in the city, that much is clear." Terezi seems to find a lot of things funny because she laughs a lot.

"We know plenty about the city. I've been here a million times before, I know the place like the back of my left hand." Karkat says, fiercely.

"Sure, sure. So, I'm sure you know your way to Damara's, hm?"

"Of course I do!" It's probably somewhere in the city?

"Ha!" Terezi shakes her head, "You're lucky you got us to protect you, kid."

"Stop calling me that. You can't be more than a year older than me, maximum." Karkat attempts to
stare her down; needless to say, she's blind and it doesn't work. She probably wouldn't even know if he was staring the opposite way.

"How old are you, kid?"

He fights the urge to swat her off the wall. "Sixteen."

"I'm seventeen, I win!" She cackles, triumphantly.

"Are you guys going to go back and forth all night?" Nepeta rolls her eyes, "Does it matter how old anybody is or where anybody's from? We're all friends, right?"

"Sure." Terezi shoots Karkat a look. It's smug, like I'm want to kick your ass and I probably could easily but I'm going to take pity because your friend is cute. At least, that's what Karkat reads into it.

Nepeta makes most of the conversation from then on, engaging in a heated conversation with Terezi about roleplaying and her characters. It turns out that Terezi is an avid roleplayer too, which is just fucking great. Karkat hopes they don't expect him to roleplay with them at any point.

Eventually, Terezi's sister rescues him. She's like a knight in shining... Uh, converse. She kicks the car door open, asks "y'all" to call her Latula or Tula or any other nicknames they can come up with, and tells them to get in the car.

From a young age, Karkat has been taught not to get into cars with strangers or complete fucking weirdos but he breaks both those rules and climbs into Latula Pyrope's car. He is on edge the whole time anyway though, his fingernails digging into the leather seats (it's a really nice fucking car, he notes) for the majority of the journey.

"So, Rezi tells me that y'all are on the tapes." Latula says, when they stop at a red-light, "You guys got a Walkman or something?"

Nepeta pipes up. "Karkat lost it."

"Suspected as much." Latula laughs quite like Terezi, "Catch!" She throws a Walkman into he backseat and Karkat makes a grab for it before anybody else can, clutching it to his chest to stop Nepeta taking it. It's been painted teal with a red Libra symbol, enough to give anybody a migraine, but it's a way of listening to the tape and it could be bright orange and covered in Faygo for all Karkat cares. Terezi passes him the tape and he pops it in, sliding the headphones over his ears.

"Karkat."

The now-familiar voice sends a pleasant shiver down his spine.

"If things go to plan, you should be on your way to meet Rose right about now. I don't think you'll like her much, since she's probably the only person that could rival your vocabulary."

How would Dave know-

Anyway, I don't know if you realised but all the places on the map have some sort of significance. I'll be sure to recount some of them for you at some point but right now, the most important one is coming up. Damara's Place is pretty infamous throughout the Beforus district for being one of the more dangerous clubs around. Rose... Rose likes it there, don't ask me why. I swear that place attracts lesbians, she's always going with her girlfriend."
This all means that Dave must live in Skaia City, which makes something in Karkat's chest clench tightly.

"Like I was saying, it's on the trail because it's the first club that I ever went to. I was fifteen, which is probably too young to be sneaking into clubs like that with fake IDs. But my life has never been conventional, y'know? It's not conventional for your brother to run a puppet porn site and your older sister to be drunk off her ass all the time."

Dave laughs but it doesn't sound happy.

"I'm getting off track. I came to this club when I was fifteen years old, dragged along with my older sister, who didn't want to go alone and always encourages me to pull stupid shit like that. Usually because she's intoxicated as fuck. It was an okay evening, I guess. I can't remember it too well now because I'm pretty sure I smoked something."

"Like I said, it's a dodgy club and I wasn't down for anything so I left early, on my own, because Roxy was too caught up to remember that she had to take me home. It was around two or three in the morning and I was pretty wrecked for a fifteen year old. And... I saw something. There were... These guys. These guys that were outside the club and they were... Kissing like I'd never seen anybody kiss before. I'd never seen two guys kiss before."

Karkat lets out a breath that he didn't know he was holding.

"I can remember it vividly. They kissed like it meant something to kiss and I wanted to kiss somebody like that. I was fifteen, horny as fuck, and I wanted to kiss somebody like that."

"This probably all sounds so stupid to you... But before I moved in with Rose, before I left home last year, I'd been raised by my foster parents. Or the most recent set anyway. And they... They didn't believe homosexuality was right. Not one bit. I didn't even know that guys were allowed to kiss guys. I know, I sound like some church kid from a movie, but I honestly didn't know that guys and guys could..."

"That's why Damara's is on the trail anyway. It's the place that I realised that guys... Well, I realised that I was gay as shit, basically. It just sticks out in my memory significantly because of that. It's the place of my realisation."

Dave draws a long breath.

"I promise I'll tell you about why the Rec Centre and Noir Statue are on the list. I swear I will, Karkat. There's just... So many things that are so hard to say, even into a microphone to a virtual stranger... That's all for now, I gotta take five minutes to get my chill back."

There's a rattling of Dave hitting a few buttons before the recording clicks to a stop.

Karkat doesn't know what to say. He flips the tape.
I was home sick and had some time, so voilá!

_Damara's_ is as rowdy and out of place as Dave described. It's a large club, not dissimilar from the kind of stuff he's seen on TV, and there is a long line of teenagers and young adults, weird and wonderful. Some people look severely fucked up and Karkat decides they must be regulars. Anyway, their group doesn't stick out one bit as they join the back of the line and work out a way to bust three underage teenagers into this club. Karkat is incredibly glad that Kankri didn't come with them because he wouldn't approve of this scene in the slightest.

He's incredibly that Latula Pyrope is with them because she's the kind of person that definitely does go clubbing and walks with such a purpose, nobody dares question her. She's also got red tips on her dark braids and snakebites, which Karkat can't help but stare at. Back home, there was a big drama when Rufioh Nitram got his septum pierced, but nobody here seems to care in the slightest. Karkat swears he sees more eyebrow piercings in five minutes here than he's ever seen in his entire lifetime.

"I've never been to a place like this before." Nepeta voices Karkat's thoughts as she stands on tiptoe to peer over people's heads. The two of them, obviously not-city kids with their sensible clothes and practical haircuts, are the shortest in the line and it's blatantly obvious that they belong more in church group than a club.

"It'll be cool, you're with us." Terezi assures her, as the line moves a few steps forward, "Just act more Beforian than you are."

"How the fuck do you act Beforian?" Karkat asks, entirely forgetting that he proclaimed himself to be an expert on the area earlier.

Terezi shrugs. "You gotta act a whole lot tougher. And cooler. They won't let you in unless you're cool."

Though she's trying to play it "cool", Karkat can't help wondering if she's been anywhere like here before either or if she's just quoting Latula at him.

"What kind of bullshit is that?"

"Just trust me: keep your mouth shut, does as Latula says, and don't take any joints from anybody for gods sake. Who knows what's in that crap?" They move another few steps forward, quickly approaching the front of the queue. Despite the dropping temperature of the early evening, Karkat is beginning to sweat again. Fuck.

This was a bad idea- _is_ a bad idea.

"You think our parents will disown us if they find out about this?" Nepeta asks, prodding Karkat's elbow to get his attention.

"Dad will be disappointed if anything." Karkat shrugs, "Doesn't Meulin sneak out all the time to
places like these?"

"Sometimes she sneaks out and goes to Kurloz's house." Nepeta wrinkles her nose, "I think they're having sex."

"No shit." Karkat rolls his eyes, "What did you think they were doing, playing cards?"

"Playing cards naked maybe." Nepeta says, "It's just weird to think about. He's older than her. And you'd find it weird if Kankri was screwing somebody, right?"

Nepeta's right, some things are just too weird to think about.

"You ever think about sex?" Nepeta says, abruptly, and much too loudly.

"All the time." Terezi grins, "But none until you're legal, Miss Leijon!" She nudges her in the ribs and Nepeta gets a huge, dumb smile on her face.

They reach the door. Karkat wonders if it's too late to give up on this whole quest and go home.

"Chill, Karkat." Latula smacks him on the back.

Blocking their way is a tall (and terrifying) girl with a clipboard and two long braids that are draped over her shoulders. They fall down to her feet, almost scraping along the ground, and Karkat can't help but stare. City people are so much cooler than anybody back home.

"Yo, Pyrope." The girl nods to Latula before turning to the rest of them, "You shrimps look a little young to be breakin' into a place like here." Her eyes trail over all of them in turn, "Let's see here: we got the little Blind Wonder, Cat Girl, and..."

"Yes?" Karkat growls, waiting.

The girl laughs. "Shouty McNubs, how adorable. Nice to see the kind of company that you're keepin' nowadays, Pyrope."

"C'mon, Rezi and her friends are meeting somebody here. Don't deny the blind girl a good time, Peixes. Besides..." Latula lowers her glasses to wink, (another very Terezi-esque gesture, Karkat realises with surprise), "They're on the tapes."

Peixes checks her clipboard and then, looks up at them: "Is one of you named Karkat? Karkat Vantas?"

"What's it to you, Braids?" Karkat glowers, "Where'd you get my name from anyway?"

"A gal who passed by about fifteen minutes ago now gave me this." She waves a tape at him, "And said I saw a Karkat Vantas that I should give 'em the tape. Today's your lucky day, kiddo, I'm feelin' nice." She slaps the tape into his hand and grins at him- her teeth are sharp like a shark's and he gets the feeling that she bites- waving them inside.

"Enjoy freezing your ass off out here, Peixes."

"Enjoy grinding against sweaty teens, Pyrope."

Karkat has to push his way inside, there are so many people, and Nepeta clings to his arm so that she doesn't lose him. They are way out of their depth in a club full of people and they don't even know what Rose Lalonde looks like. She could be anywhere. He finds a gap, a clearing in the ground by a table and pushes into the space, before turning to his friends. Nepeta is still clinging to
him, slowly getting her bearings, and Terezi is swaying in time to the music. Latula Pyrope-terrible guardian she is- has already vanished into the crowd.

"What now?" Terezi shouts over the loud music.

The entire atmosphere is loud and sweaty and gross, people pressed up against each other, and Karkat just tries to keep his gaze focused on Terezi and Nepeta. The cat girl has detached from his arm, looking a little more sure of herself, and is humming along under her breath.

"We look for Lalonde!" Karkat shouts back.

"We don't know what she looks like!" Nepeta yells, "I say that we make the most of this. Karkat, this might be our only chance to club. Everybody at school will be so jealous!"

"I don't think-" Karkat tries to protest but the girls have already caught each other by the arms and started spinning around, yelling something with delight that he can't be bothered to decipher. He doesn't know what he's supposed to do, so he just stands there and watches as they blur into a mess of dark and olive and green and red and fall into each other, laughing.

They spin until they're dizzy, which is when Terezi grabs Karkat by the arm.

"Hey, you wanna dance with me?" She yells to him, pulling him in before he can protest.

"I really don't dance!" He tells her, "It's not a thing I do, Pyrope! Dear fucking Jesus, just let me go and sit down somewhere!" He's not even sure if she can hear him over the aggressively loud music.

"No chance. Copy me!" She begins to dance absurdly, like she doesn't care at all what people think of her, and holds Karkat's hands tightly, forcing him to dance with her. It doesn't get any less humiliating but the whole situation is so ridiculous that she actually makes him laugh properly for the first time in what feels like years. Terezi Pyrope feels like the kind of person he could become friends with. He wonders if he'll ever see her again after tonight.

It's not long before Nepeta's pulled back in and they're dancing in a circle, the three of them pressed close together so that they don't get lost. And even though Karkat feels like a complete idiot, he's having fun and he tries to hate it, tries to hate this, but he can't. He can't hate this bizarre feeling of... Of... Friendship, maybe? He tries not to think about it. He's still blushing furiously.

Unsurprisingly, he's the first of them to retire to a table and leave the girls to dance on their own, waving their arms around wildly. He really isn't made for this kind of scene and can only hope that nobody here tries to engage with him.

"Hello."

He would be so lucky.

A girl- a dark-skinned girl with thick white hair falling down to her chin and thick-rimmed glasses perched on the end of her nose- has sat herself beside him. She is wearing a full-length dress that dips to the ankle, tied in the middle with a ribbon, and the thickest eyeliner he has ever seen.

"Rose Lalonde." The name tumbles out of his mouth before he can stop it.

She smiles a close-lipped smile. "Karkat Vantas. I didn't expect you to look so... Small."

Why does everybody always pick up on his height first? It's so fucking unfair.
"You look exactly how I expected you to."

Her head tilts a little to the left. "It's nice to finally meet you, Karkat. Did Meenah Peixes give you the next tape at the door?"

"I really don't understand why these stupid things-" He waves said cassette at her to emphasise his point, "- have to be hidden all over the city in seemingly random places. Why couldn't your idiot of a brother-" He suddenly realises that he's talking to Dave's sister, oh god, how weird is that? "- have just mailed them all to me in one go?"

"I think that would have taken the majority of the fun out of it." Rose adjusts the glasses that are balanced on her nose, squinting a little, "Don't you agree?"

"Fuck no."

She chuckles.

"You said that there were two tapes in this goddamn place? Feel like telling me where they are so that I can pick them up and get the hell out of this hormonal hellmouth?" He tries to stare her down, trying to mimics the look that Kankri uses to get what he wants from their dad. Needless to say, it doesn't work. Her violet eyes- contacts?- meet his gaze and stare defiantly until he's the one that has to look away.

"I told you, an associate of mine will hand them to you." Rose says, "She's yet to arrive unfortunately. I wonder what's keeping her?" She stands- no, she rises from the table with a sense of grace, "Are you drinking tonight? I can purchase you something."

"I'm sixteen." He tells her, "I'm not legal."

For a moment, Rose looks mildly baffled. "Forgive me, I didn't know you were straight-edge." What was she expecting him to say? Yes? "I'll just get myself something to drink then. Stay there and I'll be back in a few moments."

She turns away and he makes a split-second decision, standing up so quickly that he nearly falls over. God, he can be a klutz sometimes. He blames genetics. "Lalonde-!"

"Hm?" She glances back, a swish of black fabric and blonde hair.

"One drink." He holds up a finger, "I'll take one, no more. Understand?"

Once again, her mouth slips into a thin smile, stretched across her face. Even though she probably doesn't realise it, Rose Lalonde looks remarkably like a snake when she smiles like that. It's beautiful and vaguely threatening. She disappears into the crowd, seconds later, drifting in the direction of the bar. Karkat can't hear anything over the sound of his heart in his ears. God, his dad would kill him if he knew that he'd just let a complete stranger buy him drinks. There again, nothing seems particularly ordinary today.

His eyes catch back on Terezi and Nepeta, who are a little further away now, and look as if they're going to spin each other into another world or something. He's never seen two people look so far away and close together at the same time. Since he last looked up, Terezi's hand has crept fully into Nepeta's and he can't help but think I knew it.

The sound of two drinks being set down brings his attention back to Rose Lalonde, who has returned to their table. She sits down, crossing one long leg over the other so that the beads tied around her ankle jingle against each other.
"Since I understand that you have never drunk before, I decided that I would go easy on you." She says, pushing a drink in a fancy glass towards him.

"It's pink." Karkat states, for the sake of anybody colour-blind or anybody as blunt as him.

"Do you have a problem with that?" Rose raises an eyebrow, "And I will forewarn you that if you say anything vaguely sexist, I won't allow you to sit with me anymore."

But you sat with me, Karkat thinks, frustrated.

"Nothing." He glares at the beverage as if it were an enemy and took a sip from it, unsure of what to expect. It's bitter enough to make him splutter but he forces himself to swallow, wiping his mouth quickly on the sleeve of his sweater. "You said that you were going easy on me, Lalonde! Since when has a drink bitterer than Leonardo DiCaprio at the Oscars counted as going easy on somebody?"

"It's hardly bitter." Rose has a much more eloquent cocktail held delicately in her hand, which makes her look vaguely like somebody out of an old-fashioned movie, "If it was any sweeter than that, it would be Koolaid, Vantas."

He takes another sip. And another. By the fourth sip, he's ready to admit that maybe he judged too quickly. The drink isn't all that bad but he decides that he'd much rather have a soda than something like this. Obviously, he doesn't say this to Rose.

"Are you enjoying the tapes so far?" Rose says, perhaps to make up for the lack of adequate conversation.

"I guess." Karkat shrugs, "I wish your brother would stop being such a fucking coward and get to the point already."

Rose rolls her eyes. "You're blunt and impatient. Dave found it incredibly difficult to record those, you should know. He found it rather upsetting recounting some of the events that have happened to him, I believe, even if he lead you to believe otherwise. Trust me, Karkat, he's weaker than he likes to let on. I know my brother."

"You've heard the tapes then?"

"I heard him throwing my laptop against the wall in frustration and breaking it significantly." Rose takes another sip from her drink, (hers isn't pink, Karkat thinks, bitterly), "You really should stop doing that, you know?"

"Doing what?" He wishes she wasn't so frustrating to talk to.

"Using anger as a defence mechanism. It's quite irritating." She sighs, "Look, even now, you're scowling at me and you don't even know that you're doing it. Throwing up walls isn't going to help anyone."

"Lalonde, if I wanted therapy, I would have asked for it." She's right, he is scowling, but purely because she is beginning to piss him off.

Rose offers a vague wave of her right hand in response, as if to say whatever.

"I don't have to stay here and listen to this bullshit." Karkat stands up, "And for the record, I am not "using anger as a defence mechanism", you're just really fucking annoying. You shouldn't read into people like that."
He storms off. Rather, he attempts to storm off. He stops when she calls after him:

"I seem to be getting to you, I apologise."

He turns to glare. He wishes that he could think of a snappy response.

"Come back. We don't have to talk about you if you don't want to."

_Rose would get along well with Kankri_, Karkat thinks.

"Karkat?" She's approached him now, touching him on the arm in a manner that's probably meant to be affectionate, "I'm sure that you have some questions for me and I'd be happy to answer all the ones that I can."

Reluctantly, he lets her lead him back to the table.

"You aren't here alone, are you?" Rose asks, curiously, "Where are your friends?"

"They aren't my friends." Karkat says, on instinct, "But that girl with the red glasses and the cat girl attached to her, they're with me."

Rose peers over at them. "Interesting choice of friends."

"There wasn't much choice. And they aren't my friends- they're just a pair of idiots that I'm hanging around with for the night. I don't even know Terezi, she's just some girl that gave us a tape and refused to fuck off." Karkat back to Rose, "I have a question for you."

"A question? How delightful." She's as sarcastic as he knew she'd be, "And pray, what might that question be?"

"Do you live here? In Skaia City?"

Rose purses her lips. "I'm not at a liberty to say. But let's just say that we don't not live here."

Something in Karkat's chest squeezes. "That's a yes?"

"I said nothing." Rose seems to spot something or somebody, as she fixes her gaze on a spot across the room and smiles her weird reptilian smile. She raises a hand, waving somebody over eagerly- a little too eager for Rose, she broke her sarcastic and wise character for a good minute. It's not long before another girl appears at their table and Karkat is surprised to say that he knows her.

"Kanaya?"

"Oh, hello, Karkat. How delightful to see you here." Kanaya smiles at him in her very kind and motherly Kanayaish way that makes him feel warm and squishy inside. His Mom passed away when he was young and ever since Kanaya, two years older than him, had basically adopted him in middle school, she'd decided that she'd make up for it. She's the kind of person that bakes him cookies and ruffles his hair and is the only person allowed to hold him in her arms for long periods of time. He stamps hard on the warm feeling in his chest, willing it to go away so that he doesn't embarrass himself in public.

"I didn't think this was the kind of place that somebody like you would hang out." Karkat realises how bad that sounds and attempts to correct himself, "No, I mean-"

"No, dear, you're quite alright." She assures him, "This isn't my usual scene, I have to agree with you there. However, my good... Friend Rose likes to come here and I like to accompany her." She
looks to Lalonde, "I had no idea that you had acquired spectacles recently."

"I thought they gave me a more intellectual look."

"Intellectual meaning slightly pretentious, I suppose?"

"A little, yes." Rose takes the glasses off, "Less pretentious?"

Kanaya just smiles.

Karkat is dumbfounded. He never knew Kanaya had a girlfriend, let alone one like Rose. He can't believe Kanaya never told him.

"I suppose it's a small world." Rose says, voicing his thoughts for him, "Anyway, I was going to make introductions but I see now that they're not necessary. The two of you seem to know each other quite well. Kanaya, you never told me that you kept such angry company."

"Don't tease him, Rose." Kanaya rolls her eyes, good-natured as ever, "I must have mentioned Karkat to you at some point."

"I'm sure that I would have remembered such a bizarre name." Rose says.

Kanaya's dark cheeks tint darker somehow. "Oh."

"Fuck you, my name is not "bizarre". Karkat is a perfectly good name."

"For a small, fluffy kitten perhaps." Rose says, innocently.

"Did you just-?"

Rose cuts him off, smoothly. "Karkat, it was very pleasant to meet you. Truly. But I'd like some time alone with my girlfriend, if that's okay with you."

"Gladly. I'm just here to take my next goddamn cassette. You said that there were two here and you've only given me one, you flake." Karkat huffs, "You better give me the second one sharpish, Kanaya."

"Cassette?" Kanaya frowns, "I don't know anything about a cassette, Karkat. In fact, I don't think I know anybody that still listens to cassettes. Were you expecting me to have one on my person tonight? I apologise that you came all this way when I didn't have one for you."

Karkat forgets how to breathe for a few moments.

"Kanaya, I gave you a cassette to keep safe." Rose reminds her, "You did keep it safe, didn't you?"

"......." For a long moment, Kanaya considers, "Oh, you did! I remember now but I don't know what I did with it. Didn't it have music on it? I think I might've given it to Porrim, it seemed more like something that she'd be interested in. She said something about taking it to work with her, I believe? She works in that music store over the way and she's always looking for more browsing music to play."

"Porrim has the tape?" Karkat splutters.

He's going to have to go and see Porrim Maryam?

Rose shrugs. "You'll just have to go and collect it from her, I suppose. That might add a little more
time into your journey but I shouldn't think it would be too much of a problem." She waves him away, oddly impatient all of a sudden, "On your way now, Karkat, you're losing time. You need to finish the tapes by tomorrow night."

"What, why?" She's giving him more questions than answers.

Rose just waves him away. "The tapes will explain it all. Go on, grab your friends and get going."

With a growl, Karkat begins to push his way back through the crowd towards where he saw his friends earlier; much to his annoyance, they seem to have disappeared from where they were and he can't see any signs of them anywhere. Where on earth could they have gotten to? He glances back to ask if Rose has seen them but she's already attached to Kanaya like a parasite, trying to suck her face off or something. Karkat winces.

As he glances around, barely able to see anything, there's still no sign of Pyrope or Leijon.

"They would pick now to vanish off the face of the fucking planet." He mutters.

"Lookin' for your friends?" A voice comes from behind and he spins around to see some douchebag in shades leaning against the wall, (how long has he been watching him?), "The cat girl and the blind kid? I think they were headin' outside for some fresh air. Or some makeouts. You never can be too sure."

"Thanks." Karkat says and, now knowing that he has a time limit, he hurries towards the door without so much as a glance back.

He doesn't notice Dave Strider smiling after him.
When he finds them, they are sat on the hood of Latula Pyrope's car and smiling like completely idiots. Something about finding them like this, leaning against each other with Nepeta pressed into Terezi's neck, makes Karkat feel kind of...

He really doesn't want to use the word jealous to describe how he feels. But seeing the two of them alone, close like that, he can't help it. Nepeta was the only person that he knew who wasn't already with somebody else and now, he is more alone than ever. Nepeta's found herself... A girlfriend and all he's found are some stupid cassette tapes from a guy that he'll never even meet. Fucking stupid.

"Hey Karkat." Terezi says, waving him over, (how she know it was him if she can't even see?), "Did'ja get the next tape? Did'ja meet Rose Lalonde? What was she like?"

"Calm your tits, Pyrope, this isn't an investigation." Karkat rolls his eyes and looks at the two of them for a good hard moment, "What the fuck are you two doing, snuggling on top of a car like this? This isn't some shitty indie movie."

"Jeez, if it really bothers you that much, we'll stop." Terezi slides off the hood and lands easily on her feet; Nepeta follows suit and grabs her by the hand, pulling her so that she's at least facing Karkat, "You didn't answer any of my questions."

"Yes, yes, full of herself." Karkat stamps on the jealousy swelling in his chest and tries to focus his attention on something other than the girls' interlocked fingers, "So, I found out where the next tape is." He addresses Nepeta, "I don't suppose that you know where Porrim Maryam works."

"Sure, it's just round the corner from here. Like a block away." Nepeta says, like he should know that, "I've been there before with Meulin. It's one of her favourite record stores and Porrim gives us discounts sometimes. I thought Porrim was covering for us back home?"

Her deaf sister's favourite record store. Karkat can't even be bothered to question her anymore.

"Yeah, I thought so too. Well guess what? Looks like nobody's covering for us anymore, since Kanaya is too busy sucking her girlfriend's face off and Porrim is at work. Basically, we're fucked." Karkat huffs; he's going to be in such trouble when he gets home, especially if he doesn't come back until tomorrow night, "Do we have to walk?"

"The exercise is good for you." Nepeta insists, "C'mon, Karkitty, it's this way."

"Actually..." Terezi "looks" up at the sky with a frown, "It's probably dark, right? It's probably not a good idea to wander through Beforus in the dark. We're vulnerable targets, after all. I can't imagine Vantas being much help if we're attacked."

He rolls his eyes. "Wow, way to assume, Pyrope."

Why does she always have to guess right about him?

"It's fine, I can defend us." Nepeta says, "I'm tougher than you think, Purrezi. I do all kinds of sports after school; I could probably take down an entire football team if I wanted to!"

Terezi grins. "Fair play, Leijon."

"But I have to listen to this tape-" Karkat points out, holding it up, "-before we go get the next one.
Otherwise, I'll fall behind and things will get confusing."

Terezi, looking the wrong way again, says, "He's holding up the tape, isn't he?"

"Fuck you, blind girl, you knew I was." Karkat huffs.

"Just use the Walkman and listen to it on the way over there." Nepeta says, "You still have the Walkman, right?"

"He left it in the car." Terezi sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose, "Idiot. Lucky for you, Tulip doesn't bother locking the car doors."

"First of all, I swear to God, you're some kind of mindreader. How the hell did you even know that?" Karkat wonders if all blind people have mind-reading superpowers or if it's just Terezi, "Secondly, you just told me that this city was too dangerous for us to walk through at night. You said everybody in this district was tough as hell. You implied there was high risk of us getting attacked on the street. And you're telling me that your insane sister doesn't lock her car doors? Does she want to get robbed?"

"No, she just doesn't give a shit about that kind of thing," Terezi shrugs, "Or she just forgets about these things. You may find this hard to believe but Latula can be a little... Reckless."


Terezi snorts with laughter.

True to her word, the car door is unlocked and Karkat rescues the Walkman from his seat, untangling the headphones. He clicks the tape in and shuts it in, pushing the headphones on and no doubt making his hair look even worse. He doesn't usually care about things like that, of course he doesn't, but if he happens to run into- you know what, never mind. Just forget that he said anything.

"Karkat, we've gotta get moving if you want to finish the tapes in time." Nepeta says, tugging on his arm impatiently, "Seriously, we're only on the fourth tape and that means there are ten more to find."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming." He lets her pull him along, ending up trapped between the two girls.

"That's what your mom said last night." Terezi cackles. Considering she's older, she is a lot more immature than Karkat and Nepeta put together. Actually, he takes that back because Nepeta actually found that funny. They are both immature losers. Karkat is the only one here with a shred of self-respect apparently.

He presses play on the Walkman.

"Hey Kitkat. What's up?"

Pause.

"I completely forgot that you couldn't answer me, how lame is that? Anyway, I hope you're chill and that Rose didn't drive you insane. I swear, they should use her to torture information out of spies. You know that thing where they drip water onto people's heads until they go insane? What's it called? Water torture. They could replace that with Rose talking, if you know what I mean."

"You better not be talking shit about me to your boyfriend, David!" comes a distant voice, followed by a smacking sound.
"Jeez, calm your tits, Roselyn. She just hit me with a pillow, if you hadn't guessed." Dave is laughing. It is a very beautiful sound to listen to, sort of breathy and relaxed. It's almost as nice as Rose referring to Karkat as Dave's boyfriend- no.

"Karkat, don't believe a word Dave says. The only reason he dislikes me is because I filled his sweater with frogs the other day and he insists it still smells like pond water."

"What kind of maniac fills somebody's sweater with frogs anyway?"

"Somebody who is pissed that you got pancakes stuck to the ceiling last week.

Dave's nice laugh.

Rose's laugh is almost identical to his, it's not hard to tell that they're twins from their voices.

"Seriously, though, get the fuck out of my room, Rose. I've gotta tell Karkat some important and emotional shit about my childhood."

"To donate to the Save Dave Strider Fund, please call the following number- Rose deadpans."

"Begone, evil witch."

Rose's laugh. "See you around, Karkat."

He listens to the sound of her leaving the room again, closing the door behind her.

"I guess I should explain some things. Like Rose and me. We have different surnames, which is kind of obvious, but she really is my twin. But here's the deal, okay? Our parents got in big trouble with social services for... Y'know, drinking and owning swords and shit like that. Turns out they don't trust kids to cool parents."

"That's how we all got ditched in foster care. And gained different surnames from different families over the years- me and Dirk stuck with Strider, Rose and Roxy got Lalonde."

"You know, they'll feed you that bullshit about trying to keep siblings together but I can tell you first hand that it's not true. Nobody wants four kids on their hands, after all. For years, I got shifted between homes and families and yadda, yadda. You know how this story goes. I'm an outsider and all that shit. Don't fit in anywhere. Blah, blah, blah."

Karkat mutters an agreement under his breath and receives a sharp nudge from both sides. Terezi is pulling a stupid face at him, trying to distract him.

"Guess that's where all my problems start. How cliché is that? I'm a troubled foster kid, you're a normal guy... Like a movie, huh?" Dave trails off, thoughtfully, "Where was I? I've been moved around a lot, that's what I was saying. I only moved out about a year back to live with dearest Rose. She's not half-bad, y'know? She keeps shit together."

"They let me see my brothers and sisters, my last lot of foster parents. They were good like that but they were also kinda... Suckish. They were trying their best. But y'know, when you go looking to foster a kid, you don't want one with red eyes and rebellious tendencies? That's fancy talk for being a total ass by the way."

"Needless to say, they weren't my biggest fans. No wonder I moved out as soon as I possibly could. Anybody would."
"There you go, Karkles, you got all the boring background on me. Hope that's enough to keep ya satisfied until the next tape. Stay tuned for more boring anecdotes."

He pushes the headphones back and lets them hang around his neck, staring at the ground as he processes what he just heard. Either side of him, Nepeta and Terezi are chattering away but he doesn't hear a word of it. All he can think is: what?

Sure, it's cool to hear about Dave's background. He'd be lying if he said that he wasn't intrigued but he was expecting.... More interesting, fuck if he knows. Rose just built up a hell of anticipation about these tapes.

And why? That's his other question. Why the hell has Dave picked him, of all the people in the world, to learn all these things about him?

"What's up, Karkitty?" Nepeta asks, eventually, "You look down."

"It's nothing. Just... Nothing." Karkat shrugs.

"What did Dave say?" Terezi snickers at his name, like it's a big joke, "Any lovey-dovey confessions from your boyfriend?"

"Shut up." Karkat can feel his face heating up, "I don't even know him. We've never even met."

"Karkat's got a boyfriend, Karkat's got a boyfriend!" Terezi sings gleefully.

"What are you, some stupid third grader? Does this look like a playground to you, Pyrope? Do you really think that's how dating works? You send someone some stupid tapes and expect them to fall in love with you?" Karkat glares at her, "Don't be so fucking stupid!"

"Way to be harsh, asshole." Terezi doesn't seem upset, "You're the one that's never even had a crush on somebody before, what do you know?"

"How-?" Either she can read Karkat much too well or Nepeta is telling her stuff.

"Was there anything important on the tape?" Nepeta insists, eager to change the topic, "Anything that we should know about? Dave's not dying, is he?"

"No- wait, what?"

"I don't know, this whole situation reminds me a little of P.S I Love You." Nepeta shrugs, "The one where the guy-"

"Yeah, yeah, I know what happens." Karkat rolls his eyes, as if he didn't dedicate about five hours to crying over that the movie the first time he saw it, "No, Dave didn't say anything important. Just that he's been through the care system."

"Poor kid." Terezi says, sounding a little sincere, "It can't be easy to be taken from your parents, y'know? I don't know what I'd do without my Mom. Poor Dave and poor Rose too. No wonder they both sound kinda messed up."

"Wait..." Karkat thinks back, "He also said something about having red eyes... Red. How the fuck does that even happen?"

"Sometimes, people's bodies and minds get all jumbled in the womb." Nepeta says, "Maybe Dave's genetics just got screwed around a little."
"I guess." Karkat shrugs.

"Red eyes... Mhm!" Terezi licks her lips.

"You're one creepy fucker, you know that, Pyrope?"

"Thanks, Karkat." She grins at him.
Cassette Four: Side B

Chapter Summary

Terezi figures out literally everything about Karkat because she's a genius.

(AKA I finally say all the stuff I've been hinting about outright)

Happy Saturday!

"And then, Karkat got his ass completely kicked to the curb." Nepeta finishes. Most of the stories she has to tell about Karkat and his run-ins with other people end like this. He has a tendency to get into trouble with his loud mouth- especially at school.

He huffs. "That's not how it happened. Don't make it sound like I provoked anybody."

"You provoke everyone." Nepeta rolls her eyes and leans against him, looking up at him innocently, "Besides, there's a romantic element to it. You're the loud-mouthed outcast that gets into trouble because of his smartass remarks. You are a walking rom-com trope."

"Do you guys watch a lot of rom-coms?" Terezi- despite being blind- is managing to give Karkat a look. "Together?"

"Of course!" Nepeta says, "We're friends. And Karkat doesn't have anybody else to watch Legally Blonde with."

Terezi laughs. "A pathetic representation of the legal system."

"Don't ruin it." Nepeta laughs too. Karkat is stuck between them.

He just tries to block out the sound of them flirting, for the sake of his sanity.

When they get to the music store, it seems desolate and empty- but that might just be because it's decorated to look that way, Karkat isn't really sure. It has a very intentionally grunge-y look to it, which isn't surprising if Porrim works here. Looks sort of like the setting of an indie movie (reminiscent of Empire Records, Karkat thinks). Either way, when he steps through the door and look around, he is almost sure that nobody is here. He calls out anyway, just in case somebody is lurking around behind the shelves of records.

"Hey!" It comes out a little more aggressive than he imagined, which is usually the case, "Maryam? Are you here? It's Karkat!"

"Who is Porrim Maryam?" Terezi asks, curiously, "Will I like her?"

"You'll either like her or you won't." Nepeta says, "She's that kind of person."

Terezi shrugs. "I'll like her, I'm sure. I'm a people-person."

"You're creepy." Karkat tells her.

Suddenly, somebody taps him on the shoulder. "Hey, can I help you guys with anything?"
"Holy shit!" Karkat nearly jumps out of his skin, spinning around to find a girl with a wide smile standing behind them. It takes him a few moments to get his breath back before he can study her. She looks perfectly nice, creepy smile and goth jewellery aside, but something about her makes his skin tingle. Judging by the badge pinned to her front, "Aradia" works here.

"You look like you saw a ghost." She laughs, "I'm Aradia."

"Do you sneak up on everybody or should we consider ourselves special?" Karkat says, still recovering, "That was creepy as shit. Pyrope, you're second-in-line for the creepiest person I met tonight prize. Aradia just took your spot at the top. The city is full of freaks, holy shit."

"Karkitty, that's not very nice." Nepeta says, even though she still looks a little startled; she turns to Creepy McSneak and smiles, "Hi, we're looking for Purrim Maryam? I don't suppose you've seen her?"

"You literally just missed her." Aradia says, "She went out to get pizza for us. But she'll be back soon, if you want to wait. It's a long time since anybody has come in here..." The way she says it is scary, like she's been waiting for customers for literal centuries. "Are you sure that I can't interest you in any records?"

"Sorry, we're actually after something else," Nepeta shrugs; upon seeing Aradia's face fall, she suddenly panics and corrects herself, "Though, my sister really likes collecting nice records. I don't suppose you have any that would look nice on a wall?"

"Of course, come with me!" Aradia says, brightening up again, "I'll show you where we keep the prettiest records, just for you, just for your sister!" And she grabs Nepeta by the arm, pulling her along behind her. Actually, her enthusiasm is even kind of creepy.

"Creepy but cute." comments Terezi The Mindreader, "And she just stole my girl."

She doesn't look upset by this but there's a look on her face that isn't her usual grin. Karkat isn't really sure what's on her mind but he's not sure if he's allowed to ask. He says nothing. The two of them stand there, silently, by the door, and don't say anything to each other. Oh god, the silence is actually kind of awful. He should definitely say something. Ask her what's wrong. Ask her what the deal is with her and Nepeta. Ask her about the weather. Just say something, anything-

"So..." He says, eventually, and she "looks" at him, "You and Nepeta, huh?"

"You didn't like her or anything, right?" Terezi says, hopefully, "She talks about you a lot. I thought you two might have some kind of thing going, since she seems practically attached to you. That could just be because your friends, of course, close friends, but she laughs a little too hard and talks too much and I really don't want to get in the way of anything." She inhales sharply, "I'm not in the way, right?"

"Holy shit, no, I don't like Nepeta. Of course I fucking don't. Not that she isn't a... Decent girl, I guess, though she can be insane half the time but-

"You swing the other way." Terezi decides, crossing her arms, "Don't you, Karkat?"

Karkat licks his lips. He doesn't know what to say.

It's not like he's afraid of people knowing- if somebody found out, he wouldn't give a shit (probably)- and it's not like he'd be alone, since he's far from being the only gay guy in his town. And since Kankri is queer too, he doesn't suppose anybody would be surprised. But... He hasn't told anybody yet. Well, nobody important. His ex obviously knew but who gives a fuck about him?
(Karkat does. Karkat definitely gives many fucks about his ex. But he'll deny the hell out of that.) Nobody else knows. He wanted to keep it quiet, after all.

"I can read people exceptionally well." Terezi half-explains, "And I've never seen anybody so terrible with girls. You didn't seem to have any idea that Nepeta has had a crush on you for years."

"I knew. Believe me, she's not exactly subtle and I'm something of a romance expert."

"Says the sixteen year old who hasn't dated a single person."

Karkat doesn't say anything. He adjusts his sweater collar, hot.

"You have dated someone?" Terezi sounds surprised.

Karkat nudges at a hole in the carpet with the toe of his sneaker. He still doesn't say anything.

"Aaaaaand you aren't going to tell me about it." She pouts, "That's so unfair, seeing as I told you the entire situation with me and Vriska. You owe me big juicy gossip about your love life, Karkles."

"Maybe it's none of your fucking business who I have or haven't dated. God, I thought I'd escape this bullshit in the city but no, I can't escape people asking me questions about things that I blatantly don't want to talk about."

Too many people asked about what was going on with him and... Gamzee. Too many people assumed totally wrong. So many people thought they were best friends or some shit.

"Jeez, jeez, talk about touchy." Terezi raises her hands in a surrender, "Fine, you don't have to tell me anything. I'll just have to ask Nepeta."

"She doesn't know." Karkat says, quickly, "Well, she does but she doesn't at the same time- it's complicated- and she doesn't need to know."

"Well, well, I didn't have you nailed down as a man of secrets, Vantas." Terezi raises an eyebrow.

"You have no idea." He mutters, still poking at the hole in the carpet.

She doesn't understand because she isn't from a small town, where secrets rarely stay secret and he's had to work so hard to keep certain things under wraps. Of course, there are some things that you can't hide when you grow up amongst a tight-knit community (as Karkat knew from experience) but ex-boyfriends can just about be hidden away. You know, if they conveniently move away.... Shortly after the incident... And disappear off the face of the earth.

And they don't even bother with returning your calls.

Karkat pushes the memories back down before they can surface, focusing his attention on breathing properly and toeing the hole in the carpet so that it grows bigger. His chest feels tight, the blood rushes in his ears, and he can almost see it all now- NO. He will not think about it, he will not think about it, he will not.

He kicks the wall with a hard THUMP. Anger isn't the solution to his problems but it's a solution to many of them.

"What was that?" Terezi asks, and he ignores her. She shuts up.

Luckily, Aradia and Nepeta return shortly afterwards and manage to distract Terezi from any other
questions that she was thinking of asking him. (Between them, the three girls can talk up a storm). Honestly, he suspects that she's slowly working out what's wrong with him in her mind, like a detective works out how a murder was committed, and she's fitting the pieces together. And any minute now, she'll turn around and say-

"Karkat?" Nepeta nudges him, "Anybody home?"

"Leave me the fuck alone, Leijon." He says, giving her a look.

"No." She says, "You look upset and I won't leave that alone. I'm your friend, dumbass."

"I said, leave me alone." Karkat scowls.

"But-

The bell rings throughout the store as the door swings open and Porrim steps inside, carrying two pizza boxes stacked on top of each other, and somehow managing to look as beautiful and terrifying as ever. She is tall and elegant and very heavily pierced- in several places, if rumours are to be believed. Porrim pauses, surveys the situation, and hands the pizzas to Aradia. Then, she sweeps over to Karkat and Nepeta and brings them into her tight grip. She squeezes them tightly, making Karkat choke and squirm to be free.

"I thought you guys would be home by now." She says, like she's their Mom or something, "Do your parents know that you're out this late? I'm not sure they'd be happy with it."

"You were meant to be covering for us, Maryam." Karkat grumbles, still pressed tightly up against her breasts and unhappy about it. Porrim might be his brother's friend and Kanaya's sister but he's not her biggest fan. Sure, she's helped him with some shit in the past but he's still terrified at the sight of her. She's a domineering woman, wears a lot of black, and doesn't have the kindly look that Kanaya has. Porrim is sharper, scarier.

"I assure you, your father thinks you are spending the night at our home. Mother will know not to tell him otherwise, she's not an idiot." Porrim ruffles his hair, "You and your brother need to come over more often, hm? I enjoy your company."

"Miss Maryam, can you please let go of us?" Nepeta squeaks, squished, and the two of them are released.

"It's nice to see you too, Nepeta." Porrim smiles at her and ruffles her hair too, for good measure, "But really, it's not safe for you kids to wander around the city alone at night."

"We aren't alone, we're with my sister. She's tough as shit." Terezi pipes up, helpfully, "She's waiting for us with the car back at Damara's. We just came here to get a cassette and leave."

"Well, I'm not just letting you leave." Porrim says, a spark in her eyes, "Have you kids eaten yet? Aradia, don't eat all the pizza, save some for our guests. And you're going to need some jackets, it's cold out. We probably have some that we can lend you. And I'll find that cassette- the one Kanaya gave me, I presume?"

"You don't have to-" Nepeta attempts.

"Sit down and enjoy the pizza." Porrim orders.

Obediently, they all sit and Aradia passes the box around. Karkat didn't realise just how hungry he was until he was stuffing three slices of pizza in his mouth at once. It was good pizza too, real
pizza, city pizza. He thought this stuff only existed in movies but apparently, it actually exists in real life.

"So, how is the trail going?" Porrim asks, as she begins to dig through the box of cassettes kept behind the counter for the correct one, "Karkat?"

"Okay, I guess." He mumbles around a mouthful of food.

"And who's your new friend?" Porrim gestures to Terezi, "Did you meet her in the city?"

"I'm Terezi." The girl jumps in before Karkat can, "I'm from Alternia. My sister is Latula Pyrope."

"Oh, Latula..." Porrim smiles, because she literally knows (and has dated) everybody in the entire universe, "I see it now. She must style your hair for you? You look a lot like her."

Terezi grins contently. "That's 'cos we both look like Mom."

"Your Mom must be very beautiful then." Nepeta says.

Smooth, Leijon.

Karkat is ready to swear that the blind girl blushed.

"Yeah, she is." Terezi says, firmly.

"I don't think the cassette is in here." Porrim frowns, "Aradia, did you see where I put the new stuff that I brought in this morning?"

"Didn't you put it in the back?" Aradia looks up from her phone, (squinting, Karkat can see she's messaging someone), "I thought I saw you taking a whole of things in there. Do you want me to come and help you look? Two heads are better than one."

"That would be helpful." Porrim says, getting to her feet, "Will you kids be okay while we look?"

"Actually, I'd like to help!" Nepeta leaps up, a little too eagerly, "If that's okay, of course."

"I would-" Terezi attempts but Nepeta gives her a look, gesturing for her to stay.

"You two stay out here." The cat girl says, "Have a nice chat." And she eyes Karkat meaningfully, as if to say 'get me a date', and disappears after the other two.

Once again, Karkat and Terezi are left alone. He doesn't say anything and she just sits there, bumping the sides of her shoes together and humming quietly. He knows that she's blind and that she can't look at him but honestly, watching her "stare" blankly at the wall is still a little unnerving. He really wishes that she'd at least look at him.

Instead, she just sits there until she grows bored, which is when she stands up and begins to trail her fingers over the records in their sleeves. Karkat just watches her, wondering what the hell runs through her head half the time. Nothing like the thoughts that race through his mind, he'd wager, and he wonders if he's the only one that is constantly struggling not to be swallowed by memories and bad thoughts. Perhaps. It can't be normal, right?

Terezi picks a record out of its sleeve and runs her fingers over it. "Did you know that anybody sold records anymore?"

"I don't think they sell them." Karkat says, "It's not as if this store is exactly popular." He gestures
to the emptiness around them.

"It's the middle of the night." Terezi shrugs, "Not many people go shopping at these time. Most people will be spending their evenings in their homes or out at events but not buying records."

"Do you feel tired yet?" Karkat asks, rubbing his eyes at the thought, "It's so late. God, I wish that I was at home right now. Watching a movie, maybe, or something equally as lonely and miserable."

"Nah, I've been sleeping most of the summer away. I'm practically nocturnal by this point." She shrugs, "You?"

"I'm eternally tired, like some sort of shitty sparkling bloodsucker from a poorly written teenage romance novel."

Terezi cackles. "Has anybody told you that you're funny? And evil. But mainly funny."

"Evil? Evil towards who? The Twilight saga's demographic of insecure twelve year olds."

"We were all part of that demographic once." Terezi is still snickering.

Karkat hates that he agrees. "I'm seriously going to need some shitty coffee though or I'm not going to make it through the night without passing out at four in the morning like some drunk college student."

"I'm going to need some more pizza." Terezi nods to the empty boxes, "Like seven more. I'm starved, we'll have to pick up some more food before the night's over."

"Well, I'm broker than said drunken college student so you're going to have to be the one paying to fuel your pizza addiction."

Terezi just grins at him and he notices for the first time that her front teeth are ever so slightly wonky. Crooked.

She goes back to fumbling her way along the shelf, trailing her greasy pizza-covered fingers over everything and knocking at least five things over. He doesn't say anything, staring at his feet and wondering if Terezi counts as his friend. That would bring his total up to a very impressive three, two more than Kankri's got. He wonders where Terezi went to school and if she had friends there. She doesn't seem like she'd have a lot of friends because she's bat-shit crazy and people don't usually befriend the weird kids.

Karkat didn't have any friends when he'd started high school because he's also one of the weird kids. He'd walked in on the first day of freshman year alone and failed to impress anybody with his lack of social skills and loud voice. The school in their town was pretty big, since some of the city kids came there too, but Karkat still couldn't find anybody to hang around with. Nepeta had still been in middle school and Kanaya always seemed to be working on some important homework or another, apologising profusely about it of course, which left him on his own often enough. He'd spent most of the year on his own.

Then, he'd met... Him. Gamzee Makara got sent to their high school after he got kicked out of his fifth one and had joined their grade halfway through, just appearing one day and taking most people by surprise. Karkat didn't think too much of him. But Gamzee ended up sitting next to him in a bunch of classes and kept trailing after him at lunch, until Karkat gave him a chance. They became fast friends after that- but there was a bad side to Gamzee, a side that Karkat tried his hardest to ignore.
It had all gone downhill during the summer.

"Earth to Karkat. This is Houston." Terezi snaps her fingers under his nose, "What is up with you, dude? You gotta stop spacing out on me. It's hard to tell if you're daydreaming or ignoring me."

*Daydreaming. Yeah, something like that.*

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." Karkat stands up and brushes himself off, "What did Nepeta want us to talk about anyway?"

"Most likely wants you to set us up." Terezi says, "Aren't you Mister Matchmaker after all? The romance expert?"

"Mhm." Karkat says, meaning yes and no.

"Anyway, I have something else to talk to you about." Terezi says, refusing to meet his gaze or perhaps not knowing where his gaze is, "It's private and I'm totally intruding but I gotta talk to you about it. It's important and-"

She's babbling. He has no idea what she's talking about, honestly.

He scowls. "Get to the point, fuckwad."

"Karkat." Terezi says, dropping down in front of him and her blank eyes managing to meet his, through her bright red pointy sunglasses, "I lied to you, okay?"

This is not what he was expecting. "What?"

"I lied to you when I said that I thought you didn't have secrets."

She scratches the back of her head and takes a deep breath.

Then, she continues. "I'm not stupid, okay? I know you have secrets. And I know... I know what you're working so hard to keep quiet about. I know what it is."

Karkat swallows.

"And I don't give a fuck, just so you know. I don't care if you're... You know." She runs a hand through her hair, "I am too. I understand. I'm like you."

Her "gaze" has dropped pointedly to where she knows his body is.

"And I know you want to keep it secret because you've probably gotten hurt about it in the past." Terezi continues, "But you don't have to keep your walls up now because me, I understand more than anybody, and Nepeta knows, right? Of course she knows. And she loves you anyway."

"You... What?" Karkat blinks, trying to process that, "What the fuck are you trying to say, Pyrope? You figured out..." He considers what she just said, "Wait, you too? You're like me?"

Terezi grins at him. "They say that it's 0.3% of the population or something. Did you really think that you'd never meet anybody like you? God, that's so selfish, Karkles."

All he can do is stare at her, open-mouthed. "I thought I was alone."

"You're not." She assures him, "Stop looking at me like an idiot. I know you're staring like a complete dumbass." And she claps him on the shoulder, "Your secret's safe with me, Karkat. I
won't tell anyone that you're... You know, trans and stuff. Don't tell about me either."

He feels as if the world has grown a little larger.
Porrim finds the tape, wedged between an old copy of *In Utero* covered in dust and a coffee mug with *Hot Mama* printed on it. Throughout the explanation, Karkat refrains from commenting and just takes the tape without a word. He pops it into the Walkman and listens to it on the way back.

(Porrim does lend them jackets. And he is so fucking grateful.)

"I was alone on the first day of sophomore year."

There's no introduction. Karkat rewinds the tape several times to make sure that he didn't miss anything and it really does start like that. For some reason, those words alone have him feeling... Unnerved. There's something very un-Dave about it. Where's the bouncy greeting? The banter with Rose? Nothing. Karkat feels sick. He guesses that this is where things get serious.

"Recently moved to the city. Not Skaia, obviously, some place states away, you understand, and I didn't know anybody. Not a single person. There's literally nothing more nerve-wrecking, right? I... I think you understand what it's like to be somebody and not have any bros to hang around with... Right, Karkat?"

High school. Karkat, having spent his school life in a reasonably small elementary and middle school, had been shoved into a slightly more mainstream high school and had been shocked at it. It was like being thrown into a vat of ice water in the middle of a hot summer. He'd been small, loud, and friendless for most of freshman year.

But how the hell did Dave know that?

The thought sends a chill shooting up his spine; Dave wasn't... He wasn't stalking him or anything. Right? As much as the thought disturbed him, it was hard to put out of his mind. Unless... Dave said that he knew somebody who knew Karkat. Somebody was feeding information about Karkat? Perhaps. But who?

His eyes flicked briefly over their small group; Nepeta could be a gossip but she wasn't an idiot, she knew not to tell strangers shit about Karkat, especially things he'd made her swear to keep quiet. Terezi only met him today. Kanaya was closely connected with Rose and Dave, it seemed, but like Nepeta, she was no gossip.

"I was a complete loner, right? Picture me as that one kid from any shitty high school based movie that sits on their own and tosses their hair and acts like they're above everybody. That guy is me. I'm that guy."

"But... I met a guy."

There's always some guy. Karkat lets out a sigh.

"For the sake of his... Dignity, let's call him something as stupid and geeky as him. Brendon, let's
call him Brendon, okay? He could totally be a Brendon, this guy. No, actually, he's not cool enough to be a Brendon. Whatever, let's stick with it. Brendon. He's one of those guys from a movie too, okay, but he's the nerd with the glasses."


"Brendon- ugh, no, I can't even, that sounds so fucking stupid-"

Dave starts laughing. Karkat can't stop a smile.

"Anyway, this guy came up to me and totally asked me to be his bro automatically. And he's a good guy, that's what you've gotta understand. We were best bros- are still best bros- and we're tight as shit."

"Best bros..." Dave sounds a million miles away, which he just might be, "I suppose we are. But he never seemed to figure out that I had one hell of a thing for him. I don't know if you get that. But there is nothing more painful than a straight boy having no idea whatsoever that you like him."

"I thought he liked me, I really thought he did. We spent so much time together, y'know?"

"I... This is so stupid, I can't believe I'm telling you this-"

The sound of a loud crash makes Karkat flinch in surprise.

"Dave, what the hell are you doing?" Rose's voice is further away than usual.

"This whole thing is so fucking stupid. This guy isn't even going to care."

"Dave, calm down. You're being illogical."

"Ugh..."

"Let's turn this thing off and then, we can talk, okay? We can talk about J-"

Footsteps and the tape crackles to a stop. Karkat knocks the Walkman against his fist to make sure that he hasn't broken it somehow and the tape doesn't crackle back to life. That really is the end of this tape. It sends shivers down his spine. Dave has clearly... Been hurt. Deeply. To still be affected by something like that, a year after it happened... Still, Karkat understood. He ran his fingers over the buttons of the Walkman with a sigh.

Terezi taps him on the arm, mouthing something at him. He removes the headphones.

"What do you want, Pyrope?"

"Latula's gone."

"What?" Karkat looks up.

They're standing back in the parking lot, sticky and hot music pounding in the near distance, and there is indeed no sign of Latula Pyrope anywhere. Her car has vanished (he wonders briefly if it has anything to do with the fact that she leaves the doors unlocked) and left them abandoned here with no mode of transport. He looks to Terezi, who shrugs and kicks a old can into the gutter, and Nepeta, who looks anxious.

She has quite the right to be to; they have no way of getting home and it's a dangerous time of night to be out. Three kids, on their own, with nothing but themselves and the clothes on their back. If
Karkat knew how long they'd be away from home, he would have brought some supplies or something. He doesn't feel safe out here.

"What the heck are we going to do now?" Nepeta asks, looking around as if an answer is about to jump out at her, "We don't have a ride anymore. I thought your sister was going to wait for us?"

"Maybe... She got bored." Terezi says, sounding a little sad about it, "And didn't want to wait for us no more, so she just left without us. Or maybe she got stoned or something and forgot about us. Who knows? It's Latula, after all."

"Hey, Terezi, it will be okay." Nepeta says, wrapping an arm around her girlfriend, "I'm sure Latula didn't mean to ditch you. You're right, she was probably stoned off her face or something. Is she the kind of person... That does that a lot?"

"Not a lot." Terezi says, "But sometimes. She lets me come with her because I lend her money. I have a part-time job to help save up my college fund." She says it with such a sense of pride, "Latula's just my ride. She never swore to take care of me or anything. She just brings me with her because I ask her to."

"What an asshole." Karkat says.

"Yeah, I guess." Terezi agrees, "But she's my sister and I love her; so if you say that again, I will have to fight you."

"Sounds like a pretty one-sided fight." Nepeta teases.

"Hey!" Karkat protests.

Terezi just cackles.

And maybe because he's tired and it's early in the morning and everything seems so stupidly out of hand, Karkat laughs too. And before long, the three of them are laughing much too hard about nothing and clutching each other so they don't fall over. Karkat doesn't think he's ever laughed this much, especially about nothing at all, and it feels... Nice. He guesses. It's just been so long since he's had any reason to laugh about anything.

He decides to put this sudden positivity down to him being exhausted and hopes that it will wear off soon.

Eventually, Terezi giggles to a stop first and sits down on the curb, still chuckling to herself. Nepeta falls onto her lap (really subtle, Leijon) and Karkat sits beside them, close but not too close. Terezi notices, pulls him closer and rests her head on his shoulder. And they sit there, the three of them, and try not to think about anything. At least, Karkat tries not to think. He has no idea what's going on in the girls' heads.

"God fucking damnit, Pyrope." Karkat says, as she leans against him, but he doesn't push her away, "What the hell are we supposed to do now? It's not like we can fucking walk back home in the dark. Especially since the walk would take hours from here and I swear, I feel like death was warmed up in an Easy Bake Oven and served up with a pair of idiots on the side."

"We could take a bus?" Terezi suggests, "looking" at him, "You do know what a bus is, right? You country-bumpkins have seen a bus before?"

"Please don't make me laugh again." Nepeta giggles, "I'm all laughed-out."
"Newsflash: just because we're not from the city doesn't mean that we lack basic knowledge of how the world works. Yes, I've seen a fucking bus before, you pretentious city kid." Karkat rolls his eyes.

"Jeez, so touchy, Karkles." Terezi flicks him on the neck, making him growl at her in protest, "There's a stop not too far from here. You guys got any change?"

Nepeta crawls off her girlfriend's lap and the three of them empty their pockets out into a pile, finding a couple of coins here and there. For some reason, Terezi only seems to have bubblegum and scraps of old receipts stuffed in her pockets. She also finds a strawberry lollipop half-eaten and covered in dust, which she sticks in her mouth anyway. Karkat is horrified.

Luckily, Nepeta has a ten-dollar bill tucked into the pocket of her shorts, which she gives over reluctantly.

"You could have mentioned this." Terezi sniffs the note but thankfully, can't lick it due to the lollipop stuck in her mouth.

"I've been saving it for something important." Nepeta shrugs, "It's... Well, you know, my dad gave it to me the last time I went to see him. But I guess we can use it now."

"When'd your parents split?" Terezi scoops the money up and counts it out, just by touch.

"I don't like to talk about it." Nepeta says, "I'm happy with just my mom, really. But it's nice to see dad sometimes too."

Karkat doesn't say anything. Neither does Terezi, stuffing the money back into her pocket and proclaiming it to be enough. And she hooks an arm through her Nepeta's and directs them to the nearest bus station (how does she know where it is? How often has she been here?). And between instructions, she talks about roleplaying and dragons, which seems to be her default topic of conversation. Nepeta seems interested enough though. Karkat tunes it out.

He's busy thinking about Dave again- and thinking about how much he hates that he's thinking about Dave again- and what the hell could have happened with that guy in junior year, which has messed him up. Rejection, Karkat supposed, is a painful thing to cope with. But something as sudden as that would be more peaceful than slowly falling apart.

Him and Gamzee had fallen apart- and it was all Karkat's fault- and it had been the most painful thing that he'd ever experienced. He hadn't been able to do much more other than watch TV on the couch for the first few days afterward with his chest throbbing like he was having an asthma attack. Breaking up with Gamzee was a lot like having an asthma attack- it hurt and he couldn't breathe and it felt like he was going to die.

Needless to say, he'd recovered eventually but sometimes... He could still feel that Gamzee-shaped hole in his heart itching and sore like old stitches. He wondered if whatever Dave had gone through had been as bad as that and had left him that affected.

Karkat feels an overwhelming rush of empathy that makes him feel almost dizzy.

"I had no idea that buses ran this late." Nepeta's voice breaks through his thoughts, "But looks like there's another one in ten minutes. Do you know which stop we'll need, Purrezi?"

"Yeah. There's a stop just up the street from my home." Terezi says, "We can get off there- ha! Get off!- and head back to my place. My mom won't mind you guys staying. We'll get a few hours rest and see if I can find somebody to chauffeur us. My neighbour might be willing- though he's a bit of
"an ass."

"Cool." Nepeta says, before turning to Karkat and frowning at him, "Are you okay? You've gone really quiet all of a sudden."

Terezi squints behind her glasses. "You aren't upset that I found out-"

"Does it ever seem to you guys that the entire world is full of assholes?" Karkat says, "I mean, doesn't there seem to be a little too much heartbreak and misery in the world? I'm not sure that's what God intended for the world to be like."

"I think there are too many Vriskas and not enough Nepetas in the world." Terezi agrees- uh, kind of- and nudges her girlfriend, making Nepeta giggle.

"I think Dave might've gotten his heart ripped apart by some guy. His best friend or something awful." Karkat can't believe he's sharing this, (it seems like a secret he should be keeping), "And I don't think that's fucking okay. He sounded really torn up about it. And it happened a year ago."

"And that totally sucks." Nepeta says, in a *duh* kind of a way, "Hearts can't be fixed properly after they've been broken. But they can be stuck back together in a different way."

Karkat swears it's the smartest and weirdest thing he's ever heard her say.

"We need more Nepetas in the world." Terezi reiterates.

The bus is running late but when it arrives, it empty aside from the driver and somebody falling asleep in the back. Because Terezi and Karkat are hopeless- with her lacking the eyesight and him lacking the mathematical ability- Nepeta counts out the money and they take their seats in the front.

Terezi and Nepeta play some sort of blind version of eye-spy (using the other senses instead), whilst Karkat stares out the window.

It's late and the bus seems to be rumbling along at a slow pace. Karkat nearly slips into sleep at least three times, only jerking awake at the last minute. Even when the bus pulls up at their stop, he nearly falls asleep on his feet as they stumble down the sidewalk to Terezi's place.

Terezi's house is pretty large, in comparison to Karkat's and Nepeta's at least, and Karkat will admit that he gawks a little as they're lead up to the front door. There's no sign of Latula here either, though there are a few other cars sat out on the driveway. Flashy cars. Karkat gets the impression that the Pyropes mostly likely spend a lot of money on cars and not much else.

He just has time to note the sign nailed up beside the door, which reads: PYROPE FAMILY in loopy handwriting, and the dying pot plants before Terezi unlocks the door and pushes it open. He steps into the hallway of the house and immediately regrets it, as he is hit by the overwhelming amount of 80s nostalgia stuck up everywhere. Ferris Bueller's Day Off is playing in the front room, for gods sake. Terezi kicks her shoes off, so Karkat follows suit (but not as violently), before following her down the hallway.

"Mom?" There's an open door, which Terezi sticks her head around, "Hey, Mom, you're still working? You should take a break."

"I'm so close to cracking this case, Rezi." Terezi's mom sounds a lot more like her than Latula, "I'm glad you're back. Is your sister with you?"
"Nope, we got a bus. Is it cool if my new friends stay over?"

Karkat peeks round the door and manages to catch a glance of a dark-skinned woman hunched over a lot of papers. There's a cane leaning against the table beside her and she's wearing the exact same glasses as Terezi's. Pointy red ones. The similarity between them borders on being slightly eerie.

"Only if they're okay with sleeping on the floor." Terezi's mom cracks a weary grin, "You didn't pick them up in an alleyway or anything, did you, Rezi?"

"Nah, they're from outta town. Classier folks than us." Terezi grins, "Make sure you get some sleep, Mom."

"You too, Rezi. 'Night."

Terezi leaves the door open and continues down the corridor.

"That was your mom?" Nepeta is smiling, "She seemed pretty cool."

"My mom is insanely cool, I probably mentioned that at some point." Terezi says, "It's just a shame that she works much too hard. But that's business, I guess!" She leads the way up the stairs to her bedroom, which is as painted brightly enough to give anybody a migraine, "Nepeta, you get the bed with me. Karkat, you get the floor."

"Well, isn't that just great?" Karkat rolls his eyes.

"Sheesh, you can share with us if you really want."

Karkat decides he'd rather sleep on the floor.
Chapter Summary

This is a bunch of badly written filler and I'm sorry.

When Karkat wakes up, his back is sore and that's how he knows that he slept on the floor. It's not the first time he's done it, since he's had a few sleepovers at Nepeta's where he had to sleep on the floor, and has fallen asleep in a few weird places in the past due to his tiredness catching up to him, so he recognises the feeling. His back is sore, especially around his shoulder blades and where something sharp has been poking him in the side. It turns out to be a large book on the justice system. Karkat swears under his breath.

Waking up is often disorientating and for a moment, he's not really sure where he is. On the floor, yes, but where? This isn't the grey carpet of his bedroom or the wooden floor of Nepeta's front room. The carpet here is ketchup red and ugly. Rubbing at his eyes, he pushes himself up and stretches his arms. At a glance, he can see the faint light of early morning creeping underneath the curtains. That's when everything seems to snap into place at once: I'm at Terezi Pyrope's, we're looking for cassettes, and we only have until tonight to find all of them.

He can't believe how much has happened since yesterday morning.

"Hey..." The sleepy, raspy voice of Terezi Pyrope draws his attention. She's lying sideways in the bed so that she can face him, grinning a little, and the whites of her eyes are a little shocking without her glasses. They're just so bright, almost glow-in-the-dark white, and he can see the faint outlines of once brown eyes under a filmy covering.

"How'd you sleep?" She props herself up on one elbow.

"Fuck you, my back hurts. Couldn't you have given me a mattress or something? Don't you have a spare room in this fucking mansion that you seem to live in?" Karkat glares as well as he can this early in the morning.

Terezi flips him off lazily. "You're the one that refused to cuddle with me and Nepeta."

"I'm not sharing a bed with two girls." Karkat rolls his eyes, "That would be weird and uncomfortable for everybody involved." He thinks about how many people he know that would disagree with him, "Plus, I don't like to get too close with people, I don't know if you've fucking noticed that."

He picks consciously at the collar of his sweater.

"I know, I know, you're completely insecure about the body you were born in." Terezi says, waving her hand around to emphasise her point, "I understand. We should organise some kind of trade."

"If you can work out a way to do that, it would be fucking great." Karkat gets to his feet, "We better get moving soon, we've got so much ground to cover today. Where's your bathroom?"

"Down the hall, on the left." Terezi tells him, sitting up properly and running her hand through her
mess of curls, "Want me to find you some clothes to borrow?"

"Do you own any clothes that won't make me look like a walking advertisement for Marvel Comics?"

"Hehehe!" Terezi shakes her head, "Shoosh, it's nice to feel like a superhero. And if wearing a Superman shirt makes me feel like one, goddamnit I am going to wear one!"

She gets up, wearing only her underwear, which makes Karkat look away and his face burn with embarrassment. He didn't need to see any girls in their underwear; not now, not ever. Terezi doesn't even seem to care and begins to dig through her closet for something that he can wear. Karkat notes that she pushes her way to the back of her closet, where she seems to be hiding her old clothes out of sight. He tries to focus on her back and her legs instead of... Uh, other places that he could be looking.

He waits patiently, looking around the room and taking in the stacks of comics and video games (Terezi likes her *Phoenix Wright* games) and the endless law books and textbooks piled up beside her bed higgedly-piggedly.

Terezi clears her throat to get his attention and pushes a pile of clothes into his hands. He inspects them, warily, and deems them to be acceptable. Even if the shirt does have the Superman logo printed on it- honestly, this girl has some kind of obsession, Karkat swears. Terezi "looks" at him expectantly, standing there with her arms crossed, like she's waiting for him to strip right there or something. Terezi Pyrope apparently has no knowledge of boundaries.

"I'm not getting changed with you staring at me like that." Karkat barks.

"But I'm blind, I can't see you."

"It's the principal of the matter."

"Ugh, fine." She turns and faces the other way, "Are you happy now?"

"No. I'm going to change in the bathroom. See if you can wake Nepeta or at least, rouse her enough to tell her that we're leaving soon. Straight after breakfast."

The bathroom is no less hideous than the rest of the house, painted that same blinding shade of teal as Terezi's bedroom, with a single red stripe that stretches all the way around the room. Karkat knows that two thirds of the people living here can't see but that's no excuse to have such horrible taste in colours.

Another awful thing about this bathroom is that the counter is covered in perfumes and make-up and bottles of scent that makes Karkat feel a little sick to look at. He's curious, though, and inspects a few of them. He guesses that most of the lipsticks and things belong to Latula. They definitely don't belong to Terezi.

The bathroom also smells strongly of the colour red. It makes him feel as if he's being smothered but he tries not to cough.

It turns out the pants are too long for his legs and he has to roll them up a few times so that he doesn't trip over them. The shirt seems to fit well enough, though he still misses his sweater. Still, he guesses it would be gross to wear his sweater two days in a row, considering how hot and sweaty it is outside. He still feels half-naked in a sleeveless t-shirt though- so much of his pimpled arms are on show for everybody to see.
He's quick in bathroom, cursing not having his toothbrush because he has to smear toothpaste on his finger instead, but feels a little better for cleaning himself up. He even makes an attempt to flatten his hair a little but it doesn't work- it never does. Anyway, he feels less grimy, less like he spent most of the night out on the streets. God, his father will crucify him if he ever finds out that Karkat was hanging around dark city streets during the night.

With that in mind, he returns to Terezi's room and asks if he can borrow her cell phone. She throws it to him, occupied with trying to tie her mess of hair up, and tells him to make it quick. Deciding that his dad won't be awake yet, Karkat decides to call his brother instead.

"Hello?" Kankri's voice sends an odd wave of homesickness washing over him.

"Hey, shitstick." Karkat says, speaking quickly so that his brother can't cut in with one of his tirades about language, "I'm okay, no thanks to you. I'm staying with Terezi and yes, her mom is here too, don't flip your shit. I'm not gonna make it home 'til- what?"

Terezi is mouthing something to him. "Tomorrow. We don't know how late we'll be out."

"I'm not going to be back until tomorrow, don't let Dad send a search party."

Kankri seems dumbfounded. For a minute, Karkat thinks that he's going to run off and snitch on him like he usually does.

Instead, Kankri inhales sharply. "Okay."

"Okay?" Karkat didn't think it would be that easy, "Did you actually just fucking say okay or should I get my hearing checked? Because that's not like you at all, Kankri. To agree with somebody, especially me. Are you sick or something?"

"I said okay, Karkat. As much as I disapprove of you running off like this, I am glad that you're striving for your independence. And.... You sound happy. Happier than you have in a while. So, I'll help you out here. But let it be known that you owe me a favour after this is all over."

"A favour?"

"Yes, you owe me a favour, Karkat. I already have something in mind. For now, make sure that you enjoy yourself. And don't get into any kind of trouble."

"I'm not going to get into trouble. I need to go now."

That's a lie. He just doesn't want to continue this strangely civil and awkward discussion.

"I'll talk to you later, Karkat." Kankri pauses, "I'm glad you're okay. Goodbye, now."

He hangs up abruptly, before Karkat can say anything else, which is strange for Kankri.

When he turns back to the girls, Terezi is back to shaking her girlfriend gently in effort to rouse her, mumbling something that Karkat can't make out. He does hear the sound of their lips connecting, which makes him cringe and look the other way. He clears his throat.

"C'mon, 'Peta." Terezi says, straightening up and turning to Karkat, "Is she always like this?"

"Kid needs her sleep, like any sane human being." He glances at the window, where the curtains have been pushed back, "It's really fucking early for anybody to be up, in case you haven't noticed, Pyrope."
The early sun is already starting to rise, the temperature racing up to match it, and Karkat wishes that he could go back to sleep. A couple of hours isn't really enough and he's going to need some coffee really soon, if he's going to stay awake all day.

"We should get some shit together before we head out again." Terezi says, picking up a backpack and emptying the contents onto the floor. She seems to have given up on waking Nepeta for now. Karkat, who is clean and tidy, flinches at her carelessness.

"Let's see: we'll need snacks, maybe some torches for when it gets dark, cell phone..." Terezi leads the way down the stairs, fumbling her way to the kitchen, and grabbing things as she goes, "Red Bull is probably a good idea."

"Coffee." Karkat says, "Coffee would be welcomed right now. As in, I would roll out a carpet and have trumpets playing and a whole crowd of people cheering if you gave me some fucking coffee right now."

"We have a coffee machine." Terezi tells him, "You get to make the coffee, I'll make some breakfast. You like bacon, right?"

"Of course I like bacon, dumbass. Everybody likes bacon." Karkat says, "Never get to eat it because of my stupid vegan brother."

Terezi looks shocked. "Don't worry, I'll make you enough bacon to give you a heart attack."

"Is that a threat?"

"No, it's me making up for your lack of bacon over the years by delivering it to you all at once. Now, you better start making that coffee. I don't pay you to stand around and do nothing like a dumbass."

"You aren't paying me anything."

"Hehehe!" Terezi has a strange sense of humour.

By the time a sleepy Nepeta with wispy brown hair sticking out at all angles appears in the doorway, Karkat and Terezi are halfway through the incredibly high stack of bacon sandwiches and Karkat is on his second coffee. He still feels exhausted but much more awake than he did previously, his brain buzzing and his blood bubbling under his skin. Gotta love that daily fix of caffeine. They've been up for a while, mainly discussing where they're supposed to go next, since Dave didn't so much as give them a clue. Asshole.

"Hey, Nepeta." Terezi grins, waving enthusiastically at the wall to Nepeta's left, "Good morning. I tried to wake you up for breakfast but I couldn't."

"Mhm." Nepeta stretches, yawning, "Morning."

She patters closer, her socked footsteps soft against the wooden floor.

The Jewish girl surveys them for a long moment, looking over Karkat and Terezi and their breakfast, before she giggles. "Wow, you guys, way to make me jealous."

"What?" Terezi blinks.

"She can't eat bacon." Karkat says, around his mouthful of sandwich.
Nepeta is generally pretty liberal but there are some things where she sticks firmly to the rules.


"Nah, don't worry. We need to get going, right? So you can just buy me breakfast on the way into town." Nepeta waves away her girlfriend's apology and takes a seat at the table, resting her head on it so that her hair flops in front of her face, "So, did Dave say where the next tape was?"

"No," Karkat has already had this conversation with Terezi at least four times this morning, "He didn't say. What an ass."

He doesn't say: "The last tape came to an abrupt end and honestly, I'm kind of worried about him now." Because he does not care about this pretentious dickbag and his cassette tapes, not one bit. The fact that Dave was a focus of his dreams last night means absolutely nothing.

"Then, how the hell are we supposed to know where to go?" Nepeta says, "Are we just meant to wander around the city until we find a cassette lying in the gutter or something?"

"Hm..." Terezi looks thoughtful, "Let's brainstorm some ideas on the way to the bagel shop."

She stands up and slings her backpack over on shoulder, crossing the room to grab her cane. Karkat notes that she keeps it in the umbrella-stand. She also brandishes it like a weapon, whenever she's not using it to walk. It reminds him of the fact that this girl told him that she was good at sword fighting and he notes to watch his step around her.

"Don't just assume that I want to get bagels, Purrezi." Nepeta rolls her eyes.

"I wasn't assuming that. I just want to get some bagels and I'm hoping you do too." Terezi shrugs, "There's a really good place not too far from here. And bagels are a great, completely Kosher food." Which makes Nepeta grin a little, "Now, let's get going!"

She waves her cane in the air, before flinging open the door and stepping outside into the rising heat of the early morning. Karkat exchanges a look with Nepeta before they follow the blind girl outside. It's only when they're walking down the sidewalk that it occurs to Karkat that it's weird that they didn't bump into Latula or Terezi's mom. Lucky, he guesses, but he feels uneasy. He wonders just how much time Terezi spends alone in the house.

He doesn't get to ask her because, once armed with her cane, Terezi walks about three times as fast as him and he has to speed-walk to keep up with her and Nepeta. Damn the two of them and their fitness.

Admittedly, the bagel shop does seem pretty good (it smells amazing) but Karkat isn't going to have a second breakfast, even if Terezi is totally game for it. He just waits by the counter as Nepeta reads the menu to Terezi and tries not to care about the fact they're holding the line up. He struggles not to care. He also feels conscious that people are staring at them, some of them with those sad looks that people get around obviously blind people. Pity, he guesses. Either way, he doesn't like people looking at them like that. They get food to-go and continue down the street, talking about where they might be supposed to go next.

Nepeta thinks that they should head back to all the places they've been to so far to check that they didn't miss anything. Terezi thinks that they should go to an arcade- not for the sake of the trail but because she takes all her first dates there.

"Great, there is nothing better than third-wheeling on a goddamn date." Karkat rolls his eyes, "Could the pair of you stop shoving your relationship in my face for five damn minutes?"
"Aw, don't be jealous, Karkat." Nepeta pats him on the arm, "There's somebody out there for you, I just know it! Somewhere out there is the Person B to your OTP."

"Somehow, I doubt that." Karkat says, not thinking about Dave even a little bit. Jeez, just because he's heard the guy's voice and relates to him somewhat doesn't mean he's got a crush on him. That's not how these things work.

Terezi is pushing open the gate of a park, completely oblivious to the conversation. She crosses the grass and sits on the nearest swing, still eating her bagel and humming to herself contently.

"You shouldn't be so hard on yourself." Nepeta tells him, "I can think of loads of people that you could be paired with."

She follows her girlfriend like a sheep, collapsing on the swing beside her, leaving Karkat to stand by them like an idiot. This is why they should always make sure that parks have more than two swings- so that the third person doesn't get left out. Sidewalks should also be wider so that Karkat isn't the one that has to walk behind the two of them.

"Name somebody." Karkat crosses his arms.

"Uh..." Nepeta frowns, looking thoughtful, "Will Smith?"

She's trying to be funny.

"You can't think of a single human being within my range to pair me with, can you, O Great Shipping Princess?" His tone drips with sarcasm, "Of course you can't. Because there isn't anybody, Nepeta, I'm telling you."

"You just haven't met the right person." Nepeta insists, "You will. Give it time, Karkat, college is a much bigger world than this. One more year of high school and you can go out and find whoever it is."

"What's going on?" Terezi asks, licking bagel crumbs off her fingers.

"Karkat wants a girlfriend." Nepeta says.

Terezi and Karkat exchange looks.

"Or maybe he-"

They're interrupted by Terezi's phone buzzing.

Please direct yourselves to the Alternia Art Gallery as soon as possible. I am waiting for you there, in the Romantics section. I look forward to making the official acquaintance of Miss Pyrope and Miss Leijon.

~ Rose

"Guess that answers where we're meant to go, huh?" Terezi grins, as her phone reads the message to her in a robot voice, "Good old Rose, spelling it out for us. Guess I'll actually get to meet her this time. Cool!"

"Cool." Nepeta echoes, "How do we get to the art gallery from here?"

"It's right on the other side of town..." Terezi bites the inside of her cheek, evidently thinking, "We
could catch a bus but it'd take a while to get to the right stop and I'm not too sure about how to get there. Latula... No." Suddenly, she seems to have a eureka moment and jumps to her feet, "I know!"

"What?" Karkat and Nepeta say, when the blind girl doesn't elaborate.

Terezi just gestures for them to follow her.

At first, Karkat thinks that they're heading back to her house so that they can use of the Pyrope's many sport cars. (He doesn't know how they'd drive one, since neither he nor Nepeta have learnt yet and Terezi is blind as a bat). But at the last minute, Terezi veers off down the street towards a fancier looking house. It sits at the end of the street proudly, the biggest of the big houses, and Karkat wonders why it looks familiar. Terezi walks right up to the front gate and presses the intercom, (why do this house have a fucking intercom? Sure, it's a huge house, but still. Rich motherfuckers, Karkat huffs to himself).

There's a moment before somebody answers on the other end of the intercom.

"Ampora residence, wwhat d'you wwant?"

And suddenly, Karkat remembers when he's seen this house before. That one time that Kankri was going to Cronus's house for the first time and didn't want to go alone. So, Karkat had stuck with him like a good brother and had been rewarded by being left alone with Eridan Whiny Brat Ampora for a few hours. He didn't hate the kid but he certainly disliked him.

"What's up, Eridan? I need to cash in on a favour." Terezi is grinning mischievously.

Pause. "That better not be you, Pyrope. I though I fuckin' told you not to come 'round this wway anymore."

"But you owe me a favour for that one time I saved your ass!"

"I don't owwe you anythin'."

The intercom is turned off with a beep.

"You and Eridan know each other?" Nepeta asks, tilting her head to one side, "I didn't know that."

"Oh, sure we do. We live on the same street, after all. Not to mention, I used to LARP with him for a while until I got bored of his whiny bullshit. Plus, we're in the Vriska's Exes Club together."

Terezi cackles, "A few weeks back, the kid was getting picked on and I saved his sorry butt. Nobody's gonna mess with him again."

"I thought you just said you didn't like that asshole. Why the hell did you help him?"

"Because friends don't let friends get their heads shoved in toilet bowls." Terezi says, as if it was some kind of mantra, "Either way, Eridan can drive and we gotta catch a ride to the art gallery. Unless you want to risk my driving?" She cackles.

"Alright, let me try." Karkat steps up to the intercom and presses it.

"Tez, I swwear to God-"

"Hey, asshole, it's Karkat. You know, the one who's brother is dating your brother. Unfortunate, because I am really not looking forward to being kind of related to your family of douchebags. Anyway, we need a ride and you owe Terezi a favour, since she's the reason that your fat-head isn't
stuck in a clogged and shitty U-bend right now. So, we put two and two and BANG you're our fucking driver for today. Haul your lazy ass out of bed and drive us to the art gallery, you piece of shit."

There's a pause.

"Please?" Nepeta adds, helpfully.

"Ugh, fine. But don't tell anyone that I actually hung out with you people."

"We aren't hanging out, we're using you as a free chauffeur." Terezi steps back as the gates open, "Capiche?"

"You're the worst neighbour. I can't believe you told Kar about what happened. I told you I was handling it anyway."

"Two sophomores were giving you a swirly and you call threatening to tell your father handling it? Keep dreaming, Ampora." Terezi snorts.

Eridan huffs and the intercom flickers off. Seconds later, the gates slowly open so that the three of them can creep up the driveway towards the huge Ampora old mansion, which has apparently been passed down through whole generations of assholes. That's what Eridan said, not in those exact words, to Karkat anyway.

Speaking of Eridan, he's apparently keen to keep their grubby hands away from his precious home because he's waiting on the driveway with his arms folded and his stupid scarf flapping around his neck. Karkat doesn't have the slightest idea why the douchebag is wearing a scarf on one of the hottest days of the entire day but he knows better than to ask, since he doesn't want to be subjected to a long-winded and stupid explanation.

"You're such a bitch, Pyrope." Eridan grumbles, glaring at her, "I told you not to tell anybody."

"Don't be a baby, Ampora, and I won't bring it up again."

"You're so childish." Eridan says, before turning to the other two, "Hey, Kar. Nice to see your stupid face again, I guess." He studies Nepeta for a moment, his face flushing a little, "Nep."

He probably hasn't forgotten that the last time he saw Nepeta, when the Amporas invaded Karkat's home one day, he tried to flirt with her. The results were both hilarious and embarrassing. Eridan adjusts his scarf and Nepeta's olive cheeks are glowing rosy pink.

"Back off my girlfriend." Terezi grins, "She's taken, Eridouche. Now, you promised us a ride?"

"I did no such thin'." Eridan says but he fumbles in his pocket for his keys anyway.

The ride to the art gallery is a little long and mainly consists of Terezi and Eridan jabbing at each other playfully with Karkat occasionally grumbling about how immature the pair of them are. Both of them tell him to shut up and Nepeta laughs.

When they do reach the art gallery and climb out of the car, Nepeta tells the others to wait for a little while while she speaks to Eridan. Terezi and Karkat hang around a few meters away, straining their ears as they attempt to overhear.

"What was that about?" Terezi asks, as they head up the steps of the art gallery.
"Oh, I was just telling him of somebody that he might be interested in messaging." Nepeta says, with a sly look on his face, "Pawllux has something to look forward to tonight."

"You set Ampora up with Captor?" Karkat pulls a face, "They'll rip each other apart."

"At first." Nepeta says, "But then follows unconditional love."

Karkat rolls his eyes. He knows better than to criticise her ships- even when they are stupid and will never work out realistically.

The art gallery is big and grand looking, compared to the surrounding buildings, and actually has maps in several different languages at the door so that they can find their way around inside. That's just how big the building is. Karkat and the girls screw around, showing off how many languages they can read and making paper airplanes to throw at each other, before Katkst reminds them that they're meant to be meeting Rose in the Romantics section. He swears he's the only mature one here. And he picks up a map, seriously this time, and tries to make sense of it.

"Hey, dude, you need some help?"

A guy with douchey sunglasses has approached and is standing in front of them, hands stuffed in his pockets. Karkat can tell he's an asshole because he hasn't even bothered to take his headphones off whilst he's speaking to them. Which is a completely asshole move.

"Yeah, actually, we're looking for the Romantics section." Nepeta says, thrusting the map at the stranger, "Do you have any idea where we should be going? I can't make head or tail of this map."

"The Romantics, sure." The stranger says, "You wanna be headin' up the main stairs and it's to your right. 'Course, it's dull as shit and I'd recommend you check out a different section. Or a different gallery. Seriously, who spends their Saturday in an art gallery?"

"You do." Karkat points out, snatching the map back, "You're hanging around inside one, you ignorant fuckwad. I suggest you don't tell people how to organise their social lives until you get one yourself."

The guy just laughs. "Sure, sure. Why don't you stop referring to visiting an art gallery as having a social life? Especially since it's most likely the only event on your calendar."

Karkat's face feels hot. "Why don't you shut your face, since you have no idea what the fuck you're talking about, you ass?"

"Boys, boys, boys." Terezi intervenes, "Chill. Thanks for the help, coolkid, but we'll be fine from here. C'mon, Karkat, let's go find Rose." She pushes Karkat towards the stairs and he goes willingly, still feeling hot and like a volcano that's about to blow it's top.

He wishes he'd made a smarter remark but at least he'd got the last word.

"Have a nice day, hot stuff!" The asshole calls after them.

_Damn it!_

"Karkat, you've gone really red in the face." Nepeta frowns, "Chill."

He doesn't chill; his entire body feels like it's burning up from the inside, from a mismash of embarrassment, annoyance, and something else that he can't describe. He really wants to go back and continue ranting at that idiot but he controls himself, focusing his pent-up anger on stamping
up the stairs instead.

It only occurs to Karkat as he's heading into the Romantics section that he's met that douchebag with the shades before. In Damara's, right? He swears that was the same guy that was leaning against the wall there. He'd recognise that douche with his bleached hair and lame aviators anywhere.

Huh. What a small world the city seems to be.

Small world full of dicks.
Chapter Summary

The title comes into play.

Sorry, my anxiety has been getting worse so updates will most likely be more sporadic.

Rose Lalonde is standing in front of one of those pretentious paintings from the Victorian era, all full of heavenly imagery, and looking at it with a look of intellect normally seen on smug college students. A camera is hung around her neck on a purple ribbon- not a lanyard, an actual lilac ribbon. Seeing her wearing white instead of black makes Karkat double-take.

"Lalonde." Karkat calls, as they approach, "What the shit is this all about? Thought you didn't like participating in this, since you were so keen to get rid of me last time I saw you."

Rose turns to them, camera swinging on its ribbon, and smiles her snake-like smile.

"Ah, Karkat. Don't be so sensitive, I was merely eager to spend some time with the girlfriend whom I haven't seen much recently. I apologise if I came off as hostile." Her gaze drifts to the others, "Now, why don't you introduce your friends to me before continuing with the accusations?"

"I'm Terezi." The blind makes a grab for Rose's hand, taking a few attempts to find it, shaking it eagerly, "Terezi Pyrope. This is Nepeta Leijon. We are the current two members of Karkat's harem and the sexiest by default." She wiggles her hips and cackles.

"Don't joke about things like that." Nepeta giggles, "Purreziiiii."

She elbows her girlfriend.

"I understand." Rose nods, still smiling, "You keep interesting company, considering your aversion to sexual matters, Vantas."

"Don't psychoanalyse me, you creepy bitch." Karkat grumbles, "I don't choose to hang around with these shitheads. They just won't leave me alone."

"Bullshit, we're your best friends." says the blind girl, who he only met yesterday.

"Delightful." Rose smiles, shaking Nepeta's hand too before stepping back, "How is it going? Are you enjoying yourselves?"

"Well-" Karkat considers.

"Of course we are!" Terezi says, brightly, "I'm having the greatest time. I've never had proper friends before because-"

"Mhm." Rose purses her lips, "Terezi, I don't suppose you've ever been to the comic book store across the street from here? I've heard that they have several special editions of Daredevil there. Perhaps you and Nepeta could mosey over whilst I discuss some matters with Karkat."
"Ooh, Karkat's got a girlfriend." Nepeta winks at him.

Karkat rolls his eyes. "Go make out with your crazy girlfriend or something, Leijon."

He scowls at them as Nepeta and Terezi traipse out of the gallery, both of them attempting to mouth things to him. He can't lipread well, so he just shakes his head and ignores them. This only prompts Terezi to start making obscene gestures with her hands, so he just turns his back to her and faces Rose instead. He hopes that she doesn't think that Terezi really is his best friend.

"So..." Rose says, looking amused, "How are you finding the trail?"

"Conflicting." Karkat admits, crossing his arms; he was going to leave it at that but word started tumbling out of his mouth before he can stop them, "I mean, your brother just sounds so... Strange. First he can't be serious for his life and next thing you know he is fucking around with my head by telling me all about his tragic past."

"The last tape touched a nerve." Rose observes, studying him as if he is a frog in a boiling pan of water, "Didn't it, Karkat?"

"Fuck you, Lalonde, I didn't say that. What is it with your family and intentionally screwing with me?"

"I'm not screwing with you, Karkat; I was merely commenting on your apparent "conflict"." She smiles and touches his shoulder lightly, "I understand that you've been through a lot."

"Kanaya's been telling you shit about me, hasn't she?" Karkat grumbles. Maybe Kanaya is the one that's been feeding Dave information all this time? After all, she knows nearly everything there is to know about him.

"No, she simply informed me that your last relationship has ended abruptly and you seemed upset by it."

"Well, no shit." Karkat huffs, "We aren't talking about me. This is about Dave."

"Are you sure that this isn't about you?" Rose says, in a trust-me-I'm-a-therapist kind of way, "I am only suggesting-"

"Shut up and stop fucking with my head, you bitch." Karkat clamps his hands over his ears, "I don't have to hear any of your psychological bullshit!"

Rose just smiles. "Very well. Take your hands off your ears, you look like a fool."

He takes his hands away from his ears. "What did you want to talk to me about anyway? What was so important that I had to hitch a ride with a pretentious hipster wearing a scarf in the heart of summer to meet you at this place full of grubby finger-paintings?"

That makes Rose chuckle. "You have quite the way with words."

She's mocking him.

She pulls a cassette from her satchel with a flourish, waving it in front of his face. Literally waving the one thing he wants more than anything right now under his nose. Now, she is definitely mocking him. He doesn't make a grab for it, knowing that she'll just snatch it out of the way to tease him.
"I merely thought that you'd be interested in having a listen to this tape that my brother recorded, detailing how he fell in love with his best friend and had his heart broken. That is, if you can stomach listening to it. You had a similar experience, didn't you?"

"Lalonde, I don't-"

"It's strange how well the stories mirror each other. Young boys falling helplessly in love with the wrong people, only to get their hearts broken." She doesn't seem to realise that she's going too far. She better shut up or-

"I'm warning you-

"Strange how you both fell for your best friends too, isn't it? I think-"

"*Gamzee is not my best friend!*

Karkat's hands clench into tight fists and he glares at her hard.

Rose, losing her eloquence for a half a moment, drops the tape in surprise. It falls from her slender fingers and clatters to the ground, landing right by Karkat's feet. He grabs it quickly, stuffing it into his pocket, backing away so that Lalonde can't snatch it off him. He doesn't know why she would but it's best to be safe. Rose is looking at him with a strange expression, like he was an experiment that gave surprising results. Like that wasn't what she was expecting him to say.

Breaking Rose's pokerface feels like shattering the matrix.

"Don't talk shit about things you don't understand, Lalonde." Karkat says, firmly.

He shouldn't have let Terezi take the Walkman, he wants to hear this now.

Rose's shock falls from her face and she brushes her bangs back, straightens the ribbon around her neck, and clears her throat. She regains her apathetic attitude, adopting her usual expression again without a word. And she looks at him.

"I apologise for offending you." Rose says, finally.

"Yeah, well, shut up." Karkat says, turning away.

She grabs him by the shoulder before he can walk away. "Wait."

Karkat doesn't say anything but a noise like a growl raises in his throat.

"I didn't mean to offend you, I didn't know the topic was so sensitive."

"Yes, you did, don't talk crap." He throws her hand off but doesn't walk away, "I just want to ask you one thing and you aren't allowed to twist it around to fuck with me."

"..... Okay." Rose nods, "Go ahead."

"Why the hell did Dave pick me to listen to this?"

There's a pause.

"I can't tell you."

Karkat walks away.
He doesn't turn back, even when she calls after him, and just keeps walking until he finds the exit. And he doesn't stop walking, walking right out across the parking lot before realising that he has nowhere else to walk and collapsing on the sidewalk. He's glad that there aren't many people around here. He thumbs nervously at his left sleeve, wishing, wishing, wishing for his sweater back. He likes his sweaters- he owns many, most knitted by Kanaya- and they're familiar to him. Terezi's shirt is alien to him and it feels revealing somehow, as if people can see right through him.

He would do anything to be home in one of his sweaters with Kanaya stroking his hair and telling him that everything's going to be okay.

After the whole Gamzee disaster, Kanaya had been the one that had gently coaxed him off the couch and told him repeatedly that none of it was his fault. She'd told him not to worry about any of it. Gamzee wasn't worth worrying about. And Kanaya had ran her fingers through his hair and soothed him in fluent Spanish tones that reminded Karkat of his mother. And Kanaya had held him while he cried about the fact that she reminded him of his mother- and he'd felt so pathetic for crying. Real guys didn't cry about things like that. When he'd said that to Kanaya, she'd just scoffed at him and told him not to be an idiot. And she'd held him for a long time after that, shushing him gently.

And she'd wrapped her arm around him every single time he called Gamzee and it just went to voicemail for months afterwards. And she'd dragged him back to school and insisted he went back there, even though he did everything he could to get out of it. And if he got into trouble, she took him home and patched him up.

Karkat owes a lot to Kanaya.

But right now, he'd do anything to have her come pick him up. If only his dad would let him have a cellphone like a normal person, then he wouldn't have to borrow other people's all the time. Or use pay phones, when he can find them. It's rare to find a payphone nowadays but they have one back home, near Karkat's house.

He wonders if there's one nearby...

"Oi, Vvantas!"

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Suddenly, the morning sun is blocked out by a figure standing over him and a scarf blowing in the wind. It seems that Eridan Ampora is still hanging around and looking haughty about it. Eridan always looks haughty- Karkat thinks it might just be because his face is full of sharp features.

Maybe Eridan just looks like a dick and he's actually an okay guy.

"Wwhat the fuck are doin' here, more like? Are you havvin' some kind of mental breakdown on the sidewalk? Just saww you run out of the museum like your pants wwere on fire. Finally realised wwhat a loser you are, Kar?"

Karkat retracts his earlier statement. Eridan is a dick.

"Fuck off, asshole."

Eridan frowns. "Seriously, should I call your daddy to come pick you up?"

Karkat snorts. "How about you just leave me alone? Go get your head shoved down a U-bend again- might fix your Compulsive Asshole Disorder."
"That's not funny, Kar." Eridan crosses his arms, "I just wanted to see if you were okay."

"Yeah, right." Karkat rolls his eyes, "Because an Ampora wants to check if I'm okay."

"Kar, that's so... Prejudiced." Eridan plops down beside him, "Just because Daddy is an... idiot... An' a misogynist... An' a homophobe... An' a racist..." He glances away, "Doesn't mean I am. We're friends, right? An' kinda like brothers if Kan an' Cro stay together, right?"

"I guess." Karkat shrugs.

"You're okay, though, right?" Eridan says, "Because you looked really freaked out there. Like somebody had... I don't know. Who were you talkin' to in there? Tez said you were meetin' someone."

"Just some girl. She pissed me off. That's all."

"That's all?" Eridan raises an eyebrow expertly, "That's not the Kar I know. The Kar I know would have a five page rant about exactly how this girl had pissed him off and why she shoulda kept her mouth shut 'bout whatever it was."

Karkat really doesn't want to talk about any of this, especially with Eridan Ampora of all people. But he glances around and there's no sign of Terezi or Nepeta- not that he thinks he'd feel comfortable talking to them either. He wants Kanaya more than anyone but she'll be busy with her girlfriend most likely. Heck, she could be meeting with her right now. Kanaya is the kind of person that would probably enjoy a date in an art gallery. Karkat can see it now; Rose and Kanaya wandering arm-in-arm around an art gallery and making intellectual remarks about the artwork, (which they probably read up on prior to the trip).

"I can't stop thinking about this guy that I used to date who turned out to be a complete dick. The words spill out before Karkat can stop them, "I keep remembering things that I don't want to remember because I worked fucking hard to put the memories in the back of my mind so I didn't have to think about them ever again."

"And I'm exhausted because I got barely any sleep and I was up late last night looking for stupid cassette tapes with two lesbians who were busy falling in love, while I watched. And it hurt to watch. And I think I might be falling in love with some guy that I never met, even though I know hardly anything about him. And he knows nothing about me. Well, he knows some things but he doesn't know the right things."

Eridan opens his mouth.

Karkat continues before he can speak, holding up the tape. "And the guy I think I might like went through a similar thing. He got his heart broken by his best friend, who turned out to be straight, and I think it ruined him. And all the details of that are on this tape. And I really need to listen to it because I really need to know what happens. But I can't listen to the tape because Terezi has the Walkman."

Karkat inhales sharply, "And I know it sounds stupid but I think I might be going crazy because all I can think about is the guy I used to like and the guy I think I like and how everybody seems to be falling in love with each other all the time and it's not fair that everybody seems to be happy. Because Terezi and Nepeta fell in love like it was nothing but I can't do that, it's not that simple for me, and I can't let myself fall in love with this guy that I'll never meet."

"And I feel like everything is being torn apart and being put back together at the same time and I'm
honestly not sure I can handle that right now. And I want to go home to Kanaya."

When he finishes, Eridan just waits and stares at him with cold, blue eyes. Karkat waits for him to start spouting bullshit about true love because Eridan seems like the kind of person that would believe in that. Karkat can't believe in that anymore. Instead of saying something stupid, Eridan just leans over and pats Karkat on the arm.

"Kar, I think you might be havvin' a panic attack."

Is that why he feels like he can't breathe? Karkat pinches his t-shirt and the binder underneath, tugging it away from his chest to see if he can breathe a little easier. At least he didn't tell Eridan absolutely everything. Just mostly everything.

"Just focus on breathin'." Eridan says, "Wwe can talk wwhen you feel okay again."

Karkat inhales slowly and exhales with his eyes closed. Maybe he's overreacting about all of this. He can't believe that he bottled all of that up, only to tell Eridan Ampora about all the things on his mind. Of all the fucking people, it had to be Ampora.

They both sit there quietly until Karkat's chest lets him breathe again and the inside of his head stops sounding like a thunderstorm. He stares at a spot on the sidewalk where some little kid has drawn a happy picture in chalks and manages to relax a little. He can remember doing that sort of thing when he was a kid.

He sighs and looks across at the gallery, where he stormed out of. Rose didn't know she was crossing a line... But she shouldn't have pushed him. That was a dick move on her part. Maybe he should have stayed and talked more but honestly, he'd needed to leave. Two more seconds with Rose and he might have punched a Picasso. His anger gets the better of him sometimes.

"I didn't knoww you wwere gay." Eridan says, eventually, surprising him, "You shoulda told me, Kar, wwe coulda gone out some time."

"You're-?" Karkat stops midsentence and looks at Eridan with his scarf and purple-streaked hair and tacky rings. No, he doesn't even need to ask.

"I'm kiddin'." Eridan says, after an awkward moment of silence, "I don't go in for the whole tortured an' rugged guy thin'. Plus, you're kinda short."

He thinks Karkat is rugged. He can't help his chest swelling with pride.

"At least I'm not a fucking nerd." Karkat breathes. The air tastes stale.

"You're feelin' better then." Eridan doesn't have a smile, just a slight half-smile that looks tight and uncomfortable on his face, "I'm glad."

"You aren't good with people, are you, Ampora?"

"Fuck you, I'm great wwith people."

Karkat gets to his feet. "Well, I should go find Terezi and Nepeta."

"You do that." Eridan nods, looking miserable about not getting a longer feeling jam, "Say hi from me, I guess. I'm goin' home, if you don't need a ride."

"We can make it from here." Karkat shrugs, "Ampora..." He sizes him up, "Thanks for listening to
my shit. You didn't have to."

Honestly, he's glad that Eridan listened and didn't ask any questions. He's not sure that he could answer any questions right now.

"S'nothin', Kar. I get wwhat it's like. Likin' people is hard."

Karkat considers. "Do you have Pesterchum, Ampora?"

"Yeah?" Eridan's brows furrow, "Wwhy?"

"Look up a guy called twinArmageddons. He's a... Friend of mine. Tell him that you're an... Acquaintance of mine. I swear to god, you better not call yourself my friend. He's a piece of shit but I think you'll like him in the end." Karkat says, before turning away.

He leaves Eridan scrambling to open his Pesterchum.

Take that, Leijon, Karkat Vantas is the shipping king.

Speaking of Leijon, he locates the comic book store across the street that Rose Lalonde must have been talking about. It's a reasonably big store with the kind of nerds that you'd expect to be at a comic book store this early on a Saturday loitering around outside. For some reason, Karkat doesn't feel self-conscious here. Maybe because he knows that those two nerds by the first rack of comics are too busy debating Superman vs Batman to stare at him. Or maybe because he knows that he belongs with the kind of people that read comics. Like Terezi and Nepeta, who he finds browsing the manga.

Ugh, Nepeta can be such a otaku.

"Hey, Karkitty." She smiles, when she sees him.

"Hi, Karkat!" Terezi waves eagerly in the wrong direction.

Karkat notes the arm slung around Nepeta's shoulders and tries to feel happy for them. It doesn't work. He wishes somebody would lean against him like that. He wishes that he had somebody that he felt comfortable with and could press up against and talk to and hear them laugh- hear Dave laugh. But Karkat obviously isn't thinking about Dave.

He summons up his strength. "Hey. I got the tape."

"Cool." Nepeta says, "We're just looking at Steins;gate."

"You mean, you're looking at it." Karkat rolls his eyes, "Terezi is blind."

"I can still appreciate the story." The blind girl says, brightly, "I like Lukako because-

Terezi is cut off by a cheery voice. "Hello, everybody!"

Aradia fucking Megido.

"Jesus Christ!" Karkat nearly has a heart attack. He knocks a box of Buffy comics over.

Standing behind them, grinning eerily wide as she was yesterday, is Aradia Megido. A pendant is swinging around her neck and she's wearing exactly the same dumpy clothes that she was wearing yesterday, the same skirt with holes worn into it. Her hair hasn't been washed. Why the fuck is she here? What are the odds that they'd run into her twice in two days in two different places? Karkat is
ready to declare Aradia Megido an esper.

She puts her hands on her hips. "Can I help you with something?"

She's wearing a name-tag. She works here too?

"I thought you worked at the record store." Nepeta stutters, once she recovers her ability to speak.

"You scared the shit out of me." Terezi laughs, at the same time. She relaxes instantly.

"Fuck." is all Karkat can grumble.

"I work here during the mornings. I work at the record store at night!" Aradia smiles, giving them a double thumbs-up, "I'm saving up money so I can go to a good college and study archaeology. One day, I intend to end up being just like Indiana Jones. So, can I help you?"

"You can help us by fucking off and never sneaking up on us again!" Karkat huffs.

"Don't mind him, he's grumpy in the mornings." Terezi explains, patting Karkat on the back.

"Actually, Aradia, we're fine. We were just leaving, actually." Nepeta says.

"Ooh, where are you guys going?" Aradia inquires.

"Not to somewhere you work." Karkat mutters.

"Prospit tower." Nepeta picks somewhere out of thin air, "And we really need to get going."

They hustle out of the store before Aradia (creepy ass esper) Megido can ask anymore questions. And they cross the road to the parking lot, where Terezi comes to a stop and turns to them. And she looks angry, flicking her curls back out of her face and wielding her cane as if she were planning to challenge them to a swordfight. An angry Terezi with a weapon is a terrifying sight indeed.

"You guys are so judgemental. Aradia seems super nice!" She exclaims.

"You can't see her creepy smile- OW!" Karkat doubles over as a cane smacks him in the stomach, clutching at his abdomen, "Terezi!"

"Just because somebody looks a certain way doesn't mean they are a certain way!" Terezi defends, "I think Aradia is nice. And I don't think you should have been so eager to leave, either of you."

Nepeta stares at the ground. "But I really want to hear the next tape, that's all."

"Judgemental country-bumpkins." Terezi mutters, slipping her backpack off and dropping it onto the floor. She puts her cane down, kneeling so that she can dig through her bag until she finds the Walkman. She throws it to Karkat, who barely catches it. Then, she digs out a jar of chocolate spread and unscrews the lid, offering it to both of them before beginning to eat it straight out of the jar. Nepeta frowns.

He fumbles with the Walkman, carefully removing the last tape and slipping it into Terezi's backpack, before popping the next one in. And he sits down on the curb, pushing the headphones over his ears, cranking the volume and pressing play.

_Faint crackling._
Karkat tries pressing play again but there's still nothing. He rewinds. He fast-forwards. He stops. He pauses. He plays. He pauses. Plays. Strains his ears. Fast-forwards. Rewinds. Frantically presses buttons likes there's no tomorrow. Ejects the tape and flips it over. The blast of some Smash Mouth song is so deafening that his heart starts to pound furiously. He fast-forwards through the music, wondering if there's a message at the end. Flips the tape back over to Side A and tries again. Maybe he just didn't hear it. The recording.

Dave.

Maybe.

Please.

Please let it be here.

He needs to know how Dave got his heart broken. He has to know.

"Karkat, what's wrong?" Terezi pokes him, her face and hands sticky with chocolate spread.

"There's nothing." He can't breathe again.

"What do you mean?" Nepeta looks confused.

"There's nothing." He repeats, "Nothing. There isn't anything. Where is it?"

Terezi takes the Walkman from him, smearing chocolate spread over it. The sight of that makes him shudder- there's nothing worse than sticky substances. He remembers when Gamzee kissed him for the first time and he tasted sticky, felt sticky, sounded sticky in Karkat's ears. And how it had been great but had later started to make Karkat feel like he was sinking.

"There's nothing recorded." Terezi concludes, "There's no Side A."

"But I need there to be." Karkat croaks.
Cassette Six: Side B

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your kind comments on the last chapter!! I try to reply when I can but I'm really bad when it comes to... Y'know, replying. But you guys are all super nice, thank you!!

Disclaimer: It's eleven at night and this chapter hasn't been proofread. I'm also really, really bad at writing strife scenes. But I tried .-

By midday, the sun is burning so hot that Terezi slips off her sneakers and socks and climbs into the fountain in the city centre. Nepeta joins her, squealing with delight at the cold water on such a warm day. The two of them splash at each other, yelling and shrieking and drawing a lot of attention to themselves. Karkat, on the other hand, is slumped on a table at a nearby cafe and cursing the sun. No matter which way he looks, the sun is glaring at him and trying to burn holes into his skin. It's seriously so fucking hot. Even the air out here is damp with sweat and stuffy like a room that hasn't been opened in a long time.

Karkat has always hated the summer for this very reason; he doesn't cope too well in the heat, especially considering he's normally still wearing about three different layers of clothing. He normally spends most of the summer inside, online or at Nepeta's, comfortable inside.

The sunshine hates him.

He glances up again at his friends, who are rolling around in the fountain and completely soaking themselves in water. From looks of things, Terezi is also digging around in the fountain for loose change. Not to keep, of course, but to feel it run through her fingers and hear it patter down into the water. Nepeta keeps looking at her in that stupid way that people look at people they desperately want to kiss. In movies, Karkat has seen it a million times. When Nepeta finally does lean over to kiss her girlfriend, laughing, he looks away.

They came to the city centre because they weren't sure where else to go. Terezi reckoned that here was their best bet. Dave hadn't left any instructions on the blank tape and Rose hadn't replied to any of their messages- and they had sent a handful of messages. Karkat feels... Defeated. He doesn't know where to go from here. And he blames himself for losing his temper and not hearing Rose out. She might have been able to explain why the tape is blank.

That fucking tape.

Karkat was expecting that stupid cassette to-

He thought it would have-

It could have had-

He doesn't know what the hell he was expecting. It's not like that cassette was going to have the answers to everything- it's not like the goddamn meaning of life was going to be recorded on there or anything- but he thought that it would have something on it. Something, anything. He certainly
wasn't expecting it to be completely blank. He was expecting to hear about Dave and how... Well, he just wanted to know what had happened to Dave. It would feel reassuring to know that he wasn't alone, that's all. To know that somebody else had been through the same thing as him. To know that somebody else understood how he felt.

Like when he'd found out that Terezi was similar to him, it had helped him look at the world a little differently. And he was hoping the tape would help him feel... Closer to Dave? That sounds stupid as shit. He doesn't mean that. He means... He doesn't know what he means.

Anyway, the missing tape was really pissing him off!

"I swear, if I ever see Dave fucking Strider, I'll strangle him." Karkat mutters to the table. He must look completely made to the other people in this cafe, sitting at a four-chaired table alone and muttering to himself.

"Aw, don't be so mean! You can't strangle him. That's not how boyfriends treat each other!" A blonde, curly-haired woman turns around and looks at him, "'Sides, I don't think you'll run into him again."

This woman looks sort of like Rose, with the same structure and colouring, but more relaxed and cheery. There's no sarcastic tone to her voice or a smirk on her face—just an honest to god grin—and she's bouncing in her chair. She's also wearing sunglasses and holding a bottle in her left hand, which has a handmade pink label on it. Roxy's Mix is printed on it.

"Roxy?" Karkat guesses, rubbing his temples, "Haven't I put up with enough shit from you assholes yet?"

"Nope!" Roxy turns all the way round, adjusting her chair so she can sit haphazardly on it; she's not drunk but she's certainly a little bit tipsy, "'Anyways, I can't help overhearing you talking to yourself and I'm thinking that you need some help."

"I don't need your drunk ass to help me."

"Oh, methinks you do." Roxy pats the pocket of her pink shorts, "'Cos I've got something you're after."

Karkat straightens up. "You have one of the cassettes?"

"Shush, not so loud, honey." Roxy shushes him, "What was I saying? Oh, yeah, I'm Roxy. You probably guessed that already but whatever, I'm Roxy. And you're so cute that you must be Karkat. Dave was not kidding 'bout you being adorbs."

"He said what about me?"

"There's no need to blush, sweetie." Roxy pats him on the arm, friendlily; he shuffles away quickly, "It's perfectly natural to be in love at your age, y'know? I had a boyfriend at your age... How old are you again?"

Karkat rolls his eyes. "I-"

"Nevermind, it doesn't matter." She waves his words away with a dismissive gesture, "S'nice to meet you. Anyways, how's it going?"

"How's what going?"
"Y'know, life and stuff. I'm trying to be friendly with you here, y'know, break the ice so I'm not just shoving the tape in your face and leaving. That would be kinda rude, dontcha think?" She looks at him, expectantly.

"If you are asking if I want you to shorten this interaction and give me the cassette already, the answer is fucking yes. I'm on a time-limit here and honestly, your babbling is doing nothing to further the conversation."

"Oh, yeah? Because your texts imply otherwise." Roxy puts down the bottle on the table, pulls out her cellphone, and shows him text messages that look familiar.

**LALONDE, IT'S KARKAT. WHERE THE FUCK IS THE NEXT TAPE?**

**LALONDE, YOU CAN'T JUST IGNORE ME.**

**LOOK, WE'RE IN THE CITY CENTRE. YOU BETTER JOIN US WITH THE NEXT TAPE OR I'M GOING TO BE PISSED. YOU BETTER BRING AN EXPLANATION AS TO WHY THE FUCK YOU THOUGHT IT WAS OKAY TO BRING UP GAMZEE.**

**ON A SIDE NOTE, FUCK YOU FOR THAT.**

"See? You said you wanna talk to me. Or you implied it!"

Those are the messages he sent to Rose from Terezi's phone.

"I sent those to Rose." He states, blankly, confused.

"Nuh-uh." Roxy shakes her head and her curls bounce, "You definitely sent these to me."

"Scroll up." Karkat demands.

She does. The message Rose sent them that morning is still sitting there.

"Huh?" Roxy says, as she reads it, "I guess Rosey used my cell instead of her own. Makes sense when you think about it, since she clearly wants to avoid you contacting her. She's sorta aloof like that."

"Aloof is one way of putting it, snarky bitch that refuses to explain anything is another." Karkat remarks, "Can I have the cassette now?"

He knows that he's being impatient but he's desperate for the tape and Roxy seems to be drawing out this conversation as long as humanly possible.

She crosses her arms and gets a stupid smile on her face. "Nuh-uh. Not yet. First, there's something you gotta do for me. A favour."

**Oh, Jesus, he does not have time for this shit!**

"I'm on a time-limit, Lalonde, I don't have time to go pick up a goddamn latte for you."

"I didn't say anything about that!" She stands in a swish of pink and white, "Actually, it's a different kind of favour. See, my brother, Dirk, recently introduced me to strifing. You know about strifing, right? Of course you do!" He doesn't. "Anyway, I wanna strife with you!"

"Strife?" He feels like an idiot.
"Don't you know about strifing?" Roxy raises an eyebrow, one hand on her hip.

"Doesn't everybody?" Karkat huffs, "What kind of dumbass do you take me for. I'm the best at strifing, goddamnit."

"Okay." Roxy says, "Ten minutes from now upstairs? I gotta go grab something."

"Fine. Prepare for me to kick your tipsy ass back to Texas."

"Actually, I'm from-"

"Or wherever the fuck."

Roxy takes a long swig from the bottle, wipes her mouth, and disappears with a wave.

"Shit." Karkat has no idea what he's gotten himself into.

Terezi is soaked from head to toe when Karkat finally manages to convince her to climb out of the fountain. The blind girl drags herself out, dripping wet, and begins to wring out her shirt. Then, she explains to him what strifing is, whilst she shakes the water from her curls. Apparently, strifing is like a battle ("sorta like Mortal Kombat") that usually occurs between two people after one has challenged the other. It can involve anything from fists to swords to rifles to whatever you can think of- a free for all- and Karkat feels sick. After she's done explaining, Terezi raises her eyebrows at him.

"You got mixed up in a strife, didn't you?" She says, with a sigh, "And you don't even have a weapon? Jesus."

And then, she fucking splits her cane in half to reveal two goddamn fucking swords.

"What the fuck was that?" is the only reasonable reaction.

Nepeta, stepping out of the fountain, echoes Karkat's words exactly. She looks as shocked as he feels. Holy shit, seriously, who could have guessed that Terezi had secret swords hidden in her cane? Sure, she mentioned that she had a sword but double blades in- no, he can't even be fucked to question her right now. There's no time.

"Okay, this might not be the ideal weapon for you, but it's all we've got to work with right now. Come here." Terezi gestures for him to come closer. Nobody nearby has apparently noticed the blind girl unsheathing her swords for all to see- is this a regular occurrence in the city?

Karkat approaches her and she instructs him on how to wield both swords, guiding his hands so that he's holding them correctly. The matching blades feel heavy and awkward in his hands like they're weighing him down. Her hands feel hot on his; delicate hands with badly painted nails resting against his rough hands. Terezi tells him he needs a good stance or else he'll fall over. He stands so that he doesn't feel like he's about to fall over backwards and practices swinging the swords. That's all they have time for before he hears Lalonde yelling for him to get his ass upstairs.

She also whoops enthusiastically. Nepeta giggles, pressing a hand to her mouth to smother it.

He's not expecting for his friends to follow him back to the cafe.

"You two really don't have to come." He says.

"I wanna see how you hold up." Terezi says.
"She wants to see your ass get kicked." Nepeta corrects.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

Upstairs in the cafe turns out to be an empty space with whitewashed walls and dark floors. Judging by the sign on the stairs, there are plans for renovation but for now, it is completely empty. Aside from Roxy, who is standing there with a sword definitely not built for her. Beside her, a man that has to be Dirk- Dave's older brother. He's wearing Gurren Lagann style shades, has his hair gelled to one side, and is wearing skinny jeans. He's wearing a stoic expression on his face. Karkat feels that summarises this guy up perfectly.

Roxy is talking with him quietly, apparently discussing something important, before she turns to face him.

"Aw, you brought your besties!" Roxy smiles and it doesn't sound sarcastic.

"They are not-"

"Damn right." Terezi grins, winking at him, "Besties, right, Karkles?"

"Fuck off and die, Pyrope." It doesn't make her grin shrink even slightly.

"Good luck, Karkitty." Nepeta pulls him into a hug, quickly, and it doesn't feel awkward for once; at least, it doesn't make him feel extremely uncomfortable like it used to, "I know you can win. I know it!"

Then, they back off and he's left facing Lalonde.

"I'm new to this." Roxy disclaims, briefly, as she approaches.

Me too, Karkat replies, silently. He steps up.

The swords are weighing him down, keeping him grounded. He swings one, clumsily, and doesn't even come close. Roxy laughs but not in a ha-ha-lets-laugh-at-the-n00b way. It's friendly. She aims at hit at his lower torso and it takes him by surprise, making him stumble backwards a little. It doesn't hurt but it makes him jump.

He lurches back at her, swinging the right blade and making contact with her sword. There's a resounding sound of metal hitting metal, a clang ringing through the room. He pushes down but she pushes back and they come to a standstill for a moment, both of them putting their strength into it. Eventually, she twirls out of the way and brings her sword back around to hit his arm. He retaliates before she can recover, hitting her on the shoulder. It makes her eyes widen.

He thinks about what idiots they must seem to Dirk and Terezi, who have done this before—probably a million times. What a pair of blundering idiots they must look. His face heats up in humiliation and his left blade hits Lalonde's ankle. She falls on her butt. He's looking around to see if that counts as a win, when she kicks him in the stomach and the floor rushes up to meet him. The smack echoes through his mind. That's going to leave a couple of bruises.

Roxy is already back on her feet. "Come on, Karkles."

Oh great, she's adopted that awful nickname too.

He crawls backwards, barely stumbling to his feet before his back hits the wall. He readies his blades, breathing heavily and cursing his goddamn asthma and his general unfitness, knowing that
if he exercised as often as Nepeta, this would be easy.

Speaking of Nepeta, she's giving him a double thumbs-up of encouragement. It's never occurred to him before that she's probably the sweetest person he knows—maybe a little cloying and over the top at times but she really cares about him. And that makes him feel... Something. The strange emotion of friendship, perhaps? Roxy's sword makes contact with his bare arm and leaves a long scratch from his shoulder to his elbow.

"Fuck!" He's not good with blood, so he doesn't look. He closes his eyes and blindly swings.

"Aagh!" Roxy gasping makes his eyes open quickly. She's clutching her left thigh, just above the knee. "Shit, that was unexpected."

She takes a few steps back, barely regains her composure, and steadies herself. Karkat moves forward, towards her, weapons at the ready. And he takes one look at Nepeta's encouraging smile and Terezi's bat-shit insane grin and something surges through him. His left blade knocks Roxy down, his right blade pins her there.

He stands over her for a moment, the better of two n00bs, and keeps her there.

Roxy giggles, apparently still a little tipsy. He's impressed that she could swing straight actually.

"That's match." Dirk says, "Round two."

"Round two?" Karkat's blood drains from his face. They have to go again.

"It's two out of three." Dirk states, crossing his arms, "Unless you want to concede?"

"Fuck no."

"Yeah, I kinda thought you'd say that." He says, stepping back to lean against the wall again.

Karkat lets Roxy up and they face each other again.

Now that the pair of them have realised their pace and got used to the weapons they're wielding, the second round moves at a much faster pace. No more awkward pauses between swings, as they wait for the other to move. Furious clashes and clatters and collisions as they face each other—though, Roxy is still laughing and Karkat feels a tug at the corner of his lips. This is just so fucking stupid.

He never knew he was the kind of person that could engage in a swordfight with a tipsy woman for a cassette tape but apparently, that's just the kind of person Karkat is now. And he feels more comfortable here than he's ever felt before. Even though he doesn't like the fighting, the environment here is comfortable. The people in here— they're his friends, even the ones he's just met- and he feels more at ease than he does at home or at school.

But you're never going to experience this again, his mind tells him.

He stumbles, a blow to the face. He hears Nepeta yelling but waves her away. He's fine.

This can't last, Karkat tells himself, because tonight, this will all be over and you'll go back to the tiny town nobody has ever heard of and lose the people you've met tonight.

Him and Roxy are still struggling to push each other down, lunging at each other.

It will all go back to you and Nepeta and Kanaya.
Terezi is yelling instructions at him, her hands cupped around his mouth.

And you going to a school full of people you hate. And you only having one friend, who has a different lunch period to you. And you sitting alone. And you seeing the school counsellor for anger issues. And you having no friends in any classes.

His left blade hits Roxy's full on and he nearly falls.

And you, Karkat Vantas, never being able to feel as alive as you do right now ever again.

He can't let this go to waste. Any of this.

"Fuck!"

Roxy crumples at the blow of his right blade and he falls to his knees in front of her, gasping for breath. Her curls fall in front of her face and she doesn't get up, defeated. He barely manages to keep himself from just lying down and going to sleep right there. This shit is exhausting.

"Match." Dirk calls from a million miles away.

Instantly, Nepeta is at Karkat's side and attempting to... Comfort him? Her hands are on him, even though she knows he hates it, and she's rubbing his back and telling him it will be okay. On his other side, Terezi is feeling his face to check if the scratch there needs stitches. She settles for sticking a band-aid over it and moves onto checking his arm. Roxy kneels up, smiling at him. Her lip is cut from where she bit it.

"Good game, kid." She says, "We both held up well for first timers, hey, Dirky?"

"You were pretty great." Her brother tells her, "But hold still so I can make sure you're okay."

After, he turns to Karkat.

"Kid, not bad. You lacked practice obviously and your style was messy but you have some real passion." He almost-smiles at him, "If you got yourself some proper training, I think you could be great at this."

"I'm not really... A physical fighter." Karkat says, finally catching his breath and managing to stand up, "But that really helped clear my head. Who knew that mindless violence was the answer to all my problems?"

He's being sarcastic.

Terezi doesn't get it. "Well, it was probably a good outlet for your surprises-"

"Fuck off, Pyrope." He says, and she laughs.

Roxy digs around in the pocket of her shorts and throws him a tape. "As promised. Let's strive again sometime, Karkles, once we've both got our own weapons."

Sure enough, Dirk is now handling her sword with a lot more expertise than she did. He straps it to his back, offers Karkat a handshake and the other two a high-five, before he leaves. Roxy throws her arms around Karkat, nearly knocking him over, and squeezes him tightly. He can't protest because she is squeezing the air out of him. Once she lets go, she punches him lightly on the arm and grins widely at him. She follows her brother, gleeful.

"Are you really okay, Karkitty?" Nepeta asks, hand on his arm.
"I'm fine." He assures her; and he looks down at the tape in his hand, "Now that I've got this."
"Hey, Karkat, Rose here. Rose Lalonde. It's nice to talk to you again. How are you?"

"Frustrated, no doubt. If all went to plan, you met me at the museum to receive the last tape and no doubt found yourself confused about why on earth the tape was blank."

"That's simple enough to explain: I wiped it."

"What?" exclaims Karkat, listening intently.

"What?!" Nepeta frowns, pressed up against him to listen too.

"What?" Terezi blinks, confused, and without any means of listening.

The three of them are sat at the bus stop, hunched up close together on the bench. Terezi has pulled a blanket from her bag and spread it across the metal seat so that none of them are burnt by it. It's amazing how hot it can get this time of year. Terezi is sat on the edge, her cane in her left hand and her phone in her right. The audio of the phone navigation is a little distracting but Karkat presses hard to ignore it. Nepeta is wedged between them, attempting to share the headphones with Karkat. She was curious about the tapes.

So was Terezi but after three rounds of Rock, Paper, Scissors, Nepeta got to sit next to Karkat and listen in. She's warm and smells sweet and is sat very close. It.... It doesn't bother him as much as it used to but he still wants another inch of space between them.

"I know that might come as a surprise to you but please, allow me to explain myself thoroughly before you come after me screaming like a madman." Rose clears her throat, "My brother... Likes to pretend that he doesn't care about things. It's part of his charm, he likes to present himself as apathetic. But when it comes to John, he really does care. He cares more than he'd like to admit."

"John?" Nepeta repeats, biting her lower lip, "You think-"

"Shut up." Karkat hisses.

He knows what she's going to say and he doesn't want to hear it.

"The last tape was bullshit, that's what I'm trying to say. Dave told a lot of things like he wanted them to be heard but I don't think that's right. So, I wiped that tape and this one too. This one was just full of dick jokes, so I'm sure you don't mind. And if you don't mind, I'd like to tell you more about my brother."

Things have taken a turn for the peculiar, it seems, but Karkat is curious.
Dave... This idiot of a guy that Karkat is trailing around the city for... He wants to know more about him. If he's being frank, he wants to know as much as he can. Not because he cares about this douchebag... He's just curious.

He can see the rise and fall of Nepeta's chest out the corner of his eye. He can hear her breath, feel it against the skin of his neck, and he shuffles as far as he can whilst still sharing the headphones. It doesn't work and she's not fooled.

"Karkitty." Nepeta fumbles for the pause button, "Is something wrong?"

He means to say "nothing" or "I'm fine".

Instead, he says. "You're too fucking close to me. We aren't dating, Leijon, you don't have to sprawl yourself out across my lap like that. Shit, I know you're my friend but I don't see why you feel the urge to claw at me like that."

"I'm barely touching you." Nepeta says, but her voice softens, "I'll sit further away, okay?"

"Dude, that was an overreaction." Terezi doesn't look up from her phone, "You have a serious problem with any form of intimacy. Bet you don't even letcha Mom hug you."

Karkat doesn't say anything. Nepeta readjusts the headphones so she can still listen.

"Is this better?" Her leg is no longer brushing his, a gap between them.

"Much fucking better, thanks for removing yourself from my personal space."

"Next time, just say so if I'm bothering you." Nepeta clicks play again and the tape continues.

Rose's voice is so soft and balanced, it's like listening to music. She's the kind of person that should record audiobooks of classic novels.

"Dave likes "being cool". It's his hobby, if you know what I mean. Honestly, he's a little bit of a dork (don't ever tell him that though) sometimes and can often behaviour idiotically. I think, Karkat, if you met him, you'd think he was a complete douchebag." Rose laughs, "You two would clash horribly, honestly. You wouldn't get along."

How does she know for sure? Karkat's chest clenches tightly.

"Another thing I'd like to tell you is that he's- to use the honest expression- shitty when it comes to romance. He has no clue what he's doing, fumbling along like a complete and utter dumbass. That's why he didn't know what he was doing when he fell in love with John. I know for a fact that he fell in love with John because at that time, I only spoke to him through Pesterchum and John was all he ever spoke of. It was pretty tiresome."

"When she says John..." Nepeta perks up again, "Do you think-"

"Shut up." Karkat insists.

"Dave shouldn't have fallen for John but well, if he hadn't, we wouldn't have a story to tell, would we? I warned him to keep away from John... I knew somehow that he wouldn't be interested. But Dave's reckless. He doesn't listen to me most of the time- even though he knows that my judgement is correct more often than not. And he just had to go and kiss John and make a complete ass of himself."
Nepeta lets out a little gasp.

Karkat elbows her.

"Of course, we all know what happens next. We've all seen this movie. Word got out about what had happened and next thing you know, Dave is getting beaten up for his sexuality. I wish that things weren't so cliché, of course, but children our age are pretty stupid. According to my sources, you're a strong believer that all teenagers are "fucking idiots"." Rose chuckles, "I knew there was a reason Dave chose you."

"He chose you." Nepeta sing-songs, "Karkitty's got a boyfriend~!"

"Shut up." He repeats.

"Anyway, Dave told you already: we're foster kids. Or we were. And we, him in particular, got moved around an awful lot whilst we were growing up. But wherever he goes, Dave seems to stick out a little. He's sure it's because of his eyes. I don't think that's true. People keep away from him simply because he makes it clear that he wants people to keep away from him."

"Obviously, he's still friends with John- though their friendship isn't as close as it used to be. And he's still friends with Jade. And me. But he hasn't made any new friends since the whole John incident. That's what I'd like you to change, Karkat. He needs somebody like you. To help ground him a little. He needs somebody to call him an ass. Somebody to befriend- to trust. He's sent these tapes to you because Jade told him you'd understand."

Wait... Jade? Jade Harley? Please don't let it be Jade Harley.

"But I think deep down, there's more to it than that. Because no matter what Dave claims, you have met him before. And I think... You really connected with him. And he wants to meet you again- that's the point of all of this. But he wants to draw it out into a stupid game. After all, that's the tradition. To send fourteen tapes."

"Dave has no idea you're only getting thirteen and a half. That part is all my work. And I apologise. I hope you can forgive me for intervening." Rose sighs, "The next tape is located at the swimming pool in Beforus. Good luck, Karkat."

The tape clicks to a stop. Nepeta doesn't say a word but she's wearing a oh my freaking God kind of look on her face.

"Jade told Dave about me? Jade?" Karkat splutters, still processing, "Then, that means holy shit, the John they're talking about is John I'm Not A Homosexual Egbert. Can you believe that somebody as cool as- I mean, a douchebag like Dave fell for a nooksucking loser?"

"Can you believe a nice guy like John broke Dave's delicate heart?" Nepeta says, whimsically.

"Well-" Karkat thinks back to when he first met John. Guy wouldn't know romance if it walked up to him and slapped him hard in the face. Maybe he had no idea that Dave liked him? That would make sense. And if Dave kissed him, John probably would have freaked out (he's probably straight, Karkat decided long ago, or else in severe denial) and broke it off. Of course he would. And Rose is right; things like that get around fast when it comes to teenagers. John probably didn't mean any harm.
And Dave... Dave, who felt isolated already, pushed further away from other people. Karkat wished that he didn't understand the feeling so well. That feeling of... Not fitting in. Sure, within his small and select group of friends, he's the leader (maybe co-leader with Terezi) but when it comes to other people, he's always on the edge of the group. He thinks about what Rose said.

Maybe... Just maybe they would be good friends. Him and Dave. If Dave wasn't a complete pain in the ass all the time and Karkat figured out a way to keep cool instead of losing his temper, they could be friends.

Fuck, who was he kidding?

Terezi interrupts his thoughts, "Who the hell are these people you're talking about?"

"Jade and John are Karkat's friends from the Internet." Nepeta fills her in, "I like Jade, she's super nice. I wish she was less of a dog person, though."

"Holy crap, you can contact these people? Quick, message them about Dave!" Terezi is excited, that much is evident, "Message them and ask about the tapes!"

That's... Actually not a terrible plan.

"Ask John why he was such an ass to Dave." Nepeta says.

"I'm sure he didn't actually do anything. John's not an asshole, he's just a dumbass." Karkat says, taking the cellphone that Terezi's offering him, "I'm sure he didn't tell anybody about what Dave did. These things just get around."

He opens up Pesterchum and logs out of Terezi's account. He doesn't want to use her account, especially since she seems like the kind of person to have a stupid typing quirk and text colour that hurts people's eyes. Karkat signs quickly into his own account and checks who's online- finding nobody important, he sighs and just sends messages to John and Jade, asking them to message back as soon as possible. Then, he scrolls through his chums before picking his brother and shooting him a message, assuring Kankri that he's still definitely alive and okay.

Then, he logs back out and passes the cellphone back to Terezi.

"Nobody's online." He says, suspicious, "Which is really fucking weird."

At this time of day, most people would be online. Unless Jade is asleep, she's normally got her computer open. Hell, sometimes she has it open even when she's asleep.

"Maybe they know about the tapes and they're avoiding you." Nepeta guesses, "Either way, it totally sucks that nobody can give us more information about Dave. I'd really like to meet him."

Terezi laughs.

"What?" Karkat demands.

"Nothing." She says, innocently, "I could go for lunch right about now."

"We can't "go for lunch", we have seven tapes to find by tonight, just in case you'd fucking forgotten." Karkat reminds her, "Pull your shit together, we've got to get to the pool."

"Okay but after that, we're definitely stopping at the nearest Burger King." Terezi says.

Karkat pulls a face and doesn't mention that he's never been to a Burger King before. If he told her
that, Terezi might insist on dragging him there right now. And he doesn't want to go, he doesn't even want to go to the pool, if he's honest.

Karkat just wants to go home. He hasn't slept enough, he's been forced to exercise (walking and strifing) more than he does on a daily basis, and he's tired of being screwed with. As they wait for a bus, he finds himself nearly falling asleep. Luckily, Nepeta's there to shake him awake when he looks like he's dozing off. He swears. The bus takes forever to arrive.

Once they've got onto the bus and he realises there's no seats, he just about wants to cry. Instead, he just sighs and stands. The blind girl and the cat girl score seats easily, respectively due to Terezi's blindness and Nepeta's tics. Terezi sticks her tongue out and it's hard not to feel jealous. It's not fair. Terezi's lack of eyes doesn't stop her from being able to stand.

Though, without Terezi and Nepeta talking at him, he has more time to consider Rose's words. He's confused about the following:

1. Who Rose's informer was (he suspects Kanaya)
2. Why Jade told Dave to send Karkat the tapes
3. Why Jade and John aren't online (are they ignoring him?)
4. When he met Dave (?) and where and how and why he doesn't remember
5. Why thinking about Dave makes his stomach flutter

Puzzling over these things do him no good, however, because he doesn't come to any conclusions. The only thing it's safe to presume is that Jade and Kanaya are the ones supplying information to the Strider-Lalondes. And it makes him feel... Betrayed. That they told complete strangers a bunch of private information about Karkat. After all, Jade and Kanaya know everything about him between the two of them. Kanaya knows him too well and Karkat blubbered all his secrets to Jade because she was just some girl he met on the Internet. Well, shit, that backfired.

Well, it's like that exceptionally shitty movie starring Emily Osment said: stuff you put on the Internet isn't private. He shouldn't have spilled everything to Jade. Karkat wonders if he'll learn anything from this experience. Somehow, he doubts it. The only life lesson he's learnt is that running away to the city with his best friend is the best decision he's ever made.

Karkat wonders what his dad must be thinking about him essentially disappearing into thin air and not coming home. His dad must know what's going on by now. After all, Kankri is a terrible liar and it's only so long before his dad rings around to check where he is. Somebody will spill, somebody will crumble, somebody will snitch. It's only a matter of time.

His dad will be disappointed in him for this, Karkat's sure of it.

"Karkat, this is our stop." Terezi tells him, as the bus pulls to a stop finally and she leaps to her feet, "Let's go."

When he steps onto the sidewalk, he's surprised by the sight he sees. The swimming pool here is huge, painted a hideous shade of blue on the outside, and has those awful porthole windows that Karkat associates with ships. There's a rack of bikes outside, a parking lot, and a lot of people heading inside due to the heat of the summer. None of this is surprising. What surprises him is the sight of Eridan Ampora and the girl who works as a receptionist in the Rec Centre hanging out together outside.

And they seem to be arguing- or at least, discussing something intently with lots of hand gestures and raised eyebrows.
"Hey, guys!" Terezi waves eagerly, as she approaches, "Eridouche! And... Feferi, right?"

Nepeta and Karkat follow her. It makes Karkat think of what that expression adults use: well, if so and so jumped off a cliff, would you follow?

"Oh, Jesus." Eridan massages his temples, "Get lost, Pyrope."

He looks disappointed to see them again, though he nods to Nepeta and flashes a brief smile at Karkat. The kind of smile that says we shared an emotional moment so I know consider you my friend. Karkat doesn't smile back but he nods and mumbles something. The girl, Feferi, looks much more excited to see them. She waves and bounces.

"Don't be mean, Erifin!" Feferi- the receptionist- smiles, "Are you guys still looking for your funny cassette things? How's it going?"

They're both dressed to swim and as much as Karkat hates to admit it, it's difficult to look away from the pair of them. For a kid so pale that he's basically luminescent, Eridan isn't too bad looking with his shirt off. Even if he is freckled from head to toe. The stuck-up look on his face is the only off-putting thing, the sneer that distracts Karkat from how pretty the rest of him is. Feferi is pretty too with candyfloss hair and tanned skin and pink bikini. These people, Karkat realises, are the dream. These are the people that most people strive to be. These are the people that don't normally acknowledge him.

And now that he's standing with them, he realises that beautiful, rich people aren't that different from everybody else. Just more attractive and wealthy- there is no other real definitive difference. He hates that he's learning something.

"Today is going just fucking great. It's one in the afternoon and I already engaged in a swordfight and had my life ruined twice by some stupid cassettes." Karkat says, rolling his eyes.

"Lighten up, Karkitty." Nepeta says, "We're having a lot of fun, right?" She turns to the other two, "Are you guys here to swim?"

"No, we're here to shoot clay pigeons." Eridan deadpans, "Wwhat d'you think, Nep?"

"Heh, stupid question." Nepeta shrugs, "Anyway, do you mind if we join you?"

"Are you fucking serious right now?" Karkat exclaims, "We don't have time!"

More importantly, he can't go swimming. He'd rather be eaten by a Tyrannosaurus Rex than take his shirt off in front of anybody. He looks to Terezi, who surely must be on his side, but she just grins her bat-shit insane grin.

"Come on, this trail is meant to be fun." Terezi reminds him, clapping him on the shoulder, "There's nothing wrong with having a good time. As for the cassettes, we'll catch 'em all before the end of the day. I promise."

"Was that a Pokémon reference?" Feferi wonders.

"Anyway, is it cool if we come in with you guys?" Nepeta says, returning to the matter at hand.

"Wwell, I don't think-" Eridan attempts.

"Of course, you can come in with us!" Feferi beams at them, "Let's go."
She leads the way inside.

They pass easily through the reception with Feferi waving to people and calling names in a way that implies she spends a lot of time here. Eridan just huffs and scowls, jealous that his friend is giving other people her attention. Karkat wonders what the deal is there and falls back, as they head outside, falling into step with Eridan. Outside is bright and the pool is shocking electric blue and due to the hazy feeling of the hot afternoon, most people are lazing about. Feferi weaves through the people and the rest of them follow.

"Hey, Kar." Eridan says, as they walk alongside the pool, "I didn't think I'd see ya again."

"Well, I didn't think I'd be unfortunate enough to see your sorry ass again either, Ampora." Karkat rolls his eyes, "But look, here we are, with a group of crazy girls at a pool."

Eridan bobs his head in agreement. "Fef likes it here."

"She's your rich friend, who you like because she's better than the rest of us."

"Somethin' like that." Eridan says, not even slightly sarcastic, "But she's a real great friend, Kar. I knoww she's a little over the top... But you get used to it. She's wway cooler than the company you're keepin' anyway. Wwhat are you doin', hangin' out with the Vvigilinate Justice?"

"Are you talking about Pyrope? Yeah, she's fucking insane." Karkat pauses, "But-"

"But nothin'. She's crazy." Eridan shakes his head, "Only friends with her stuffed dragons an' a couple of her roleplay squad members. A real fuckin' wweirdo, Kar, I'm tellin' you." He's frowning behind his glasses, "An' you knoww I wouldn't tell you this if it wasn't true."

"That's big talk coming from the guy who taped his glasses together to look like Harry Potter."

Eridan rolls his eyes. "Well... Just be careful, that's all I'm sayin'. Tez is a great girl, really great, but she's wweird, you knoww?"

"Weird is putting it lightly." Karkat says, his defensive side flaring up, "But I think she's cool. So pull your head out of your ass and quit talking shit, Ampora."

Terezi is ahead of him, so he doesn't notice the grin spreading across her face.
Karkat thinks he dozes off. He closes his eyes for about half a second, opens them again, and realises that the sun has vanished. For a moment, he's worried that it's nighttime already and he swears and sits up so fast that he bumps head with Eridan.

"What the fuck?" Eridan jerks back, hand flying to his head, "Jesus, fuck, that hurt, you bastard."

"What the hell are you doing standing over me like a crazy lunatic watching somebody sleep?" Karkat rubs at the spot on his head where a bruise is already beginning to form. That coupled with the band-aids covering his strife wounds, he realises he must look like a mess. Or a badass. He really hopes that he looks like a badass.

"I've been messagin' that asshole you set me up wwith." Eridan has his phone out and is scrolling through messages, "He's a fuckin' dick, so thanks for that."

"I knew you'd like him." Karkat narrows his eyes and looks up at the sky, "What's going on? Is it nighttime already?"

He's already scrambling to his feet, ready to bolt and find Dave, wherever the hell he is. Then, he realises that's it not nighttime. The sky, such a bright blue earlier, has filled with layers of dark clouds. It's probably going to rain and as much as he's been complaining about the heat of the summer, he's not sure he's ready to leave it behind just yet. The rain might ruin the end of his summer, bringing it to an abrupt close before he's ready.

"Fef says it's gonna rain." Eridan frowns, "That's why I was goin' to wake you up. We're gonna get goin' as soon as Nep manages to catch Tez."

"Catch?" Karkat glances around and understands instantly. Terezi Pyrope, shrieking like a maniac, is running around the pool with Nepeta chasing after her. "Oh. Yeah, I see what you mean." He cups his hands around his mouth, "Hey, Pyrope, what in the nooksucking, bulgelicking fuck are you doing out there? Is this really the time for a game of kiss chase? We got to get going!"

Terezi turns her head to him and Nepeta tackles her onto the grassy bank.

"Hey, Karcrab." Feferi bobs into view, beaming, "So, I don't know if Erin filled you in but we're going to get going. And I know that you probably don't have a ride but I think my car could fit us all if we squish! You've got to find the rest of the cassettes by tonight, right?"

"I'm not sure Kar actually wants us to help-"

"That would actually be helpful." Karkat admits, partially because it would and partially because it's fun to piss Eridan off, "Thanks, Feferi."

"Fuck you, Vvantas." Eridan says, as his friend goes to address the other girls, "You're ruinin' my quality time wwith Fef, y'knoww."

"Are you kidding me? You get to spend the rest of the day in a cramped car with her, right next to her if you call shotgun. I've done you a fucking favour. You get to spend a long time with your best friend."

Eridan pauses. "I call shotgun!"
Whilst the others head out to the parking lot, Nepeta and Karkat hang back to ask at reception about a guy called Dave or a girl called Rose possibly passing through here sometime. The receptionist just looks through his computer for a while, before telling them that nobody has come in here under either of those names for a long time. After that, they just follow the others outside and commune outside Feferi's shockingly pink car. It's bright enough that it could blind a man.

And Karkat tries to discuss where the tape could be hidden around the building, since he's lacking ideas, but he just ends up telling Feferi and Eridan the full of story of the last day and a half. Feferi is fascinated, looking at him with huge eyes and nodding for him to go on, in a way that isn't dissimilar to Nepeta. On the other hand, Eridan sighs and says he shouldn't have even bothered asking. Once the situation has been explained, Feferi insists they go back inside and look properly.

"You two half-assed it." She tells them, smiling, "You can't just give up because you don't get the information you want right away. Now, Terezi and Eridan can go check around the changing rooms."

"Yes, ma'am!" Terezi grins.

"Howw come I alwways get stuck wwith her?" Eridan sighs, trailing after her.

Feferi turns to the rest of them. "Nepeta, you check around the pool. Me and Karkat will check behind the receptionist's desk."

"We will?" Karkat raises an eyebrow.

"Of course! It's meant to be well-hidden, right?" Feferi leads the way to the receptionist desk, "Now, I'll distract whilst you look behind the desk." What? "Excuse me, sir, but-" Feferi starts spinning some tale about needing some help with something or other. She's a terrible liar but the fact she keeps playing with her hair and smiling her sweet smile seems to sway the receptionist easily. (Not that Karkat blames him- Feferi is gorgeous). He gets up to help her and as the pair disappear down the corridor, Feferi gives Karkat a thumbs-up.

As soon as the door swings shut behind them, Karkat clammers over the receptionist desk and drops to his knees behind it, rifling through drawers and files for anything of use. There's nothing in the top drawer or the middle drawer and the bottom drawer is just full of promotional posters for some event or another. There's nothing on the desk or tucked under any of the furniture or hidden behind the computer. And Karkat begins to panic because he knows that Feferi could be back any minute now and he still hasn't found what he's looking for.

It's as he's digging through the papers in the other drawer that Terezi rushes back in. She looks around a minute, as if trying to decide where he is, before she approaches the desk. She's clearly excited. Eridan, being dragged by the arm, looks less pleased.

"Karkat?"

"How did you-"

"You wheeze when you're panicking." Terezi informs him, (does he really?), "That aside, I've found the tape and I can't reach it without your help."

"It's lodged in one of the air vents." Eridan adds, "She can't reach an' I'm not strong enough to givve her a boost on my owwn."

"You want to me to give you a boost?"
"Yes, what don't you understand? C'mon!"

Karkat climbs back over the desk and walks with them to the girls' changing rooms. He doesn't attempt to hide his initial panic as he grasps the door handle and opens the door. There's nobody in there, fortunately, since most people went home as it clouded over and the sun disappeared. Still, he keeps his eyes on the ground just in case, as he follows Terezi to the back of the room. She stops directly under one of the air vents, pointing up. True to her words, there's a cassette lodged there, just out of reach. How did Dave get that up there?

"Fuck that, how did you know that was up there?" It's not like Terezi could have spotted it.

"Well, I-"

"Tell him later, Sherlock." Eridan says, crouching down, "Help me out here, Kar."

Karkat joins him, kneeling on the floor and bowing his head. He hasn't given anybody a boost like this since third grade when he helped Nepeta into a tree. She got stuck up there and didn't come down for three an hour. In the end, they had to call her mom to get her down. Karkat hopes this isn't a repeat of this story.

"Please don't break my back-" is all Karkat has time to say. Terezi kicks off her shoes for their sake and steps on top of them, barely managing to balance, reaching for the tape. It's pain like he's never felt it before: sharp and heavy.

"I still can't reach!" She calls.

"Ughhh..." Karkat groans, as her foot slips and digs into his shoulder.

"Jump for it, Pyrope." Eridan advises, gritting his teeth.

She misses and lands on her feet, swearing and pulling her socks off too.

"There's probably better wways-"

"Shut it, Eridouche." Terezi mutters, wiping her hands on her shirt and making a second attempt. Her weight doesn't break Karkat's back but it does really hurt and he can barely support her, even with Eridan bearing half her weight. She misses again, he guesses by the annoyed sigh, her fingers barely brushing against the tape.

By the fifth attempt, all of them are cursing and groaning.

"One more attempt an' then wwe try this my wway." Eridan insists. There's a dark look on his face-the kind Disney villains that want revenge usually wear- and Karkat does not want to know what his way involves.

"Fine." Terezi steps onto their hands, leaps, makes a grab for the tape and finally grabs it. She tugs it free of the vent. She lands on her feet, wobbling a little, just as they hear the sound of approaching footsteps. Whilst Karkat had been keeping an eye on the door they used, he hadn't so much as glanced at the other one- the door closer to them that lead to the pool. Terezi doesn't even get time to announce their victory. They're about to be caught out.

"Run!" She yells and they scramble for the door.

Terezi grabs her sneakers and socks off the ground before she makes a dash for it, the two of them quick on her heels. They tear down the corridor, passing Nepeta on her way back from the pool.
She's quick to catch on and races alongside them, grabbing Terezi by the hand. Feferi joins them in the reception, and the five of them run into the parking lot.

"Oh my cod, oh my cod!" Feferi is giggling, as they reach her car and pile in, "What the shell happened to you guys? Did I see you come out of the girls' changing room?"

Terezi just cackles. Karkat rummages in his pocket for his inhaler.

"We got the tape!" Nepeta proclaims victory; she takes the tape from Terezi and waves it above her head.

"Whoo!" Feferi cheers, clapping her hands.

Terezi is still laughing. Karkat manages to breathe again.

It starts to rain outside- slowly and then all at once, to quote a certain romance book. First, there's a few drops of rain plastered to the window and then the sky explodes and the shattered pieces fall on the outside of the car, producing an awful, metallic tinny noise. Karkat hates the rain. And yes, he is fully aware that he already complained about the goddamn sun but he hates the rain too- it's wet and he's wearing a fucking t-shirt instead of his usual sweater. He's going to get soaked as soon as they stop sheltering in the car.

He's not the only one that's pissed about the rain- Terezi starts talking about how the summer is basically over now and she didn't even get to go to Six Flags yet and Eridan starts grumbling something about it ruining his hair. It helps nobody's mood that Feferi is an optimistic ball of sunshine regardless.

"I think the rain is really pretty!" Feferi announces, "It's like being underwater without the risk of drowning, right? So, that's pretty cool!"

"Who cares what it looks like?" Terezi says, fiddling with her glasses, "It's wet and cold and unpleasant and I don't want summer to end."

"I'll take you to Six Flags next week." Nepeta promises, "It will be sunny again by then."

"Or wwe wwill havve all drowwned in this goddamn tsunami." Eridan huffs.

"A tsunami is a fucking wave, dumbass, and as much as I wish you were drowning in one right now so I didn't have to listen to you whining about your pathetic, first world life, this isn't a wave. So, just shut up and stop talking out of your baby-powdered ass." Karkat rolls his eyes.

"Don't talk like that to me, you douche; this is probably the armageddon an' wwe're all goin' to die. I don't wwanna fuckin' die wwith this kind of company. The people that find our bodies wwill actually think I wwas friends wwith you people."

"Shut your face, Eridick." Terezi sticks her tongue out at him.

"Anyway." Feferi says, desperately trying to take control, "I think we should maybe get coffee or something, while Karkat listens to the cassette. Guys?"

Eridan isn't listening. "God, Tez, wwhy do you insist on slappin' me wwith stupid nicknames? Can't you just focus on your owwn life? Oh, wwait, I forgot you didn't havve one."

"Uncalled for!" Nepeta calls from the passenger seat.
"Why are you such a hypocrite, Eridan? You haven't left your house all summer."

Feferi is raising her voice. "Hey, guys, so-

"What, are you stalkin' me or somethin'?" Eridan demands, "Jesus fuckin' christ, get a hobby, Pyrope. And I don't mean playin' superheroes in your backyard."

"You wear a cape." Terezi reminds him.

Eridan huffs.

"Enough!" Feferi's voice reaches a pitch only mice could probably hear, "I'm driving now, okay?"

And that's all the warning they get before she backs up and zooms out of the parking lot. Evidently, Feferi is not a great driver and Karkat scrambles to buckle his seatbelt as quickly as possible, just to make sure that he doesn't go pitching through the windshield when they stop. Terezi does the same, after they turn a sharp corner and she ends up in his lap. That makes her laugh but he just shoves her off. She shrugs, apologetically. He accepts.

"Hey, Feferi, this isn't a fucking car chase. Let up a little." Karkat swears he can feel his face peeling off- she can't be sticking to the speed limit.

"Fef, please don't kill us, I havve so much I havven't done."

Terezi leaps on the bandwagon. "Yeah, Ampora here doesn't want to die a virgin."

Feferi slows down. "Promise you won't fight anymore?"

"Promise." Terezi mutters reluctantly.

Karkat elbows Eridan. He swears. "Yeah, yeah, sure...

"Good." Feferi smiles.

True to her word, she stops at a coffee shop and they all rush inside to avoid the rain, (Eridan is trying his best to protect his precious hair). And they grab the booth nearest the door and somehow manage to all squish into it; Nepeta lists what everybody wants before going to the counter, leaving the rest of them to wait there. Terezi hands Karkat the Walkman over the table and he slides the new tape in, passing her the old one to put in her backpack. He's about to press play, when somebody walks over to their table.

He doesn't realise that he's being addressed until Terezi knocks him on the arm to get his attention. She gestures towards the guy standing there with hissed "Karkat, your boyfriend". He tells her to fuck off but looks anyway.

"Hey, man." It's Douche McShades, (uh, the one from the art gallery, not Dirk). And he's standing beside their table with his earphones in and a coffee in his hand. Karkat peers at where the name's written on his cup but his hand is covering it. Damn.

"What the fuck do you want, asshole?" Karkat wishes he could come up with something more original.

"Nothing. Just came over to say hey. Miss me, Kitkat?" His lip curls, "Damn right, you did. After all, there's no guy you miss more than the one that totally owned you earlier. Bet you've been waiting a long time to get the last word. So, here's your chance, hit me with your best shot. Come
on, Shakespeare, wreck me."

"Ugh?" Karkat has never been tongue-tied before; he swallows, "Go to hell."

"I was expecting more from the master of words." Douche McShades again proving his name to be accurately given, "Cat got your tongue? By that, I mean are you so incredibly intoxicated by sexy appearance that you can't even string your sentences together?"

Karkat hates this guy and himself. "What?"

"Nice seeing you anyway but I've gotta get going. See you around, Vantas." The dude tips his sunglasses like those guys on Reddit tip their hats. And for a second, Karkat sees a flash of colour. Red. Dark pupils dipped in bright, blood, garnet red irises. Red eyes. And they might be the prettiest thing he's ever seen.

And he doesn't remember telling this guy his last name.

"Dave!" Karkat realises instantly and gets to his feet but the guy has already swung the door shut behind him. In a rush, he climbs over a confused Feferi and trips on a cackling Terezi, nearly landing on his face but stumbling to his feet. He must look crazy. He forces the door open and runs out onto the street, out into the rain.

"Dave! Where the fuck did you go?" He glances both ways down the busy street and doesn't catch so much as a glimpse of stupid bleached hair or dumb aviators.

Dickhead has vanished from sight.

"Fuck." Karkat kicks the wall of the coffee shop. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. Not only has he only just realised that the asshole he hates is also the guy he likes- how did he not make that connection sooner?- but he's lost him to the city. He's been talking to Dave this whole time and he had no fucking idea. What kind of asshole intentionally pisses off the guy that they're secretly sending stupid cassettes to for fun? Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Also, it's in no way fair that Dave's attractive on top of everything else.
Dave doesn't even drink the stupid coffee, ditching it in the nearest trash can as he walks fast back towards the art gallery.

He can't believe that he actually did something as risky as that- giving away his identity to Karkat in public like that, in front of Karkat's friends too. The whole idea of the tapes- which Dirk had told Dave right in the beginning- was that they were totally anonymous. Nobody was meant to know who the tapes were from. Not only had Dave flirted with danger by meeting and talking with Karkat but he'd also fucking given his identity away in one dumb move. But was it worth it to hear Karkat chasing after him? Definitely.

He was definitely a dick for running away like that though- a dick and a complete coward. Probably brought shame on the family name and all that shit for running away like a total loser when the boy he liked realised who he was. Which was ironic (and not in a cool way) because Dave had been waiting for Karkat to realise who he was throughout the entire tapes. It wasn't like they hadn't met before- they had but Karkat didn't even seem to remember him. Maybe Karkat's memory wasn't as good as his. After all, they'd both been kids.

Dave had been with his... Fifth? Yeah, it was probably the fifth pair of foster parents, who's names weren't important. They'd put up with him for a year or two- long enough for them to take him on a holiday anyway. He must have been pretty young, in third or fourth grade, and they'd gone on a holiday somewhere near the coast. The days had been sunny and hot and the beaches had been nice but Dave refused to enjoy them, being stubborn and staying inside. That was another dick move he'd made in his life but since he'd been young, he decides that was Past Dave's fault and Present Dave shouldn't be held accountable.

Anyway, they'd been on holiday and Dave had refused to go outside. Instead, he'd decided that a better idea was to hide in the hotel that they were staying in so that he didn't have to go to the stupid beach- again, Past Dave was an even bigger dick than Present Dave. And he'd been looking for a place to hide when he'd come across a storage closet, which he decided was perfect. So, he'd ducked inside and slammed the door behind him. And he'd immediately fallen over something that was just laying on the ground.

'Something' yelled at him. "What the heck was that for?"

"Jesus!" Dave breathed. If he hadn't just fallen over, he might have fallen over anyway because he was surprised to be yelled at what he presumed to be a broom. As he removed his sunglasses and his eyes adjusted a little better to the dark of the room, he could make out the shape of another kid- a kid obviously littler than him and angrier than him. Definitely not a broom. Thank god because for a second there, he thought he was in a goddamn Disney movie.

"Do you normally try to kill strangers when you first meet them or should I consider myself special?" 'Something' demanded.

"Nah, man, you aren't special." Dave slowly regained his cool, "I just didn't see you sitting there. I'm not sure if you're okay..." Then, he reconsiders, "You're a dude, right? I can't really see-"

"Obviously, I'm a 'dude'. If you wanna talk like an idiot." Dave could hear the other kid rolling his eyes, "And I'm just fine in here. I've been hiding out here for ten minutes or something and the dark isn't so scary after a while."
"Sounds like you thought it was scary when you got here." Dave noted.

"Actually, I've changed my mind. I was fine in here until you showed up and ruined everything." The kid hunched over, crossing his arms or something, "Get out of my hiding spot."

"No way, man, I gotta hide from my foster parents in here." Dave sat up and made sure to keep his distance from the other kid, "Let's just share, okay?"

"I don't want to share, I want you to leave." The other kid said, "Or at least shut up so I don't have to listen to your stupid face talking anymore."

"Fine then." Dave had shut his mouth.

It became very quiet aside from the other kid's wheezing and Dave's steady breathing. He was focusing on trying to keep quiet, since he was used to talking a lot and found it difficult to shut all his words inside him. He was working on it though, since Dirk had once told him that being quiet and 'stoic' was cool, and Dave wanted to be as cool as he remembered his brother being. Eventually, the silence was broken by the other kid coughing.

"Dude, are you okay?" Dave asked. It sounded like a cat trying to hack up a hairball.

The other kid was quiet for a while before saying, "I'm sick."

That explained why the guy's voice sounded so throaty. Like something was blocking his words and distorting them. Rough, his voice sounded rough.

"Sucks, man." Dave said.

It was quiet again.

"I'm Dave, by the way." Dave said eventually, "Dave Strider."

The surname was a mark of pride, since it was the one thing he was allowed to keep after they took him away from his family. He longed for the day that he could use it like a secret agent: the name's Strider, Dave Strider. Shaken not stirred and all that cool stuff.

"I'm Karkat." The other kid replied.

"That's not a real name." Dave scoffed, "You can't be serious. Who the heck calls their son, Karkat? Do your parents hate you or something?"

Karkat bristled. "No. My Mom thinks it's pretty."

Dave scoffed. "That's so lame."

"Shut up, you don't even get it."

"Get what?"

"Anything." Karkat throws his hands up, exasperated, "You're an idiot."

"Am not."

"Are too."

They bicker back and forth like that for a while, until Dave breaks the cycle.
"Why are you in here anyway?"

Karkat shrugged. "Hiding."

"You said that already." Dave insisted, "Why?"

"I don't want to go to the beach." Karkat said, "There are crabs there. And I don't like crabs and my brother will make fun of me because he thinks it's stupid to be scared of crabs. But it's not stupid because I'm pretty sure that they can eat people. Hercules was bitten by a crab and he was basically a superhero, so I'm pretty sure that means normal people can be bitten too."

Dave considered this. "If a crab comes near you, just step on it."

"What if it doesn't die?"

"Step on it again."

"No, shut up, I don't want to be a crab murderer." Karkat decided.

"Kick the crabs away then."

"What if I hurt them?"

"Who cares?"

"I care!"

The door to the storage closet swung open and the sudden bright light made Dave blink furiously, shoving his sunglasses back on. Once his sight had readjusted, he managed to take in the sight of the boy standing in the doorway. An older boy with a red sweater. Who stared at the two of them for a few moments before stepping back and yelling for his parents because he'd found Karkat. Speaking of Karkat, Dave looked back to him and blinked a few times.

Karkat was- as he thought- both younger and smaller than him. He was dark-skinned with dark hair and a frown on his face. His hair was sort of long for a boy and badly cut- it sort of reminded Dave of when he'd been four or five and Rose had cut her Barbies hair with a pair of blunt scissors- and his hands balled into fists at his side. When Dave said he was frowning, he meant that this kid looked seriously pissed off. Like he really didn't want to be found by the guy who must be Karkat's older brother.

"Shoot." Karkat said, glancing at Dave, "Great. You look stupid too."

Dave couldn't help it; he laughed. For the first time since he'd been taken away from his family, he actually full-on laughed instead of just smirking or rolling his eyes.

"And you're wearing sunglasses indoors like an idiot." Karkat added, "I can't believe I made friends with an idiot."

"We're friends?" Dave blinked.

"Duh." Karkat rolled his eyes.

Dave had never made a friend before. In the two or three schools he'd been too, nobody had wanted to be friends with him. And back at home, he'd had his brothers and sisters. That made Karkat his first official friend.
"Karkat, don't be rude." Karkat's brother turns back to him, "Come on, it's time to stop playing now."

"I'm staying here." Karkat insisted, stubbornly, "I'm not going anywhere near that stupid beach. And if you make me, I'll scream."

"Karkat." Karkat's brother rolled his eyes, "Come on. Screaming isn't going to help here."

"I'm staying here with Dave." Karkat insisted, "He's my friend, even if he's stupid."

"Karkat, that's rude." His brother said.

"I don't care." Karkat said. He shuffled behind Dave, using him as a shield.

And then Karkat's parents showed up and he reluctantly got off the ground with a sigh, agreeing to go to the stupid beach even though there were stupid crabs there. Before he left, he offered Dave a kind of shrug and said that he would probably see him again if the crabs didn't eat him. And then, the small boy in the sweater slopped off and disappeared for nine years.

Now, Dave is on the steps of the art gallery and he's heading inside. He can't help thinking about how cool it had felt to make his first ever friend back there in that storage closet. He hadn't told anybody about Karkat because he didn't say much to his foster parents and there hadn't been anybody else to tell. However, he'd spent most of the remaining holiday that year looking around the hotel for any small, funny-sounding kids in sweaters. For whatever reason, he'd never seen him again and after a few years, began to wonder if the whole thing had just been his imagination. That was until he met Jade Harley online.

She'd been introduced to him by Rose and because she was pretty isolated on her island and pretty weird herself, they'd become fast friends. She also played bass guitar pretty well and he admired a girl that could handle a guitar like that. Jade had talked to him for years and talked about her other friends too, the other friends she'd met online. When she'd mentioned a guy called Karkat about a year back, Dave had spat his apple juice all over his computer screen, (it had been sticky ever since then). He couldn't believe it. But sure enough, Jade's friend Karkat was a dark-skinned guy with a rough voice that wore a lot of sweaters and was scared of crabs. And how many people like that called Karkat can exist?

Jade had given him Karkat's chumhandle but he hadn't dared message him. How would that conversation have gone? 'Hey, remember me, we hung out in a closet once when we were like eight and I've never forgotten it'. Dave had never got round to talking to him. But when John had broken his heart and he'd moved to the city to live with Rose, he'd decided that he had to do something. Just so that he didn't spend the rest of his life regretting not contacting Karkat. When Dirk told him the tradition- about sending tapes to strangers for them to follow around the city- Dave had started recording immediately. He'd got Karkat's address from Jade.

And he'd recorded... Some tapes. They weren't great, they weren't exciting, and he wasn't proud of them. But they were enough- they'd lead Karkat back to him and that was all that mattered. He'd hidden them around the city, asked for some help from some friends, and mailed the first tape on Thursday.

Since then, he'd been... Well, occasionally snatching a few words from Karkat. It was so weird to speak to somebody that he hadn't seen in years and didn't know very well. And yet somehow, it was exactly like sitting in that storage closet with the kid who was afraid of crabs. Except sexier because Karkat was one attractive bastard now that he was grown up, (but still really short, which was funny). And Dave had broken the rules of the tapes, talking to him not once but three times,
and revealing himself to be the one behind the tapes.

But it was worth it to hear Karkat say his name again.

He finds Rose and Kanaya in the cafe of the gallery, both of them cradling coffees and petite cakes that looked pretty fucking slick. Dave drew up a chair and joined them at their table, snatching up the pink-frosted cupcake and taking a bite. Amazing. And ironic.

"I take it you found the bathroom?" Rose raises an eyebrow.

"What?" Oh, right, that was his excuse for leaving. Because 'I'm going to get better coffee from a place down the street' wouldn't have been a good enough excuse for Rose- she would have made him drink the shitty coffee. He found himself really regretting throwing away his good coffee now.

He still can't believe that he ran into Karkat in the coffee shop. Talk about freaky coincidences.

"You were gone twenty minutes." Rose points out, "Which implies that either you were lying about your whereabouts or you caught another bad case of "the shits". I suspect it's the former, since the bathrooms are over there." She points to the other side of the cafe, "And you went out the main exit."

"You're dripping wet." Kanaya adds, "I presuming that's either from the rain or an accident involving a broken faucet."

"Nice work, Sherlock and Holmes." Dave says, licking pink frosting off his fingers, "How long did it take you to figure that one out?"

"Approximately 0.4 seconds." Rose looks amused, "And you're a terrible liar."

"Where did you go?" Kanaya inquires, curiously, "What kept you occupied for so long?"

"Just..." Dave shrugs, "Some guy."

Rose isn't stupid. "The same one we've been stalking?"

Kanaya visibly winces. "We merely met with him to guide him the right direction; stalking implies we have constant knowledge of his whereabouts."

On the table, her phone pings. She picks it up.

"That was Karkat informing me of her whereabouts." She says.

"Ironic." Dave comments.

"Mhm." Rose sips her coffee, "Out of curiosity, where is he?"

"At the coffee shop about ten minutes from here." Kanaya says, "Why?"

Rose stares intently at Dave, burning holes into his soul. "Oh, no reason."

She can see right through him.

"Stupid genius twin sister." Dave mumbles, sliding down in his chair.

Of all the sisters in the world, he can't believe that he got stuck with two of the smartest- he doesn't know whether he should consider himself lucky or unlucky. Because, on one hand, it was pretty
cool to have an older sister that could probably hack the government mainframe if she wanted to and a twin sister that was so smart, it was as if she could read minds. But on the other side, it was impossible to keep anything from them. Dave could remember when he'd dared to tell Rose about John and how she'd leapt immediately to the correct conclusion.

It went a little something like this:

TT: You are experiencing feelings of attraction, aren't you?
TG: no what makes you say that
TT: David, what kind of idiot do you take me for?
TT: You never inform me about people you meet.
TT: The very fact you decided to tell me about John implies that you have strong feelings for him.
TT: Plus, I realised that you were closeted back when you were four.
TT: The signs were all there.
TG: well yeah the gayness does seem to run in the family
TG: wait i mean i dont like john
TG: fuck you
TG: you distracted me with your psychobullshit
TT: I knew you liked him.

And from that point on, Rose had become the official adviser and told him what he should and should not do. She told him that he should be wary because it was highly likely that John didn't like him back and he could get into trouble and get sent away again. Not to mention, he'd been with the most homophobic of his foster parents at the time and he knew that he couldn't them find out what was going. He closed all his tabs and wiped his internet history frequently and never spoke a word to them about John. So, it was Rose that told him he should try and become bros with John before Dave tried to get into his pants. Maybe not in those exact words.

And then it had been Rose who started warning him away from John- she got his Pesterchum from Jade and started talking to him. Quickly after, she shot Dave several messages and told him that John was as straight as a ruler and he should stick to just being bros with him, or else he would just end up getting heartbroken. Dave- being the impulsive idiot he is- decided not to listen. After all, what did Rose know? She didn't know the way that John looked at him. There was definitely a flicker of something between them. Dave went looking for him the next day.

He headed round John's place and wasted the afternoon away watching lame movies with him and trying not to think about what he was going to do. And then, his heart pounding so hard that it hurt, Dave had leant over and kissed him during the credits of Con Air. John tasted like Gushers and his mouth felt wet and hot and awkward. For a second, John hadn't moved except to put a hand on Dave's shoulder to steady himself. He didn't move closer but he didn't move further away either. Then, John wriggled free and fell off the couch. Which would have been hilarious if they hadn't just made out for like a minute. Dave readjusted his shades.

"No, Dave, it's not- I'm not-" John had stammered.

"You're not what?"

"I'm not a homosexual!" John protested, looking away. He'd gone very pink in the face.

"Oh." was all Dave could think to say.

"That's okay... Um, bro." John nodded, "No homo, right?"

"Yeah, uh, no homo." Dave got up, "I'll just leave."
"Um, yeah, we'll talk later." John said.

That was the first of Dave's mistakes. The second one was going home and telling Rose everything, hunched over his computer and wishing that he could somehow go back in time and erase the entire day. He was officially screwed now. He was going to lose his only friend because he'd made the stupid mistake of thinking that somebody was actually into him. He was a fucking dumbass. At first, Rose had been very "I told you so" but she softened and started to comfort him instead. John wouldn't tell anyone, she promised, and they could fix things between them quietly over Pesterchum. Because Dave was an idiot, he believed her.

He didn't believe her the next day when he became suddenly aware of the fact that people were staring at him and not with the respect they usually had for him. There were laughs and curious stares and bigots. Somebody had already managed to graffiti his locker, which was a delightful surprise to come to school to. Dave had no idea who John had told or why or how but he didn't care. He didn't want to see that guy ever again if he could help it. Instead, he just learnt to keep his head down and waited for the stares to go away.

Needless to say, they didn't. The stares were only the start.

He got beat up a couple of times. After school, when he was just trying to head home, he'd get cornered in by kids that were older and tougher than him. And without a sword in his hands to strife with and with his knuckles bleeding, how was he supposed to fight back against it? He could only try and more often than not, try was never enough. Quickly, he grew tired of that shit and started skipping going to school most days. Or just skipping out at lunch, so that nobody could catch him on his way home. And he would go into the city, convince somebody to go into the liquor store for him, and drunk in the parking lot alone in broad daylight. That's how you know your life's gone to shit.

Of course, Rose was the one that pulled him out of it. Once she knew what was going on- seeing through all the bullshit he used in an attempt to keep her out of his hair- she insisted that he left before things got any worse. She had an apartment in another city, Skaia, and he could come and live with her. The apartment was owned and mostly paid for by Roxy, who was doing just fine with her multiple coding jobs for different companies. Dave could stay there.

It doesn't count as moving out if you don't tell anyone where you're going, after all.

Now, Rose stands. "Kanaya, we should be heading home."

"Indeed." Kanaya says, "If we are to make dinner in time for our guests arriving later, we should get started quickly. How many people are we cooking for again? Maybe we should purchase some more ingredients."

"Let's see." Rose ticks them off on her fingers, "You and I, Dave, Dirk, Roxy, Karkat and his four friends, presuming they all attend."

Just the idea of it makes Dave's stomach clench- the idea of Karkat, angry and small and adorable Karkat, actually coming to their apartment tonight. Who knows what might have happened by then? A lot can change in a couple of hours. Dave just hopes that this isn't another John situation- he doesn't have anywhere else that he can run to like a coward, this is the last place he has left. And he's pretty happy here with Rose and Dirk and Roxy and their friends and the life that he leads here. He wouldn't like that to come to an end any time soon.

"Care to come with us, Dave?" Kanaya asks, smiling kindly, "We could certainly use your help creating some "sick beats" for the party later."
"It's not a party, it's a dinner. A get-together at most." Rose says, eyeing Dave, "There will be no crazy-drunk teenagers slobbering over each other in the closet of my apartment tonight."

"Looks like you aren't getting laid tonight, Kanaya." Dave tells her.

"Speaks the virgin." Rose rolls her eyes, "See you later, David."

"Smell ya later, Roselyn."

Dave decides that he may as well head to the next spot on the trail, though he knows he'll have to be careful not to let Karkat spot him. Because it would ruin the mystery further if they kept bumping into each other and Dave knows that the mystery is part of what makes the tapes so cool. Nobody would follow them if you had the option to just speak to the person behind them- what would be the point? Honestly, if he was thinking straight, he'd just head up to where he's supposed to meet Karkat at the end of the tapes and wait there. But he's not thinking straight, (he's thinking gay), and he wants to be closer to Karkat.

As soon as he realised that he lived within driving distance of Karkat, it was hard not to just drive out to see his first ever friend and see how he was doing. A few times, Dave had gotten as far as actually leaving the city, when he'd panicked and backtracked. This was all so weird- there had to be something wrong for him. Karkat probably didn't even remember him. And why would he? They'd been kids that had spoken for ten-twenty minutes tops and yet, he was the closet friend Dave had, (John had been bumped down from the spot of best bro quickly after the incident. He was second now. On a list of two people).

Though, Dave guesses, Kanaya was kind of his friend too. But it wasn't really the same thing. Sure, she was nice and she taught Dave how to knit, being patient with him even when he kept dropping every single stitch, and she made good food and she stayed with them a lot but that was different somehow.

It had only been earlier today, whilst Dave had been in the car with Rose, on the way to the art gallery that he had come to a sudden realisation. He had come to the realisation that his best bro list wasn't even a best bro list. Since he'd seen Karkat at Damara's, he hadn't been able to put him out of his mind and had felt sort of weird. Like he was having a panic attack or something but in a pleasant way. As in, his palms were clammy and his heart was squeezing and he couldn't think, but he also had a stupid smile on his face and could only think about Karkat. When he'd described this to Rose, she just said:

"It sounds an awful lot to me like you're in love with him."

And that's when it hit him: his best bros weren't his best bros after all, they were guys that Dave liked. He liked John and he liked Karkat and now, he'd gotten himself into this huge mess over a guy all over again. And that's why the tapes were somehow more important than anything right now- because Dave wanted Karkat to follow them to the end so that they could finally meet properly. And that's why Dave had given away who he was. And that's why Dave couldn't keep away from Karkat.

"Because I'm stupid for him." Dave had realised in the car, facepalming, "Holy shit, I have the biggest fucking crush on this guy that I barely know."

"I knew it." Rose had replied smugly.

Dave regrets throwing his coffee away- he is going to need some more pronto.
"Hey, Karkat. Guess who's back, back again, tell a friend."

Rose's voice sounds nearby. "It wasn't funny the first time you recorded this, I don't know why you're still grinning at me after about the fifth attempt. You look increasingly moronic like that." Approaching footsteps, "Can I say hello to Karkat?"

"Sure you can, make it quick. It's recording."

"Hello, Karkat. I hope you're still listening because-"

"This is where it gets exciting. Since you understand why I'm recording these now, I figured that we could stop with the gloomy shit. Bumping up this thing into high gear, get ready for things to get fun."

"What my brother is attempting to say is that he's come up with some stupid ideas for things you could do on the trip to entertain yourself instead of listening to him waffle on. A scavenger hunt of sorts."

Yeah, exactly. Though I wouldn't have put so cruelly; you wound me, dear sister."

"Yes, I'm sure your heart is positively bleeding at my scathing remarks."

"Ow, the pain is too much for me. I see a bright light. Go on without me, Karkat."

"It's okay, I'm sure you'll regenerate. Hopefully into a less annoying version of you with better choice of music to blast at four in the morning. The neighbours keep complaining about the obnoxious rap." Rose chuckles, "You kids have fun now. Make sure you use protection."

The sound of her walking away again.

"I'll have you know that I always bring protection, Lalonde." Dave's laugh.

God. Karkat massages his temples.

"Like I was saying, I've got some ideas here in a nice little list for you to complete. Some of them are a little cliché but I thought you'd enjoy that. Some will take longer than others, so try and balance it out. 'Cos if you get through all the things on the list, you win the best prize of all- my choice ass."
What is that supposed to mean?!

"I think there's twenty or so things on the list but you should probably do them in order. Anyway, Terezi has the list and you kids make sure you have a good time. Catch you later, Karkitten."

Karkat spits his coffee out, splattering almost everything within a foot of him and spluttering furiously as his lungs and mouth apparently forget that they're meant to work as a team. Feferi pats him on the back until he can gasp for breath again. Eridan is trying to scramble to his feet, screaming about not getting coffee on his new pants, but is trapped in by the traitor herself. Terezi Pyrope, leaning against her girlfriend, cackling loudly.

"Nice impression of a fountain, Vantas!" She grins.

"Shut up." Karkat slips the headphones off, staring at the wood surface of the table, and takes a long sip of his coffee. This time, he manages to swallow it instead of spitting it onto poor Feferi. She's dabbing at her fluff of hair with some napkins and he grabs a bunch to try and help her. Feferi smiles, a little embarrassed, and wipes up most of the mess.

Karkat hands the Walkman to Nepeta and gestures for her to listen, while he rubs furiously at the stains on his borrowed shirt.

"Such a sudden change of tone." Nepeta notes, as she listens, "Like the turning point in a poem."

"You would think it's fucking poetic." Karkat rolls his eyes, "More like, annoying as shit."

"He's really bad at telling us where the next tape is." Nepeta adds, "I wonder if we'll be directed to Rose or Roxy again. I liked Roxy a lot, she was nice. And funny."

"You can say drunk." Terezi looks up from the dragon she's drawing on her coffee cup in red marker. It's pretty good for somebody who can't see what they're doing.

"Don't say a wword against Roxy." Eridan puts in, "She's amazin'."

"You know her?" Nepeta inquires.

"Wwho doesn't?" Eridan blinks, as if somebody asked if he knew who the President was.

Feferi clears her throat and gets to her feet, collecting up empty cups and stacking them neatly. "Hey, Karcrab. What did the tape say? Where do we have to go next?"

She scrunches the napkins up too and ditches them in the trash can, before returning to their table.

"It said some bullshit about a scavenger hunt." Karkat shakes his head, "We don't have to do it. I think it sounds stupid."

Terezi also leaps to her feet. "We totally have to do it! There was a scavenger hunt in freshman year of high school and me and Eridan here completely kicked ass!"

"Wwe got disqualified for cheatin', Tez."

"That's beside the point." If Terezi could have rolled her empty eyes, she probably would have done, "So, what's the first thing on the list?"

Nepeta, having just finished the tape, pales.

"There's a list? I wanna sea!"
"Well, that's the weird thing..." Karkat pauses for dramatic effect, just like the big reveal in a movie, "According to the tape... You've got the list, Pyrope."

He turns to her accusingly.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot I helped Dave write it." Terezi pulls the list from her pocket like it's no big deal and holds it up. Then, slowly, she seems to realise what she just said. "Oh... Shit."

_Busted._

"Fuckin' kneww it." Eridan stands, "Traitor!" He points at Terezi accusingly, stupid look on his face. "This wwhole goddamn time, you wwere wworkin' wwith the enemy an' you didn't think to tell us. I'd hardly expect less of a filthy legislacerator like you, Neophyte Redglare!"

"I'm not-"

"You've been working with Dave this whole time and you didn't even fucking bother to inform me of that, even though I asked you for anything you knew." Karkat slams his fist down on the table, "Now, Little Miss I Don't Know Anything, would you care to explain?"

"But I-"

"Terezi... You lied to me?" Nepeta looks down, "Why would you do that?"

"No, it's-"

"Let the gill speak!" Feferi insists, "You guys are being so mean! At least give Terezi a moment to explain herself."

By this point, they're drawing quite a lot of attention from the rest of the coffee shop, as half their party is on their feet and/or yelling. A barista comes over and politely asks them to leave, which (lucky for her) buys Terezi some time to come up with an explanation. All of them shuffle outside reluctantly, (Eridan mumbling something about telling his father about this, who did this little coffee shop think they were, kicking him out? Didn't they know who he was? He'd have this place shut down). They regroup outside, standing in the pouring rain and shivering their asses off. What happened to the nice hot summer?

"Have you been working with Dave this whole time?" Karkat demands, pushing his wet hair back out of his eyes, "Be honest with me, Pyrope."

"Yeah..." Terezi sighs, "I helped a little with the list. We chat on Pesterchum a lot and he said he was doing this trail/scavenger hunt/exposition thing for some guy named Karkat and I said I'd help. We lied about knowing each other because I was sent to make sure you guys were heading in the right direction. You would have asked too many questions if you knew I knew Dave. But that doesn't make me villainous or treacherous!"

"So, you thought if I knew you knew Dave, I'd interrogate you?" Karkat scoffs, "God, Dave is so self-obsessed. Like I care enough to ask about him."

"I thought you were desperate to know about him?" Feferi blinks.

"Shut up." Karkat flips her off.

"What else did you lie to us about?" Nepeta doesn't seem angry, just hurt, "You lied about knowing Dave. You lied about knowing about the trail. Please, just tell me that you didn't lie about Vriska."
Or about liking me." It's hard to tell if she's crying or if it's the rain dripping down her face, "Terezi, please don't tell me that you lied about liking me."

"I didn't, of course I didn't!" Terezi's voice is raised, "You think I'd lie about something like that? I didn't even know you'd be here. I was just told there would be a guy called Karkat, I had no idea that he'd have a cute friend!"

She looks flustered, frustrated, waving her hands about to make her point. And honestly, watching them two of them standing there face-to-face, drenched in rain, like something out of one of his movies, Karkat feels like he's intruding.

"Maybe we should all get in the car and discuss-" Feferi is ignored.

"But how am I supposed to trust you now that I know you've been lying to us this whole time about your motives for hanging out with us?" Nepeta crosses her arms, "How can you expect me to believe anything you say?"

"Trust me, Nepeta, because I like you. I like you a whole bunch, okay? And I don't know what else you expect me to say. Yes, I lied about my friendship with Dave but everything else has been nothing but the truth!" Terezi's voice squeaks oddly and she coughs, "I like you."

And Terezi steps forward and before anybody can so much as blink, her lips are pressed firmly against Nepeta's. And both of them stop yelling and start mumbling instead, fumbling their way through their kiss with three other people staring at them. Terezi's hands kind of run their way over Nepeta's body, clearly trying to get a good picture of exactly what the girl she's kissing looks like. Karkat averts his eyes from the whole situation. Eridan stares, jealously. Feferi squeals in delight.

When Nepeta steps back, she continues in a quieter voice. "Terezi... I think you're serious but there's no way I can know for sure. People have... Done this before, you know. People have asked me out as a joke. I'm kind of a weird twitchy Jewish girl that likes cats too much and people find it funny to ask me out as a dare. I'm a joke. And I really want you to prove that you're different before the end of the day."

Terezi nods. "Challenge accepted."

Feferi apparently deems now to be the correct time to step in again, clearing her throat. "Guys, as cute as the two of you are, we're now on a scavenger hunt, remember? Terezi, can I please see the list?"

Terezi hands it to her.

"So..." Karkat says, curiously, "You can't tell me a single thing about Dave?"

"No, he doesn't want you to get to know him through me. He wants to meet you in person, dumbass." Terezi pulls a face, "He's had a crush on you since he was like five or something."

"What-"

"Hey, guys, can any of you read this?" Feferi looks up from the list.

The list a little soggy from the rain and some of the words are a little smudged but they all crowd around to peer at the list anyway. It's been written in Terezi's blotched and unsteady handwriting, a mess of letters and numbers. It's almost impossible to look at without getting a migraine, let alone attempt to read. It takes Karkat a while to even decipher what number one is but he's the first one to
be able to translate. His eyes widen.

"We can't steal a numberplate; that's illegal and I am not getting my ass thrown in jail because I wanted to meet Shades McDouche so badly." Karkat says, pointedly.

Terezi scoffs. "But it's what they would do in a movie! That's why me and Dave decided to put it on the list in the first place- because that's what they'd do in a movie and you like movies. Right, Karkat?"

"I am not breaking the law." Karkat says, "Nepeta, you shouldn't either. You weird city kids can do whatever you like but we are actually decent people. Not to mention, our parents would kill us."

"He's right." Nepeta agrees, "Plus, it says in the Torah that we shouldn't steal and I'm not sure we should... Go against that, you know? God might get pissed."

"Yes, exactly, it's against our religious beliefs." Karkat leaps eagerly on the band-wagon.

"But-" Eridan says, drawing up to his full height, "What if we return the numberplate afterwards an' fix it back on?"

"That defeats the entire point." Terezi says, "That's like borrowing."

"Yeah, borrowin', precisely." Eridan says.

"I've got a better idea." Feferi perks up, brightly, "There's a place just out of town where they dump old cars that don't work anymore. Since nobody wants those cars anywhere... We can take a numberplate from there, right? It's not like anybody would be using it."

Karkat hesitates. "Still sounds kind of fishy-"

"PUN!" Feferi interjects with a grin.

"But it's our best chance." Nepeta finishes.

Karkat scowls.

"And I've got a lawyer on my side anyway." Nepeta elbows Terezi and the blind girl giggles.

"I've got a lawyer on my side anyway." Eridan mocks, exaggerating just a little.

"Okay, so what if we split into two groups?" Terezi suggests, "Because this is one hell of a list and it will take a while to complete number one. So, if Feferi, me and Karkles head out to get the numberplate... Peta and Eridouche can start on number two."

"I'd feel better goin' wwith Fef." Eridan says, hastily, "After all, me an' Nep... Awwkwwward past."

"You've got an awkward past with everybody here." Karkat points out, "So, get your ass in gear and keep in touch over the phone. You've got Terezi's number?"

"Of course he hasn't." Terezi gets her phone out, "Hold onto your dick, Ampora, a girl is actually going to give you her number for the first time in your life."

They trade numbers before going their different ways. Eridan and Nepeta take the list with them, heading down the street. The other three pile into Feferi's car, Terezi calling shotgun once again. Karkat watches out of the back window as the other two disappear around the street corner. He hopes Nepeta will be okay. Then, he remembers that she's a fucking badass when she wants to be.
She'll be great. It's Ampora he should be worried about, if anyone, that goddamn snowflake.

Ten minutes later, Karkat is stuck in the backseat of a pink car on its way out of the city with his hands clamped over his ears to block out the sound of Terezi wailing along to the radio. He curses whatever station decided it was appropriate to play the most popular nineties hits (and secretly crosses his fingers that there will be some Will Smith) and stares out the window at the city falling behind them. He's decided now that he should be worried about himself because he might go insane if he has to listen to Terezi attempting to rap for any longer.

"Seriously, can you even keep vaguely in tune for the sake of those of us who's ears are bleeding?" Karkat demands.

Terezi just laughs and rolls down the window to yell the entirety of *Ice Ice Baby* to the city they're leaving. To Karkat's horror, Feferi joins in enthusiastically, though she changes most of the words into fish puns.

When the fish girl spots him cowering in horror in the backseat, she smiles. "C'mon, Karcраб, lighten up. Have a little fun for once in your life!"

"He can't, he's made up of pure, unadulterated rage." Terezi says, as the chorus plays and she finally turns it down, "He's literally an eternal flame baby."

"You know that there's meant to be a comma in there, right?" Feferi says, "It's *I'm an eternal flame, baby.*"

"I know but Karkat's a big baby." Terezi shrugs, "I didn't know you watched that show, Feferi."

"Of course I do!" Feferi smiles at her, "I guess I forgot that you didn't really know me that well outside of school."

"To clarify." Karkat pitches in, "You two and Eridan go to the same school, correct?"

"Yes." Terezi nods, "But Feferi doesn't really speak to me because I'm kind of a loser."

"That's so not true!" Feferi says, "That's not the reason why. I just don't really see you around; you're not in any of my classes and you always go home for lunch. It's not like you're giving me a chance to hang out with you. I'd love to hang out with you. We could-"

And that's when Karkat zones out again because girl talk has always been a mystery to him. He doesn't want to know if they're planning to braid each other's hair or have sleepovers or whatever girls do together when they "hang out". He goes back to staring out of the window and thinking about Dave. Stupid Dave, always intruding in his thoughts.

He has no idea why Dave suddenly changed tone and decided a scavenger hunt would be a good idea. He's also curious about what was on those wiped tapes, since Dave said *since you understand why I'm recording these now*. Had there been an explanation on the tapes that Rose had wiped? Did she know that and wipe them intentionally? After all, she gave no explanation as to why she wiped the sixth tape. The seventh tape, she used to explain about John, but the sixth... Nothing. It was like she simply didn't want him to hear it. Why? What are you hiding, Lalonde?

And damnit, Karkat had really wanted to know why Dave had chosen him to listen to the tapes. Rose had taken that away from him.

Quickly, he asked Terezi to borrow her cell and tapped out a message to Roxy:
Hey, nook sucker, it's Karkat Vantas here. I don't suppose you could give me your sister's number or at least ask her why she won't tell the reason behind Dave choosing me for his goddamn quest. This isn't fucking Percy Jackson, I want a reason for the quest.

And then, he logged into his Pesterchum again and scrolled to see if John or Jade were online. John was still missing from the face of the Earth. But Jade was online and from the looks of things, she was actually willing to talk.

GG: hey karkat!
CG: YOU WANT TO EXPLAIN WHY THE FUCK YOU GAVE DAVE MY ADDRESS? IN WHAT UNIVERSE IS THAT OKAY?
GG: oops, i've gotta go!
Or not.
"Fuck."

She was gone again. Karkat wondered if his friends were under instructions not to tell him anything like Terezi had been and was confused about why. Because even Kanaya seemed to be ignoring him, since her online light had been flickering on and off since he'd logged on. Normally, she'd have checked up on him by now. What the hell is going on? Why is Dave so obsessed with keeping Karkat out of the know? Is he trying to make him feel isolated? Because... If so... It's definitely working.

When Karkat scrolls right to the bottom of his chums, he spots a handle that makes him visibly wince. For months, he's been trying to convince himself to delete Gamzee from his list or block him or something. Just to make things final. After all, it seemed like Gamzee had abandoned his Pesterchum anyway- ever since he'd moved away, he hadn't been online since. Karkat hadn't been able to contact him at all. And he'd tried- he'd tried calling, pestering, texting, and even telepathy at one exceptionally low point. He still can't believe that Sollux convinced him it might actually work (spoiler alert: it didn't).

He doesn't know why he wanted to get in touch with Gamzee anyway. That guy was an asshole to him, he knew that now, and Kanaya had told him again and again that Karkat should just let him go. But somehow... Karkat couldn't.

After all, you don't just forget your first and (so far) only boyfriend. You don't just forget the guy you kissed first and the guy that convinced you to get drunk for the first time and the guy that wrote you a fucking rap for Valentine's day and the guy that wanted to have sex with you on your fifteenth birthday.

_Fifteenth. Fucking. Birthday._

Obviously, Karkat said no.

And Gamzee asked why not?

And Karkat said because they were underage.

And Gamzee asked if it was to do with Karkat _"actually being a girl"_ because he could totally motherfucking look past that if that was the reason.

And Karkat had punched him in the face, which was quite the feat because Gamzee was way taller than him; and then he'd run away like a coward. Because he didn't like the dark look that crossed his boyfriend's face suddenly. Because he knew that they were over then, even before Gamzee told
him over Pesterchum (just typing the words: iTs OvEr BrO before going offline and never coming back online all over again). And Karkat had gone to Kanaya for comfort and she swore that she'd kick his ass if Gamzee went near Karkat again. And then, Gamzee disappeared. Literally. He was gone.

Karkat crumpled. He recovered. And here he was now.

Kanaya was the only person that knew why they'd broken up. She was the only person that knew that Karkat had blamed himself ever since, even though he knew it was stupid. None of it was his fault- but it had to be somebody's and there was nobody else around to blame.

"Karkat, you look like your pet goldfish just died." Feferi is looking at him in the mirror, "What's wrong?"

"You people are annoying as shit." He says, even though that's not the reason.

"Oh. Okay." Feferi can also see right through him apparently, "If that's what you want us to think, that's fine. Whenever you want to talk about whatever it is, we're here."

And then, she goes back to yelling the Spice Girls with Terezi.

*Fuck you and your stupid '90s music hour, Skaia FM.*

When they arrive at the junkyard, which is a little while out of town, all of them get out of the car and peer through the pouring rain at the heap of junk in front of them. Karkat really hopes the rain lets up soon before they drown out here. All the cars here seem to be missing some part or another- how will they ever find a numberplate in this trash heap? Not to mention, the gate is locked and it looks like the place hasn't actually been used in a while- how did Feferi know about this place? She doesn't seem like the kind of girl that would hang around here.

"We can climb the gate." Terezi decides, despite the fact she can't have known it was locked. After all, she can't fucking see.

*Terezi...* She might get it, she might be the only person that gets it. Gets what Karkat feels about Gamzee. Or what he used to feel. Fuck if he knows anymore.

"Sure." Feferi whips her hair back into a ponytail and eyes the gate like it's a challenge. She's grabbing it by the bars, about to attempt to haul herself over, when Karkat's brain explodes like a hurricane. Maybe that's an exaggeration. But suddenly, he needs to talk to somebody and not just Kanaya, somebody that will really understand. Terezi will understand the Gamzee Situation because the Vriska Situation doesn't seem so different. And because she's been... Fucking amazing at these "emotional exposition" things so far.

He should... He can... The words bubble over before he can think them through properly.

"Terezi." Karkat clears his throat, "Can I tell you something I've never told anyone before? Feferi... I guess you can fucking listen too, since there's nothing else but shitty radio to listen to around here."

"We don't exactly have time to kill-" Terezi hesitates.

"It's about my transphobic asshole ex-boyfriend." Karkat says, "I need to tell somebody before my brain fucking explodes into a mush thinking about it."

Feferi has never looked so serious. "Tell me everything and then, we'll go kick his butt."
Once they've explained the gender situation to Feferi, Karkat tells them the whole story. He starts sat with his hands in his lap and his eyes fixed on the gap between Feferi's nose, where her glasses connect. By the end of the story, he's slumped over and staring into his lap, wondering if he should have just kept his mouth shut.

"And I haven't seen him since." Karkat finishes, "He won't even fucking call me back, though I don't know why I want him to in the first place."

"What an asshole." Terezi declares, "You really punched his lights out?"

"Yes."

"Good job, kid." Terezi nods in approval, "I'm sorry you got dragged down by a douchebag so early in life. You didn't deserve that. Trust me, I know what it feels like to be manipulated- I've dated Vriska on and off since the beginning of time and she's a bitch to me. To everybody, actually. But I keep going back to her because I imagine she could change. She never does."

Feferi is playing with a strand of hair hanging front of her face. "My Mom's the same. And I know that doesn't really count as having my heart broken or anything but it sure feels like it does. It's awful having to live with somebody when they look down on you all the time."

"Is there anybody that didn't draw a fucking terrible lot in life?" Karkat wonders aloud, "If even Feferi Peixes isn't happy, how can the rest of us ever expect to get there? After all, you have fucking everything."

"I don't have a real family. Just an actually evil mother and a sister that pretends not to know me." Feferi shrugs, smiling sadly, "So, really, I've drawn the worst lot of all."

Terezi sighs and gets to her feet. "I'm happy. I know that my life doesn't seem too happy sometimes- my Mom is busy, my sister uses me for money sometimes, my ex-girlfriend is a bitch and I'm kind of a loner- but I'm happy living in the little moments. And when you add all the little moments up, it makes a pretty big picture. And I'm happy here with you guys right now. You gotta live in the moment, Karkles."

"Jesus, what did I do to deserve an inspirational valedictorian worthy speech in the middle of a junkyard?" Karkat rolls his eyes, "Can we just get on with the task now?"

"Only once you admit that you're having fun." Feferi grins, "C'mon, Karcrab, you know you're having a great time with your new best friends here."

"Actually, I'm wondering what I did to get stuck with a blind mind-reader and a pun-obsessed fish girl." Karkat replies, flatly.

Terezi lowers her glasses to give him a look. One look in her empty eyes and he crumbles.

"Fuck, fine, I'm having fun. Can we move on now?"

"I knew it." Feferi says, "Now, let's get to work on climbing the gate."

Obviously, Terezi takes the lead and is scrambling halfway up the gate before the other two have even turned around. She's lodging her feet in the gaps between bars and mainly using her upper arm strength. She's fast- but Nepeta would have been faster. After a few muttered swear words and at least one near fall, Terezi lifts one leg over the gate and then the other, before jumping down and landing on her feet on the other side. She brushes herself off before turning back to them with a grin, as if to say "easy, huh?" Karkat scowls at her.
Karkat's the next to climb and he can barely get his footing, since the gate keeps shaking. He has no idea how Terezi made this look so easy or elegant but he's struggling and is barely halfway when his arms begin to ache and his fingers begin to burn from rubbing against the rusted metal bars. He just knows he's going to fall or throw up or both and he can barely hold on anymore, his fingers slipping. When he finally reaches the top, he has to take a break there for a minute, barely balanced on top of the stupid gate. He takes several deep breaths. Then, he lets Terezi coax him down from the other side. Again, he gets stuck halfway. This time, she grabs him around the waist and lifts him down to the ground.

She over-judges her balance and they both tumble to the ground in a heap.

"Fuck you, Pyrope." He mutters, deciding to just stay there rather than try to get up, since his legs have apparently turned to jelly. He's never been so glad to be on solid ground, except for that one time he let his family bully him into going on a boat when he was like five or something. Karkat has never recovered from that. Fucking oceans and their fucking waves and their fucking animals and their fucking, fucking, fucking crabs. Seriously, fuck crabs.

"I think you mean thank you." Terezi scratches behind her ear, sitting up.

"I mean, fuck you for writing this list. I could have died up there, you asshole."

"I didn't write "climb a gate". I wrote "steal a numberplate". You're the one that decided whimpering your way over a fence would be a good idea."

"I didn't goddamn whimper, that was the sound of me kicking that gate's ass."

Terezi pulls a face. "Dave is rubbing off on you already."

Shit, she was right. Who the hell talks like that? He was better than this.

When Feferi lands beside them, he nearly shits himself out of surprise, having completely forgotten that she was there. Like Terezi, she lands neatly and makes him feel like an idiot for struggling so much with the gate.

"We should look for a numberplate," Feferi says, looking around already, "Try looking on this side first, since there seem to be more cars and less other junk."

"Use your spider senses, Pyrope." Karkat says, glancing over at her.

She grins. "Seer of Mind powers, actually, but you were close enough."
After they've prised the numberplate off a broken car, using a screwdriver with a blunt end and metal rod that must have broken off something, and Terezi has stuffed it in her backpack, they calls the others to see how they're doing. The phone rings for a considerably long time before anybody picks up.

"Hello, this is Eridan's phone." Nepeta's voice is easily recognisable.

"Hi, Nepeta." Terezi says, holding the phone out at arms-length so that they can all hear, "It's Terezi. But the others are here too so don't say anything that wouldn't say in front of them."

"Hey, Terezi." comes Nepeta's bright voice, sounding happier now, "Did you guys cross the first thing off the list?"

"Yeah, literally aboot five minnowtes ago." Feferi replies, "It took a while but we managed it. Unfortunately, I broke a nail and that is going to be a beach to fix. Anyway, how are you guys doing?"

"Well, we've crossed off number two on the list." Nepeta says, "It just said to get something pierced and didn't specify what, so I just got my ears done. Porrim did it for me, we're outside her place now. Mom did say I could get them pierced when I turned fifteen anyway. Also, Porrim said to tell you that she was giving Karkat and Dave her blessing."

"Why does everybody already think we're dating?" Karkat complains, "Everybody thinks we're dating, even though we haven't even held a proper conversation yet. It's so fucking ridiculous that-"

He's ignored.

"Cool." Terezi grins, "We stole a numberplate from a junked up car and Karkat nearly broke his face climbing the gate. Twice. But we're in the car now and we're heading back. Out of curiosity, what's next on the list?"

"Well-"

Beeping.

"Hold on, I'm getting another call." Terezi frowns, "Don't hang up, I'll be right back!" She clicks onto the other call, "Hi, this is Terezi Pyrope speaking."

"The blind one, I remember." An oddly familiar voice, "I want to arrange a meeting with your friend, Karkat. Can I talk to him?"
"Yeah, I'm here." Karkat says, before turning to Terezi and mouthing 'who's this douchebag?'. She holds up the phone so that he can see it's an unknown number and shrugs.

"Cool. It's Dirk." Dave's older brother. "I'd like to talk to you at my place. It's important, Dave asked me to help you out. Or rather, he implied that I should help him out by helping you out and Roxy leant me this number so that I could contact you. Anyway, I'll text you the address."

"Okay. Right." Karkat is baffled, "What the fuck do you want to see me for anyway?"

"I've got the next tape. And I thought you might be interested in completing the penultimate task on the list ahead of time, since it's the trickiest." Dirk hangs up without a goodbye.

"Who's Dirk?" Feferi frowns, "I can't even pun on his name."

"What the hell is the penultimate task on the list?" Karkat wonders.

Terezi clicks back onto Nepeta and continues as if nothing had happened. "So, what's next on the list?"

There's a crumpling of paper on the other end of the line. "Take a photo with Ahab's Crosshairs."

"I knowww where that is!" Eridan's distant voice sounds excited, "Wwe can do that."

"Are you guys going to meet us there?" Nepeta asks, "It's at the history museum apparently."

"Ask her what the penultimate task is." Karkat hisses.

"We'll meet you there." Terezi says, "See you there, Nepeta."

She hangs up and Karkat exchanges a look with Feferi.

"We should get you to Dirk first." Terezi says, "I have a feeling it's important."

"Fuck you, you knew he was going to call." Karkat realises.

"Maybe." Terezi winks.

After the call ends, Nepeta relays the plan to Eridan and then steps to the edge of the curb to hail a cab. This involves her waving her hand and yelling "TAXI" until one finally pulls up beside them. She has no idea if that's how you're supposed to hail a cab in the city but damnit, it works in movies and she relies on movies to teach her most social interactions. Not because she's an outcast with no friends- she has at least three, possibly four- but because she's just bad at social interactions anyway.

Anyway, she has a tendency to get off topic, so right now she'll focus on climbing into the cab instead of thinking about all of this. She can think about other things later. Eridan climbs in after her, shutting the door, and tells the guy that they need to go to the history museum. Nepeta buckles her seatbelt and consciously touches the new studs in her earlobes. She choose the prettiest ones, the nice silver studs, and made sure they were small. She wants Terezi to like them.

She wants Terezi to tell her that they're pretty and she's pretty and kiss her again. Even if Terezi can't see, she wants her to say they're pretty anyway. Shit, Nepeta wants to kiss that girl a million times over and over and over again until she can't kiss her anymore. She wants to kiss her everywhere, every second of the day. She wants to just be with Terezi all the time- does that sound weird and obsessive? Quite possibly! But Nepeta's never liked anybody aside from Karkat before
and everything is going so well and Terezi seems to really like her and she's excited. This could be it. This could be her happily ever after.

"Nep." Eridan clears his throat to get her attention, "It's blatantly obvvioulsy that you are in lovve wwith the Blind Blunder, Terezi Pyrope, so let me tell you a couple of things about her."

"If you're going to tell me crap about her, don't bother." Nepeta says, "I know that you shit on everybody that refuses you, Eridan."

"Wwhat?" Eridan looks genuinely confused.

"During the last hour we have spent together, you told me about every single person that has ever turned you down. Including the Sailor Moon you met at Comic Con and your cousin." Nepeta counts them on her fingers, "Which is weird because I thought you were gay?"

"First of all, second cousin." Eridan says, "Second of all, just because I havve great taste in clothes and am currently sextin' the asshole that your friend hooked me up wwith does not mean I'm completely gay. Just mostly." Eridan looks up from his phone, tilting it away so she can't read the endless pages of purple and yellow text, "I just havve a preference."

"That is more information than I ever needed about you." Nepeta shudders, trying not to think what Eridan 'sexting' involves. Probably at least one Harry Potter reference.

"You knoww, you an' I aren't so different, Nep." Eridan tells her, glancing up at her. His eyes are cold and bright, so much so that she blinks a couple of times and looks at her feet instead.

"How'd you figure that?" Nepeta asks, curiously.

"Wwell... You an' I both fall in lovve wwith anybody that looks at us." Eridan points out, "You kneww Kar for years an' he was, like, your only friend. So, duh, you fall in lovve wwith him. But the second you meet Tez, you fall totally head ovver heels for her instead."

He pauses and she gestures for him to go on.

"So, you only like her because she's the next person that came along. An' Tez, though I totally lovve her, she's a liability." Eridan sighs, "I'm just wwarnin' you that she's the opposite. People fall in lovve wwith her evvery fivve minutes an' she nevver takes anythin' seriously."

"Who falls in love with her?" Nepeta raises an eyebrow, "Name somebody."

"Davve liked her before. An' Vvris. Me. Evven Kar thinks she's cool." Eridan says, "You're just the next in a long line of broken hearts, you knoww."

Nepeta considers quietly. Wait, was Eridan serious when he said that Dave had liked Terezi? She mentioned them talking over Pesterchum a lot. Nepeta didn't want to think about Terezi being taken away from her, not in a million, million years. Suddenly, there are scarier ideas filling her head. Like: Terezi kissing somebody else in the rain over and over again. Terezi finding somebody better than Nepeta. Terezi admitting that this whole relationship was just a big ploy to make fun of Nepeta. She doesn't want to think about it, knows it can't be true, but Eridan's planted it in her head now.

Nepeta's left hand jerks against her knee as she ponders it.

"So...?" Eridan says, softly, "Don't you think it wwould be better to find somebody else?"
He stares at her with piercing blue eyes. And suddenly, she has no idea who she trusts anymore. She definitely doesn't trust Eridan. Or Terezi. The only person she really trusts is Karkat. He's never lied to her once, as far as she knows. Suddenly, she wishes she'd fought harder to go with him and Terezi. Or that she'd never come out to the city in the first place. If she'd stayed at home, like Karkat wanted her too, she wouldn't be so confused now. And an overwhelming wave of homesickness hits her, making her want to puke. In fact-

"Stop the car." Nepeta commands and scrambles out of the door before it's even come to a complete stop.

She doesn't even make it to the sidewalk, puking on the side of the road right next to an empty pizza box and beer bottle. Her throat burns with stomach acid and her mouth tastes metallic, like somebody made her suck on a nickel. She takes deep breaths, unsure of whether she's going to hurl again.

She spits a few times, trying to get the taste out of her mouth, wipes her mouth on the back of her hand, then she straightens up. Calmly, Nepeta walks up to the cab driver's window and tells him to drive Eridan to the history museum. She'll catch up later. Eridan will pay for his services. And as soon as the cab is moving away, she's running in the opposite direction.

To say that Nepeta is a fast runner would be an understatement- she's on the track team after all- she can outrun the best of them and has bested sexist boys at her school in many races. She's faster than Equius even. She's like the Flash, she's gone in seconds. She's like the mighty lion, when she runs. She's like the huntress, chasing her prey. In other words, she is super fast. So, when she takes off down the sidewalk, she powers through the crowd incredibly quickly. And while she's running, she thinks this through logically.

First of all, Karkat was not her only friend. She was also friends with Kanaya, who sewed cosplays with her sometimes, and Equius, who was her real best friend. Just because he wasn't here with her now didn't mean that he wasn't her best friend. Because he honestly was but she liked to spend time with Karkat too. Equius was great but she'd never fallen in love with him.

She'd never fallen in love with Rufioh Nitram either, even though mostly everybody else in their neighbourhood had. She'd never fallen in love with Jade, even though they were friends online, or Sollux, who was a close acquaintance at most. So, there was no way that Eridan was right about her falling in love with anybody that looked at her.

She was glad to realise that the two of them weren't alike after all.

Second of all, she was sure that Terezi did attract a lot of attention. After all, somebody as beautiful as that is bound to date a few people during high school and college, but that doesn't mean anything. Just because somebody was pretty, that didn't mean they were flaky. Plus, Terezi made Nepeta her girlfriend, which must mean something pretty special. Also, although Terezi is a little strange, she definitely isn't a cheater. Or a heartbreaker, or anything like that. Nepeta can tell that.

Third of all, wasn't Eridan the one telling people that Terezi was a loner with no friends an hour or two ago? He'd changed his tune pretty suddenly. Why? She had no idea. But he had, he's totally changed his opinion just to confuse her.

Nepeta concluded that he was a fucking liar and finally came to a stop, out of breath but still able to stand up straight. She felt a little dizzy after all of that but she definitely wasn't going to puke again, which was good. She leaned against a bookstore and closed her eyes until the dizziness went away. Okay, crisis averted, she should probably get something to settle her stomach a little. She seems to remember there being a cafe in the art gallery and she's not too far from there. Set on a location,
she starts running again.

At least the rain seems to have come to a stop but there's no sunshine yet. Still, it's reasonably warm outside. Or, at least, Nepeta is warm. She's also vaguely aware of the goosebumps spreading up her arms and the fact that she can't stop her right eye twitching. The latter is normal for her but still, it bothers her. She's sweating through her shirt. But it's cold.

"Nepeta?" A voice.

Nepeta stops and spins around. "R-Rose and K-Kanaya?"

The two girls are standing in equally fashionable outfits, side by side. Both of them are holding bags of what look like groceries. Ah, they must have gone shopping after the art gallery. That's adorable, Nepeta thinks, and she decides that she should definitely put Rose and Kanaya at the top of her shipping chart. Kanaya has her lips pursed in concern as Nepeta looks back and forth between the two of them, unsure of where to look.

"Nepeta, are you okay?" Kanaya inquires, stepping towards her, "You don't look well."

"E-Eridan said Terezi d-didn't like me so I r-ran away and p-puked a l-little but I'm okay n-now." Nepeta nods, "I p-promise. I'm just getting something to s-settle my stomach and t-then I'm meeting the others. I'll j-just g-go now."

She doesn't know why it's so hard to get the words out or why she can't seem to be able to get rid of the goosebumps on her arms no matter how tightly she crosses them.

Rose grabs her by the wrist and looks at her ever so seriously. "You're shaking."

"No, she meant that you're shivering." Kanaya says, "And you're sweating excessively and you just said you vomited, which means you're either more upset than you thought or you're a little under the weather." She turns to her girlfriend, "I always knew that Eridan Ampora was a little above his station but I see no reason for him sabotaging Terezi and Nepeta's relationship."

"Well, it's clear that he was jealous because he requires Terezi to bitch at him regularly to keep him on his toes. He wants to be in a relationship with her, not necessarily romantically, so he's trying to reclaim her attention." Rose explains.

"In English, p-please?" Nepeta asks.

"Eridan is salty because he wants to be friends with Terezi." Rose summarises, "And he was worried that you would get in the way, so he tried to break you up. I've seen him do this before. Normally when people get close to Feferi."

"Eridan thrives on attention. Even the negative attention from Terezi- it makes him feel important." Kanaya further explains, "He's not a bad person but he's a bit morally corrupt. But what am I talking about? We should be getting Nepeta back to your apartment, Rose. That's our priority right now. We can discuss Eridan later."

"Good point, Kanaya." Rose says, taking Nepeta's arm again, gentler this time, "Don't worry, Nepeta, I don't bite. We'll take care of you and make sure that you meet up with Karkat and Terezi again. They seem like great friends of yours, after all, don't let Eridan sway you."

"N-no, you don't have to-" Nepeta tries to assure them.
"Oh, but we do." Rose says, seriously, "Friends help friends out."

Actually, is she anything other than serious? Rose's only facial expressions seem to be either serious or mildly amused.

"We're f-friends?" Nepeta blinks. Didn't they just meet this morning? Very briefly?

"Of course we are." Kanaya says, "You can call your friends from our- uh, Rose's apartment as soon as you feel ready to talk to them again. For now, let's get you somewhere warm."

Between them, Rose and Kanaya manage to usher into a cab again and convince her that she's not going to throw up this time. And they take her back to Rose's apartment.

It's a nice apartment, mostly decorated with soft shades of pink and violet, but filled with stupid posters and Doctor Who merchandise. There's a lot of books piled around, porn magazines slipped between Freud and Jung, and the walls are covered in a mix of pretty Polaroids and magazine cuttings. Underneath the swords pinned up on the wall is Rose's collection of Harry Potter wands. In short, the apartment is the perfect fusion of two completely different people.

They sit Nepeta on the couch, whilst Kanaya makes tea and Rose fetches blankets for her. And it's not long before she hears the sound of a door being flung open and footsteps in the corridor, accompanied by a loud voice and the High School Musical soundtrack playing on a nearby stereo. Ironically, Nepeta guesses.

A somehow familiar voice approaches. "Lalonde, Maryam, I've decided that waiting in the cold for Karkat to show up later was a dumb move. It's cold as bitch-tits out there and my balls were literally turning the same colour as Vriska Serket's hair. By that, I mean bright blue. I thought they were going to fall off and I was going to have to call an ambulance to get my balls stitched back on. Imagine that 911 call, just imagine. Hello 911, my balls- wait."

The boy that Nepeta now knows as Dave Strider appears in the doorway. He looks just as Nepeta remembers him from earlier; tall, lean, blonde hair, stupid sunglasses. He is sporting a One Direction t-shirt, most likely for "ironic" reasons. He stares blankly at her. Or maybe he doesn't, it's hard to tell through his sunglasses.

"You aren't Lalonde or Maryam." He says, "You're Kitkat's friend. Shit, wait, I know this. I know this, Terezi totally told me what your name was. It began with 'N'. Naomi?"

"Nepeta, actually." She corrects, "And you're Dave, Dave Strider."

"The one and only." He quirks an eyebrow, "Don't look so surprised at how incredibly hot I am- my voice on the tapes didn't come across nearly as sexy as I hoped it would. I know, I'm a literal naked sun god on a bed of rose petals to your mortal eyes, but please restrain yourself. This sexy ass is saved for Karkles only. Don't tell him though, I want to surprise him."

Nepeta can't help laughing.

Dave smiles. He actually smiles. And he approaches, sitting on top of the coffee table in front of her, before he continues talking.

"So, Terezi was telling me about you this morning on Pesterchum. Really fucking early in the morning too, so you can thank her for that. The early bird does not get the worm, they just get dubious amounts of sleep. Anyway, she said something about you being her girlfriend."
Nepeta nods. "Yeah, I guess."

"Good for you, kid." Dave says, "Because Pyrope is one cool kid, lemme tell you that. And she had nothing but good things to say about you. Sounds like she's head over heels for you."

"Wow." Nepeta sits up straight, smiling, "Really? That's so nice of her."

"Didn't I tell you that Eridan was full of shit?" Rose calls from the hallway.

"Way to eavesdrop, Lalonde." Dave rolls his eyes.

The car pulls to a stop outside an apartment that looks reasonably nice- what does Dirk do for a living? Karkat wonders, didn't Dave say something about porn sites? Jesus on a boat, I hope he was kidding- and nobody goes to get out of the car. Feferi turns to him, kneeling up in her seat, and stares at him through the thick lenses of her glasses. He wonders if they're the reason that she looks so wide-eyed and surprised all the time.

"Well?" Terezi turns around too, poking him in the stomach with her cane, "Aren't you going to get out there? Dirk's waiting for you, you know."

"I don't know anything about this guy." Karkat exclaims, "He could be planning to run me through with one of his fancy katana swords."

"Look, Dirk is cool. And justice never lies and I am justice." Terezi says, as if that sorts everything, "Seriously, Dirk is the smartest person I know. Reads a lot of books, quotes a lot of philosophers. He's a little awkward maybe sometimes but he's the coolest."

"What exactly does he want from me?" Karkat says, flatly, "And don't say you don't know because I know you do. Tell me, Pyrope, what does this guy want?"

"I can't..." She sighs, "All I can tell you is that it's to do with strifing."

"I can't strife with Dirk." Karkat states, feeling his heart speed up at just the thought of it, "Did you see that guy? He'll kick my ass. Seriously, I couldn't even strife Roxy and now you want me to go against the guy that probably owns a collection of swords?"

"You don't have to strife with Dirk." Terezi says, before realising that she probably isn't allowed to say that, "I mean, nothing and I'm not saying another word."

She starts pointedly humming I Want It That Way to make sure that nobody else asks her any further questions.

Feferi, who has been surprisingly quiet, pipes up. "The last thing on the list is a strife with Dave. I remember because I curious what the last thing would be, since I knew it was meant to lead back to him in the end. And you have to strife with Dave. Dirk is probably going to prepare you for that. The penultimate thing was something about... Swords?"

Terezi hums louder.

"Wait, you know about strifing?" Karkat frowns. Was he the only person in the entire state that didn't know about this? This is Pesterchum all over again- he swears he was the last person in the universe to switch from Trollian to Pesterchum.

"Shore I did." Feferi shrugs, "Strifing is a normal thing in the city."
"Of course it is. Running people through with swords for fun is a completely normal hobby for people to be participating in on the streets with complete strangers. It's like dance battling but you might get your lung punctured by some douchebag in shades. Completely fucking normal!" Karkat gets out of the car, 'I do not understand the city in the slightest, you people are insane.'

As he's walking towards the apartment, Feferi rolls down the window.

"Good luck in there! Somefin tells me you'll need it!"

"Make sure you complete number three."

Then, Karkat pushes the door open and nearly shits himself in surprise.

Dirk Strider is standing at the bottom of the stairs, shades hiding his expression and a sword gripped in his hand. He's not just holding it like somebody would hold a newspaper or an umbrella either- he's holding the sword like he's about to cut someone in half. Karkat nearly has a heart attack, inhaling sharply and clutching his chest to calm his heartbeat.

"Jesus Christ, what did I ever do to deserve that?" He says, once he's remembered how to breathe again, "You scared the living shit out of me. If this is normally how you greet people, it's no wonder that even Terezi thinks you're awkward. Holy fuck, do you like causing innocent people panic attacks? How many people have walked through this door and been confronted by the sight of Dirk the Vampire Slayer with his dumbass anime sword in the last hour?"

For a moment, Dirk doesn't say anything at all. He's definitely looking at Karkat but with his eyes obscured from view, there's no way to tell what he's thinking. It could be anything from "I'm gonna tear this kid a new asshole with my badass sword" to "I wish the convenience store sold better crackers".

Then, Dirk says. "I don't recall Buffy ever using a sword, so your metaphor doesn't work. And considering all the swordsman/woman in popular media out there, I'm really disappointed you couldn't come up with something better. Dave said you were smart."

"Dave doesn't know jack shit, he's never even met me." Karkat says, finally regaining enough confidence to step away from the door and towards Dirk, "Also, he's a giant dick that doesn't get to talk about someone that he runs away from when they tried to speak to him."

"Yeah, I heard about that. Kid's kinda dumb sometimes, when it comes to people he likes. You probably know that, since you've probably heard all about John on the tapes." Dirk shrugs, "Anyways, did Rezi tell you why you're here?"

"Well, no, because that would be fucking simple. But Peixes and I figured out that it was probably something to do with you teaching me to strife so that I could hold up against Dave." Dirks steps forward, so that his hand can rest on Karkat's shoulder. Never in his life has Karkat felt so incredibly short before.

"From this moment on, you are my kohai." He says, much too seriously.

Karkat rolls his eyes. "Great, more weeb shit."
Dirk might have smiled. It's hard to tell.
Karkat was kidding when he said Dirk most likely owned a large collection of swords but it turns out, he hit a lot closer to the mark than he thought. The front room actually has more than ten swords- by Karkat's rough estimate, at least- hanging on the wall. And honestly, now that he's face to face with the collection, he's willing to admit that swords are pretty cool. Even if only pretentious douchebags seem to carry them, (and Terezi).

"I guess you like swords." Dirk says, from behind him, "Would you like an orange soda?"

"No and no." Karkat says. Because even if he's abandoned most of the rules that were drummed into him from birth just by entering here, he's still not going to take drinks or food from strangers. He really doesn't want to be a newspaper headline tomorrow.

"Huh." Dirk grabs himself an orange soda from the fridge before approaching him, "I figured you'd be a sword kind of guy, considering that was the first thing you noticed. I mean, I've got tons of cool shit lying around and yet..." He trails off, "You didn't look comfortable wielding a blade this morning."

Karkat shrugs. "I don't know if you've noticed but I'm about the same height as a pixie and I have about the same amount of upper body strength. I'd have to be Hercules to lift any of these." He gestures to the swords.

"Intriguing." Dirk cracks open his soda and takes a long sip from it.

Karkat wishes he could tell what he was thinking. He wonders if there's any way that he could get some kind of mind-reading powers like Terezi's and be able to figure out what was going on in people's heads easily. How does she do that anyway?

"What's intriguing?" Karkat asks, eventually, unable to stop himself.

"I'm just considering how you're going to strife if you can't properly handle a regular blade."

"I was just fine this morning, when I was up against your sister." Karkat says, fiercely, "Can't you see out of those stupid isosceles stuck to your face? Didn't you see me kicking ass like there was no tomorrow?"

Dirk raises an eyebrow and raises a hand, pressing two fingers gently (as if he doesn't want to touch him) against Karkat's cheek. For a second, Karkat scowls at him, unsure of what the hell he's doing. And, then, abruptly, he realises that Dirk is poking at the band-aid stuck to his face. He doesn't even need to say a word to make his point. What a fucking asshole. Karkat pushes him away, furiously, and glares.

"Don't touch me, nooksucker. Keep your grubby paws to yourself."

Dirk raises his other eyebrow. And he just stands there, sipping at his stupid orange soda, his other
hand retreating to his pocket. He doesn't say a word, just looking at Karkat with the same emotionless expression, like a robot. It's enough to drive a man insane. Karkat holds out as long as he can, glaring hard at him and determined not to speak first. Dirk doesn't. The staring match can only last a minute at most but it feels like years.

Finally, Karkat snaps. "Say something!"

The older man shrugs and puts his soda on top of a bookcase that's thick with fancy volumes. Great, he's smart, sword-wielding and quiet. The odds of Dirk being a sociopath rise significantly. Just brilliant.

Dirk unhooks a sword from the wall and thrusts it at Karkat.

He takes it uncertainly, hating how heavy and ugly the blade feels in his hand, turning it over so that he can look at it. It's obviously intended to be a light sword but Karkat has to consciously steady his hand to stop it dropping from his hand. Dirk obviously notices.

"You don't talk very much, do you?" Karkat huffs, as the sword is taken away and hung back in its spot on the wall, "Because if this is all an elaborate troll to bother me, you can yell 'psych' right now and drop the creepy quiet act."

"I wasn't aware that I was bothering you." Dirk says, (and Karkat is so glad to leave the silence behind), "Stay right there, I'll be back."

He crosses the room, his sneakers somehow silent against the wooden floor, and disappears into a different room. He doesn't draw the door closed, so Karkat could easily follow him and satisfy his curiosity. Instead, he decides to stay put and pray that Dave's brother isn't... You know, an axe murderer or anything. All Karkat can think is that he's alone in a stranger's apartment with a weirdly quiet, older man. He's seen enough movies to be unnerved.

To distract himself, he decides that he'll study the volumes stuffed into the numerous bookshelves and the empty surfaces dragging across the apartments and the large windows that let in the white light from the crowded skies. Karkat can appreciate a tidy apartment but Dirk's seems... Somehow empty. Everything seems too flawless, too neat, like there's something to hide. No- like there's something missing. Like there used to be something to fill all the gaps in the apartment, to colour in the lines.

Karkat finds himself at the other side of the room, having scanned the room for the clutter that must exist somewhere, and realises that one of the doors is cracked open. Curiously, glancing back to see if Dirk is standing there, Karkat pushes the door open just enough to be able to peer inside. And he's found the clutter, boxed up and stacked in a room that obviously used to be a bedroom. He doesn't like to poke his nose in where it doesn't belong, of course he doesn't, but Dirk has piqued his curiosity.

"Karkat-san." comes Dirk's voice from across the room, "What's up?"

"What the fuck did you call me?" Karkat demands, turning to face him.

*Why does he have an old room like this?*

"Just a joke." Dirk shrugs, "I thought you'd find it funny. Anyways, what are you doing over there?"

"I..." Karkat stares at the clutter, wondering why it's been shut away.
Something clicks into place and Karkat understands how Terezi's brain must work.

"You didn't always live alone, did you?" Karkat asks, even though he's sure, "You used to live with somebody else. Wait..." He thinks of his Rom-Coms, "You dated somebody. And when they broke up with you, you never got over it. And that's why you're so distant from everybody."

"Jeez, kid, you hang out with Pyrope too much." Dirk lets out a small sigh.

"I only met her yesterday."

"Twenty-four hours with TZ is long enough for anybody." He approaches, a box in his hands, which he places on the nearby desk; he opens it to reveal a pair of shining, hooked sickles, "I bought these a couple of years ago because I thought Dave or Rose might be good with them. But our family wield swords- except Roxy, bless her- and nobody has ever used them." He takes them out of the box and holds them up, "Perhaps you'd like to try."

"They look like pincers." Karkat comments, not moving an inch, "You must be crazy."

Dirk looks at him firmly. "Trust your Senpai and take the sickles."

Karkat scoffs and picks up one, holding it steadily in his left hand. It's a little odd to hold but it fits a little more comfortably in his hand, having a softer handle that's shaped better. He likes the feel of it. He picks up the other and moves his feet apart, balancing himself out. This is better than wielding a blade (or two) somehow. Maybe this is what's right.

"I knew it." Dirk says.

Once Terezi knows that Nepeta is upset- Roxy, or perhaps Rose since it was just signed 'R', tells her via text message- she wants to rush to her side. She needs to be there for Nepeta and suddenly, the distance between them feels worlds wide. It makes her stomach flutter but she forces herself to send back a thank you and asks that they give her love to Nepeta. Her girlfriend is being taken care of. Kanaya and Rose looking after her and there's nobody better.

Terezi slips her phone back into her pocket and turns to where she can sense the others standing. She makes herself smile at them.

"Well, it seems Nepeta is taking a break. But we have to keep going." It's a hard decision- between comforting Nepeta and helping Karkat finish the list- but she knows that she has to complete one before she can go onto the other. And the list... Has a time-limit. She'll have to meet Nepeta later and make sure she's okay.

"Right." Feferi checks the third item off the list, leaning against the case where Ahab's Crosshairs are kept, and checks the fourth, "It says somefin here aboat dance mobs." She looks at Terezi, "I don't understand."

"A dance mob. You know, like-"

"No, I know what a dance mob is." Feferi assures her, waving her words away, "I don't understand why Eridfin has gone home and Nepeta is taking a break. Did somfin happen between them? Is it just us doing the list now?"

"Yeah, I guess something happened." Terezi itches to know, "And yes, for now, until Karkat is finished with Dirk, it's just us. We have to get on with the list or it will never be finished in time."
She hopes Nepeta isn't hurt. Despite only knowing the girl for a day, she knows that if somebody upset Nepeta, she would want to know. Need to know, so that she could go and kick their asses. She wishes Rose had been more specific in her message as to why Nepeta is upset. Well... At least Rose and Kanaya are looking after her. Terezi sighs and sticks her hands in her pockets, heading towards the exit. Feferi is close behind.

They take the bus.

"You know where we're going, right?" Feferi checks.

"Course." Terezi says, and she must sound miserable or something because Feferi flinches beside her.

"You're worried about Nepeta?" Feferi guesses.

Terezi nods.

"Well-"

Feferi is cut off suddenly by a cheery: "Don't worry, she'll be fine!"

The familiar voice comes from the seat behind them and Terezi turns, because she's been taught that it's polite to try and meet people's gaze if she can. That's only one of the many useful pieces of advice that her Mom has given her! She guessed where the girl's eyes must be and tilts her face at her. The girl... The girl who's voice she can recognise as Aradia- it's not a voice that she'll forget any time soon. Such a bizarre sounding voice, cheerful and somehow slightly unnerving. Like the overly positive person in the start of a horror movie. You know, like that one guy that always says "what could possibly go wrong?" and then gets eaten by a chainsaw-wielding ghost of a dinosaur.

"Hey, Aradia." Terezi grins, "What's up?"

"Nothing much with me. There's never really anything up with me. But I know for sure that Nepeta will be fine!" Aradia leans forward, made evident by the sudden closeness and the chafing of loose material, "It's nice to see you again, Terezi. This must be your friend, we haven't met before."

"Uh, yeah, it's, uh, Feferi." Feferi stumbles over her words. Adorably obvious.

"I'm Aradia." They shake hands and Aradia inhales sharply, "Hey, you shouldn't worry about your family. They love you, underneath it all, I'm sure of it. They just don't know how to show it. You'll find your place in the world soon enough."

"What?" Feferi yanks her hand back.

Aradia doesn't pause. "I said, it's nice to meet you. Where are you guys headed?"

"I know there's going to be a dance mob in the mall this afternoon." Terezi explains, "We're going to go there to complete number four on the scavenger hunt list and then, we're coming back to pick up Karkat. He's busy learning how not to suck at strifing."

Aradia must nod. "Oops, sorry, I just nodded. Don't you guys have a car to take or something?"

"Oh, no, we do." Feferi says, "Terezi wanted to take the bus."

"Our meeting must have been fated." Terezi grins, "How weird."

"Weird." Aradia must double-pistols-and-a-wink, "I just did a double pistols and a wink, by the
way. Anyway, I was just going to go home but... If you guys don't mind me joining you, I've always wanted to participate in a scavenger hunt." Before either of them can protest, Aradia climbs over the chair and squeezes between them, "What happened to your other friend? Nepeta?"

"Guess." Terezi says.

"A male third party thought Nepeta was getting in the way of his friendship with Terezi so he lied to Nepeta to get her out of the way and she got upset and now, she's being looked after by two lesbians and a hipster?" Aradia guesses.

"Uh, what?" Feferi is confused.

"Oh, look, our stop." Aradia gets to her feet.

Terezi grins. Aradia is weird and she likes that in a person.

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Karkat is knocked off his feet again, landing on his side this time instead of his ass, and lands hard enough to wince in pain. But he pushes himself back up, stumbles to his feet, and brings his sickle up to catch the blade that nearly cuts his face open. Dirk is relentless and seeing the stoic expression on his face, it makes Karkat feel pathetic. After all, Dirk is kicking his ass and not even breaking a sweat. He's not even blinking as he pulls his sword free and swings it around to meet Karkat's other sickle.

Karkat takes a step back to avoid the next blow. "Strider?"

"Yes?" Dirk fakes a hit to the left before smacking Karkat's side with a sword, causing him to swear and back up further.

Karkat keeps going until his back presses against the wall. "How did Dave get you to agree to this? I know for a fact that you wouldn't willingly do this."

"What makes you say that?"

Karkat catches the sword and twists his sickle, holding Dirk there, before the man raises an eyebrow and easily squirms out of the way. Still, Karkat doesn't give up and insists on meeting his blade each time. It's what Dirk told him to do- you meet every hit and don't let it touch you, whatever you do. Meet the sword halfway.

"Your lack of social skills borders on sociopathic. You don't talk enough." Karkat hits Dirk hard in the stomach with the curve of his sickle. It actually seems to catch him off guard and Dirk looks surprised for half a second before his lip twitches into what might be a smile. Karkat spins out of the way before the next swing can hit him.

Dirk's sword cracks the paint on the wall. "Just because I'm not a loud mouth like you, I'm a sociopath?"

"It's an educated guess, shithead, I'm not calling you crazy. You're a creepily quiet guy that lives alone and whilst you've got the brains, you can't talk to people." Karkat ducks out of the way again, before bringing his sickles back up and knocking Dirk back again, "So, why'd you agree to this, Sherlock?"

"Kohai-"

"My name is Karkat!" He catches Dirk's shoulder with his blade.
"Karkat." Dirk's mouth twitches again, "I grew up alone. I didn't hang around with other children. It's hardly my fault that I don't understand how other people work. They aren't programmed like robots are, they run on their own systems. And I find that difficult to empathise with at times."

Karkat's other sickle hits the wall behind Dirk. He's got him trapped.

"But to answer your question, Dave didn't ask me to do this. Rose did..." Dirk pauses. "But I knew you wouldn't agree to come if I told you that. And I agreed that I would help you because I'm fucking awesome at strifing. Possibly the best."

Karkat raises an eyebrow. And Dirk throws him off and Karkat hits the floor again.

"And because I like to help people." Dirk says, "When I can. Why aren't you getting up?"

"I'm tired." Karkat complains.

Dirk crouches down beside him and lowers his sunglasses so that he can meet Karkat's eyes. His eyes are a light shade of brown that look orange in the light. They're incredibly serious and solemn.

"Did Hamilton give up when he got tired?" Dirk asks.

"What-" Karkat takes in Dirk's expression and shakes his head, "No."

"Good men don't give up. So, get back up; wipe that blood off your lip, realise your true powers, and try to kick my ass like the swordsman I know you can be." Dirk stands, looking down at him, "I know that-"

"Alright, I'm getting up." Karkat gets to his feet and wipes his mouth on the back of his hand. There's nothing there.

"The blood thing was a reference to a popular anime trope." Dirk says, "And you cut me off in the middle of my inspirational speech that was meant to revoke the fire in you so that you could become some kind of hardcore samurai but I guess you're not going to let me finish." He wields his blade, "Let's go."

The strife only ends when Karkat finally gets lucky, catching Dirk's blade with his left sickle, and twisting it free. It falls to the ground, narrowly missing Karkat's feet, and clatters to a still there. Dirk doesn't flinch, watching his sword fall, looking up slowly to stare at Karkat. The expression on his face is still impossible to read.

"Young grasshopper." Dirk pauses, "You've improved. In fact, I'd say you're ready."

Terezi hates to admit it but she's never actually been to a dance mob before- it's something that she's always wanted to do but she's never actually got to do. Maybe that's why she suggested it was put on the list, so she'd have an excuse to take part in one. Ever since she suggested it, Roxy has been organising one for today for them to attend. Terezi doesn't know who else is going to be there- Dave, perhaps?- but she's excited anyway. Actually, she's freaking pumped for this. Seriously, so excited!

They have to hang around and look non-conspicuous until the music starts, so Terezi settles herself on the bench by the fountain and checks her messages. There's nothing from Nepeta- she hasn't even called- despite the fact she could easily borrow Rose's phone or something. It worries Terezi that Nepeta hasn't contacted her at all. She sighs.
"You come here often?" Dave slips onto the bench beside her, punching her lightly on the shoulder to alert her of his presence. As if she didn't hear the squeak of his sneakers crossing the floor and hear the bench creak when he sat down. She pretends that she hadn't noticed him and turns to him, grinning.

"Hey there, stranger." She says, "Nice job giving yourself away."

"Thanks." She can practically hear his eyes rolling in his head, "I've already managed to get your girlfriend into my apartment, by the way, which I normally don't try until the second date. I could get to third base by the time you finish the scavenger hunt."

Terezi cackles, (Dave's so funny). "That's cool, I've already got to second base with your boyfriend. I fell on top of him and may have copped a feel here and there by mistake. He's precious, by the way, and I'm keeping him."

"He's not my boyfriend yet." Dave says and she pounces on his words.

"Yet!" She laughs, "Don't worry, he'll be soon enough. You should have heard him freaking out about seeing you." She puts on her best impression of Karkat, "Holy shit, he's not just a douchebag, he's an attractive douchebag."

Dave laughs. "Yeah, your girlfriend has been gushing about you too. It's unfortunate that we ended up spending more time with each other's crushes than our own."

"Crushes? I shared a bed with that girl last night." Terezi reminds him, "We're going to go to Six Flags and we've got a movie date to Deadpool next week. We're already miles ahead of you and Karkles." She pauses, "I'd tell you to call the scavenger hunt off and convince you to just ask him out but I'm having so much fun."

"Yeah, I'm having fun too, as dumb as it sounds. As it turns out, clichés are just as fun to take part in as they are to watch in movies." Dave gestures with a dramatic sweep of his arm so that she can tell what he's doing, "That's why I'm here. I want to take part."

"You're here because you know that Karkat is safe at Dirk's and you want to dance with me without making your boyfriend jealous." Terezi says.

"I have always wanted to dance with a pretty girl. It will be just like prom but a million times better because there's going to be decent music and a cute girl hanging off my arm and I get to break it down on the dance floor." Dave says, "You can't tell but I dressed up. Give me your hand, I'll show you."

He lets her feel the smooth cotton of his button-up shirt and his dumb tie, most likely the "red" one, hanging around his neck. She checks his shades are still there and grins.

"We're the coolest people here by far." Dave voices her thoughts, "You brought friends, didn't you?"

"Feferi and Aradia are here with me." Terezi says, "But, because I'm trying to steal my girlfriend's title of Shipping Queen, I told them they should go hang around on the other side of the fountain and get to know each other. Can you see them? Feferi has "pink" hair and Aradia looks "creepy"."

She makes speech marks around the words that Karkat used. She doesn't know what pink is or how somebody can look creepy but she can't describe their looks on her own. So, she steals Karkat's words.
"Oh, yeah." Dave says, "They're staring at us."

"Should we wave?" Terezi does anybody. Dave turns her in the right direction.

Perhaps because she's blind- she's not exactly Daredevil but her senses are a little keener than most people's- Terezi hears the music first. It's faint, subtle enough that nobody notices, but she gets to her feet. But as the music grows louder over the speakers- having a friend that can hack like Roxy is the best- she grabs Dave by the hand and pulls him up too. He squeezes her hand tightly and she squeezes back, grinning at her best friend. And as people begin to dance, they're caught in the middle.

"May I have this dance?" Dave asks.

As the loud music plays, Terezi nods. "Yes, my knight."

And they dance. It's a lot less elegant than it sounds, though both of them try to stay classy about it. He holds her hands and they sway together, faster and faster, jumping up and down in time to the music. Dave is swinging both their arms, yelling something that she can't hear because she's too lost in the moment. They stay together, bouncing and flailing, dancing becoming less cool and more ironic the longer they go on.

Terezi is having the time of her life but eventually, she has to let go of him to show him some of her best moves. When she turns back to grab him by the hands again, he's still there and she grins widely. Most people disappear when she turns away but not Dave. He sticks around.

"What now?" Terezi yells, leaping about enthusiastically.

As it turns out, Terezi isn't the only person that he knows at the mall. As Karkat and Dirk reach the centre, where loud music is playing and people are dancing crazily. Seriously, in comparison, Damara's looks tame. Karkat easily spots Terezi, waving her arms around, jumping around like a kid high on jelly beans. Nearby, Aradia is doing some odd dance that involves a lot of slow movement and gentle swaying that doesn't fit the music at all. Beside her, Feferi is spinning in endless circles and smiling widely. But most surprising of all is the person that Terezi spins to grab onto, both of them laughing.

"Dave." Karkat breathes, staring at him. From this distance, Dave looks just as wonderful as Karkat remembers and he actually looks happy for once. There's no stupid, stoic expression on his face. A smile. Dave is smiling, laughing. Not to mention, he's wearing a fucking shirt and tie. Jesus. Karkat wants to kiss him.

"I'm not sure you should go straight for the kiss, dude." Dirk says.

Shit, Karkat was totally thinking out loud.

"What would you know?" Karkat demands.

"Trust me, don't be overbearing." Dirk advises, "That's where I went wrong. Take things slow with Dave. He's a lot more vulnerable then he lets on." Then, he smacks Karkat on the back and starts winding his way through the crowd.

Karkat, lost and alone, pushes after him but loses him in seconds.

"Dick." He mutters before looking around for Terezi and Dave. He catches a glimpse of bright red and shoves people aside in effort to reach it, knowing that only one of them would wear such a
hideously bright red. Only a blind girl and an idiot would wear that shade of red. He's close enough that he can almost grab Dave, when Roxy pushes in front of him.

"Karkat!" Roxy grins at him and pulls him into a hug. Why do people like hugging him? Can't they see that he hates it?

"Hi, Roxy." Karkat says, desperately craning to try and see past her, "Are you responsible for this mess of idiots crammed together in such a small space to dance?"

He has to yell over the music.

"What?" Roxy clearly doesn't hear him.

"I said- ugh, JUST MOVE." Karkat gestures for her to step aside.

She looks hurt but she moves.

"We'll talk later." He promises, pushing his way towards Dave.
Three notes on this one!

First: I'm on vacation, so there's probably going to be frequent updates.

Second: The words "dumb" and "stupid" are both overused.

Third: Dave broke the story and I take no credit for that. It's all his fault.

"Dave!" Karkat finally catches up to him and that's the only word he can summon up, staring intently at Dave. Now that he's taken a good, hard look at him, he feels as if he's seen Dave somewhere before. Not just in the coffee shop or the art gallery or in that nightclub; he's seen Dave somewhere before that but for the life of him, he can't remember where it was. Maybe he's just confusing him with someone else? Fuck if Karkat knows.

Looking surprised, Dave turns to him. He doesn't say anything.

It's obvious that this wasn't the way the story was supposed to go and Karkat has clearly broken some kind of rules by confronting him upfront like this. His mouth is suddenly very, very dry and he licks his lips. Karkat wants to yell. He wants to shout. He wants to rant about how he's been dragged on this stupid trail and how stupid Dave is for making him do all these pointless tasks just so that he gets to meet him and how stupid it is that Dave is making him feel weak at the knees right now. Okay, so perhaps he shouldn't say the last bit out loud.

He ends up saying none of it out loud. He can't make a sound, can't catch the words on his tongue. It doesn't make any sense, he can normally "word vomit"- dubbed friendlily by Nepeta- for hours on end and now, he can't get a single word past his teeth. He clicks his tongue impatiently. Somehow, Dave Strider has rendered Karkat- the loudmouth, the one that's always yelling, the one that always has something to say, the highly opinionated- completely speechless. He just stands there, staring, like a dumbass.

After a prolonged silence, Terezi yells over the music. "This is awkward."

"No shit, Pyrope." Karkat says.

"No shit, TZ." Dave says, simultaneously.

_That was weird._

They look each other over again. Karkat can feel eyes scraping over his person, taking him in from head to toe, and wishes he could read Dave's facial expression. He looks as if he's flushing but it's very hot in here. Right? It's hot in here. There's lots of people, lots of movement; it's no wonder that Karkat is feeling a little flushed and Dave must be the same.

If he's being honest, Karkat isn't sure how he feels now that he's close to Dave. Listening to the tapes... Wondering about Dave... It was very different to actually in conversation with Dave. Talking to Dave before was different to seeing Dave now and knowing that it's him, but something
in him is in the verge of bubbling over. Making the connection between the voice on the tapes and
the douchebag in real life makes him feel fucked up. His stomach is full of something bigger than
butterflies, something more like bats or small birds. His heart is in his ears and his head, not in his
chest. Air, he remembers, and he exhales steadily. Breathing is a thing he should keep doing.
Breathing is good.

Still, not a single word is rolling off his tongue, though a thousand are racing through his mind.

He's too busy drinking in every single detail of Dave Strider- just in case he never gets to see him
again- to force the words out. And Karkat is still staring at him, taking in everything from his
scruffy red converse to his black shirt to his stupid sunglasses and his bleached hair. Dave has
fixed his gaze on Karkat's cheek- on his stupid band-aid. Now, Dave is definitely frowning.

"So... Are you two going to have a feelings jam or what?" Terezi asks, finally. Karkat nearly craps
himself, having completely forgotten that she was still standing there in between the two of them.
Her hands are on her hips, her head is tilted back, and she looks vaguely amused. Karkat supposes
if his stomach wasn't back-flipping, he'd find this whole situation pretty funny too. If this was a
movie, he'd be screaming at the screen for the couple to kiss.

*I should kiss him.* But the logical part of Karkat's brain crushes that thought.

"Because it's really hard to decide which one of you I'm going to dance with." Terezi continues,
bringing him back to the present; he hadn't even realised that he had completely forgotten where
was until then.

"So, which of you boys is going to take the pretty girl to the prom?" She holds out her hands, one to
each of them, expectantly.

Karkat pushes her hand away. "Dave." He licks his lips again and finally manages to spit some
words out, "I think we need to talk about some shit. Like your cryptic mixtape bullshit and the fact
that you picked a complete fucking stranger to listen to your sob story."

Dave adjusts his shades, consciously. It seems that Karkat has broken the spell of silence that had
settled over them. "You really have no idea why I picked you?"

"No?"

*Am I meant to know? You said we met once... Should I remember that?*

"Fair enough." Dave shrugs and he takes Karkat by the hand, in a "follow me" kind of way. Only
he doesn't move, so it ends up being a "we're holding hands on shit" kind of thing.

Suddenly, Dave seems to realise what he's doing, and stares down at their interlinked hands. Fuck,
Karkat doesn't know what to do. His hand is sweaty and gross from- uh, not from nerves.
Definitely not from nerves. His hand is sweaty and gross and Dave's is so soft, it's not fair at all. He
wants to drop his hand but at the same time, he wants to relish this feeling forever. Torn between
what to do, Karkat decides to just stand there like an idiot, red in the face. Karkat's fingers lock
tightly around Dave's and they aren't going to let go any time soon.

His thought process is now something like this: *DO SOMETHING, FUCKING DO SOMETHING,
WHY THE FUCK ARE YOU STANDING THERE LIKE AN IDIOT? DO SOMETHING, KARKAT.
something, ANYTHING, IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT.*

This is followed quickly by whatever the thinking equivalent of keyboard smashing is.
And then, still gripping Dave's hand with his right, Karkat lifts his left hand and slaps the asshole across the face. He doesn't even register what he's doing until his hand is making contact with Dave's face, smacking him right on the side of his face and moving across. His hand hovers in the air for a moment, trembling from shock, before it drops back to Karkat's side.

_What the fuck?_

"What the fuck?" Terezi is grinning, like she's finding this whole meeting hilarious.

"Dude, what the fuck?" Dave looks puzzled, "We don't strife until the end of the list."

He rubs the side of his face with his spare hand and guess why? Because Karkat is still gripping Dave's hand tightly and probably scaring the shit out of him. Imagine a total stranger holding you tightly with his sweaty, panicked hand. Dave must think he's a complete freak. Maybe he should let go of his hand? His hand doesn't listen to his brain, still holding.

"That wasn't me initiating a strife." Karkat replies, hoping he doesn't seem like he's freaking out, "That was me telling you that you're an idiot and I wish you'd just come up to me at the start, instead of sending a stupid tape." He takes a breath, "Because it's nearly night and I haven't finished the list yet and my dad has no idea where I am and we're having this discussion in the middle of a stupid dance mob. And this whole trail is DUMB as SHIT!"

He's pretty sure that Dave only picks up on half the words.

"What?" Dave blinks.

"HE SAID HE LOVES YOU!" Terezi yells, before dissolving into helpless giggles.

Karkat shakes his head furiously. "I DIDN'T SAY THAT!"

Dave grins like an idiot. "Dude, there's no need to yell."

"FUCK THIS!" Karkat, still holding him by the hand, drags him away. He shoves his way through the crowd, making sure to grip Dave quickly by the hand to make sure he doesn't slip away again, and only breathes once they reach a place where the music is distant. He collapses on the nearest available bench and lets go of Dave's hand. He's conscious of the fact that he's sweaty and gross, wiping his hand on his shirt. Dave does the same.

For the longest time, Karkat breathes and stares at the floor. He can't believe that he just held hands with Dave, for an extended period of time. Nepeta and his mother aside, Karkat has never held anybody's hand before. He's always made a point of pushing people away from him- even Gamzee wasn't allowed to hold his hand in front of other people. Karkat is still hot and flushed from the experience. He wishes he had shades like Dave, so that his obvious embarrassment wasn't so... Well, obvious.

"Hey." Dave says, eventually. It's hard to tell if he's looking at Karkat or not.

"What, Strider?" Karkat groans in annoyance. He wanted to talk first.

"Wow, I've been degraded to Strider." Dave feigns upset, a hand going to his face as if to fend off tears, "A few minutes ago, I held the prestigious title of Dave and you've demoted me to only Strider. Can't we reach a middle-ground and you call me D-Strides or something?"

"I'm not calling you the shitty rap name you probably made up when you were twelve." Karkat rolls his eyes.
"I was nine." Dave corrects and there's a smug expression on his face.

"Ugh, what the fuck did you want?" Karkat scowls at him.

"I wanted to tell you that you got some nice sickles, bro." Dave nods to where Karkat has them strapped to his back, "Those are sick. Did my bro pick those out for you?"

"What? Yeah." Karkat had completely forgotten about those stupid things, "Apparently, I'm not cool enough to have a sword. I have to settle for these shitty things. And your bro is weird."

"Nah, man, he's my role model." Dave says, scooting a little closer to Karkat under the pretence of admiring the sickles, "Shit, I got off-task. I was going to say something... What was it? Damn, I had a whole dramatic and mysterious speech planned but I totally fucking forgot what it was."

Karkat snorts in amusement. Dave's pretty funny- not intentionally, it seems. He's also pretty obvious about the fact that he's trying to move closer to Karkat; if the guy you're trying to get closer to can tell you're trying to get closer, you're probably not being subtle enough. It makes Karkat's heart leap in his chest. They're no longer on opposite ends of the bench. They're closer than that. Jesus. Is it normal to panic about this? Karkat tugs nervously at the collar of his shirt, missing his sweater for the millionth time.

"Wait, I remember!" Dave says, suddenly, making him jump, "It was about the tapes. I made you a tape, Kitkat."

"You made a few, yes." Karkat says, "Did you just remember that?"

"I made a tape." Dave continues, holding a finger up to silence him, "That Dirk was meant to give to you. And on that tape, is the explanation of why I choose you. He did give you the tape, right?"

Karkat removes the tape from his pocket. "This has the reason you picked me on it?"

Suddenly, he's seeing this tape in a whole new light. Why didn't Dirk mention that it had the reason for Karkat being chosen on it? Most likely because he didn't know. If Karkat had known, he would have listened to the tape by now. Shit, Terezi has the Walkman. And God only knows where she is in that thick crowd.

Dave takes the tape from him. "Yes."

And he stands up, stretches his arm back, and pushes his sunglasses back so he can see better. And he narrows his eyes at the harsh new light, his eyes adjusting, steadying his arm. Karkat realises what he's going to do seconds before he does it and lurches to his feet to stop him. But he's too late. Dave throws the tape and it's hurled across the mall, (he's either got a great throw or he just got lucky), landing in the midst of the dance mob. It's probably seconds before it's crushed under somebody's feet and Karkat can't help but yell, racing after it. Dave catches him by the arm, coolly, and pulls him back.

_Dave's hand on my arm._

And he stares at Karkat, shades still pushed back so that he can see the red irises pulsing around the pupils. "Karkles."

Dave's eyes... They're really beautiful. Really, really pretty. For some freaky, shitty anime eye colour, at least.

"How can you say my name like that with a straight face?" Karkat hates everybody.
"Because I think it's adorable." Dave says, with no emotion, so there's no way of telling whether he's serious or not, "But that's beside the point." He lets go of Karkat's arm, "You said that you didn't like the tapes- even though Jade said you'd find them romantic. So, I won't make you listen to it. I'll tell you exactly why I choose you right here and right now."

"Doesn't that kind of break the fucking narrative?" Karkat says, "Do you have no idea how to direct a decent Rom-Com, Dave? You're breaking the story if you do this. Breaking. The. Story. Only the shittiest screenwriters go completely off-task and change the story halfway through."

"Jeez, you really do have a movie obsession." Dave lowers his shades back into place, hiding his pretty red eyes, "But if you're quiet and don't interrupt, I'll tell you the story. Sit back down, kid, it's story time with your cool Uncle Dave."

Dave sits on the bench and pats the spot beside him- the spot right beside. Reluctantly, Karkat sits, leaving some space between them, and refuses to look at him. He still can't believe that Dave is willing to fuck up the tapes like this- aren't the tapes some kind of tradition? Isn't he breaking tradition? Won't he get in trouble for that? What if his family finds out that Dave broke tradition? Karkat doesn't say any of this out loud, deciding that he'll listen.

Dave's voice is smoother in real life, less crackly.

"Okay, so it's dumb." Dave says, "And sounds like complete bullshit. But I really do think that it's fate that we ended up living in the same city after all this time. I mean, when we met the first time, we were little kids. Both of us on vacation, with our respective families. I was pissed at my foster family because... Well, I don't remember. But I'm sure my actions were justified."

He pauses and Karkat gestures for him to continue.

"I was looking for somewhere to hide and for reasons that seem ironic now, I picked a closet. And I-"

"I was in there." Karkat realises, suddenly, "Wasn't I? God, I remember. I was hiding from Mom and Dad because they wanted me to go to the beach and I didn't want to."

"You were scared of crabs." Dave says, almost fondly, "Again, pretty ironic when you think about your name."

"I'm still scared of crabs, they're scary fuckers." Karkat grumbles, "With their ugly faces and their stupid pincers." He mimics a pincer with his left hand, clicking his tongue, "What the fuck is that about?"

"That's so adorable." Dave says, actually sounding serious this time, before he quickly continues with the story. "We talked and you said that we were friends. I'd never... Had a friend before. You were my first real one. And I never forgot about you. And then, one day, Jade mentioned you on Pesterchum."

"She-" Jade talks about him? Karkat can't believe it.

"Let me finish: I needed to send the tapes to somebody, so I choose you. Because you were my first friend, the first person I really... Y'know, connected with and shit. I just think it's such a coincidence that we ended up living so close to each other. Feels like fate to me." Dave finishes, looking away, "How dumb is that?"

"How dumb is that? On a scale of inventing glow-in-dark rubber ducks to sticking your dick in a toaster, I'd say it's about as dumb as the girl from Twilight calling her daughter fucking Renesmee."
Karkat says, "So, pretty dumb. But it could be dumber."

"'Girl from Twilight'." Dave snorts, "Please, it's blatantly obvious you've seen the movie. Karkat Vantas, we have all sat through those movies to see Robert Pattison and Taylor Lautner shirtless- for ironic reasons obviously- and lied about it afterwards and you are no exception."

Karkat rolls his eyes, quick to get back on the topic. "Couldn't you have just messaged me on Pesterchum? Jade could have easily given my chumhandle to you. Wouldn't that have been easier that setting up this elaborate trail?"

"What would I have said?" Dave says, "Hi, it's your closeted friend?"

Karkat can't stop a laugh escaping.

Dave peers at him. "You do have emotions under the angry front, don't you?"

"And you do have emotions under the poker-faced douchebag thing," Karkat says, mocking the curious expression on his face automatically, "Oh, shit, wait, no you don't. My mistake. You're still a stoic prick."

*What am I doing?* Karkat thinks.

Dave actually smiles and it's the best thing in the entire world; the corners of his mouth turn up easily, like he smiles all the time, and there's a goddamn dimple just above the left corner of his mouth. *A dimple.* Who knew that fucking dimples were attractive? Karkat certainly didn't, up until now. He's been looking at people all wrong.

"Emotions are dumb." He says.

Karkat is aware of the fact that he's slowly edging closer to him again. Where there was once a foot of space between them, there's now only an inch and his knee is almost brushing against Dave's. And Karkat is looking into his stupid shades, searching for... *it.* You know, searching for the look. The one that everybody gives in movies right before the kiss. He doesn't want to rush into a kiss- maybe Dave isn't even going to kiss him- he wants it to be perfect. If he doesn't see the look, he's not going to go for it.

If Terezi and Nepeta can get their stupidly romantic kiss in the rain perfectly cliché, he deserves his perfect kiss with Dave here in the middle of Skaia Mall. He just needs one look and he'll be gone.

"You're dumb." Karkat points out, fairly aware of his conversational skills draining away.

"This is dumb." Dave's leg is pressing against his now, only two layers of fabric separating their skin. His stupid skinny jeans are rubbing against Karkat's pant leg. And Karkat can feel his breath tickling his face, hot and smelling like Doritos. That should kill the moment but it just makes Karkat roll his eyes. Of course Dave smells like fucking Doritos. Jesus.

"Be dumb with me." Karkat's lips are almost pressed against Dave's by this point. He can taste his breath now, feel the sharp curve of Dave's nose pressing against his own, and he can't remember how to breathe. They're so close, they're practically kissing, only they aren't. Their faces are touching. Still, there's no look. He needs a look but all he can see is his own face in the stupid sunglasses.

Dave, look at me. *Take off the shades and look me in the eye.*
"You haven't finished the list." Dave points out, sounding breathless. His mouth is almost pressing against Karkat's by this point, his lips brushing against his skin. It sets Karkat's skin on fire, making him tingle all over.

"Fucking list." Karkat isn't sure whether they're going to kiss or not. He really, really, really wants to kiss Dave right now and he hates himself for that. Because he wasn't meant to fall in love with this douchebag, especially not in such a short space of time. How dumb is it that he fell in love with a guy before he even met him? How dumb is it that two days feels like about two years? God. Everything about this is moronic.

"You can't have fallen in love with me already." Dave says, quieter than ever, "Jeez, Kitkat, you know that you aren't meant to realise you're in love with me until you've completed everything on the list and realised that there's a person underneath all the stupidity."

Karkat leans the other way, their mouths so close but not touching. "Dave."

He can't find any other words. Except for maybe a frustrated "Jesus" but he knows that: a. Using the saviour's name in vain when you're about to kiss a guy is probably against the rules and b. If he lets that slip out of his mouth right now, Dave will never let him forget.

"Karkat, you don't even know me yet." Dave points out.

And he's right, of course he's right. Trust Dave to be right. Kissing right now would be spontaneous and romantic but it wouldn't be anywhere near true. Everybody knows that the best love stories are the ones where the people know each other inside out: two best friends falling in love is always more emotional than two strangers falling in love. If he kisses Dave now... It won't mean as much as if he gets to know him first. Once he really knows Dave, once he really feels a connection with him, that's when he should kiss him.

Karkat should wait. No- he will wait.

Taking a deep breath, Karkat moves back. He can't believe how close he got to kissing Dave and he's pulling away at the last minute. Future Karkat will probably thank him for this but both Past Karkat and Present Karkat are internally screaming.

"Give me a chance to get to know you then." He says, once he remembers how to breathe. Jesus, he thinks he might need his inhaler or something. He can't believe how close he came to kissing Dave.

"If you're suggesting I join you on the scavenger hunt, that's stupid." Dave dismisses, immediately, "I wrote the damn list, I'm not allowed to complete it with you. That's not how this was meant to work out."

"Terezi helped write the list and she's coming." Karkat rebuttals, "Besides, Eridan left and now our group is kind of girl-heavy. I need you to come so that I don't end up being trapped in another game of Would you rather? with Terezi and Feferi." He pauses, looking away, "And I really would like to get to know you."

His voice comes out quiet and cracked. He winces.

"But the tapes... I made this whole trail for you... I planned this." Dave sounds confused, "Jade said that you'd like the tapes."

"Fuck the tapes, we don't need them." Karkat says, firmly, "I'd rather talk to you in person than listen to the pretentious recordings you made in your apartment one lonely night. I want to talk to
you. I want to find out about you, not hear it on some stupid tape." He nudges Dave's hand with his, "I'm asking you to join us."

There's a pause.

Dave nudges his hand back. "... Alright. And once we complete the list, regardless of whether we still like each other or not, we'll kiss. Agreed?" He holds out a hand and they shake.

"You're completely assuming I like you, you self-obsessed asshole." Karkat says, as he drops Dave's hand, "Who ever said that I liked you?"

Dave snorts with laughter. "Yeah. Who ever said that? What was I thinking?" He gets to his feet, looking back in the direction of the dance mob, "If you're here, that means you can only be at number four on the list. We've got to move faster if we want to complete it by tonight. Rose will be pissed if we miss her dinner."

"Rose is arranging a dinner?" Karkat raises an eyebrow, "Dave, you're exceptionally shitty at keeping up the whole "mystery" aspect of this, aren't you?"

"I thought we were laying all cards on the table." Dave says, "But shit, yeah, I probably shouldn't have mentioned the dinner. Just forget that I ever said that. What dinner? Who said anything about a dinner? I didn't say anything about a dinner. Stop talking about it already."

"You're a fucking dork." Karkat sighs, as if it's exasperating and not the cutest thing he's ever seen, "Should we grab the others and get our asses on the road? We have sixteen more tasks to complete and we don't exactly have time to kill."

"Right. We should get moving." Dave agrees, "Or we could just hang out here for a little while and hold hands or some shit-" Karkat gives him a look, "Or we could finish the list. Who's got the list anyway?"

"I think Eridan gave it to Feferi." Karkat says, "She had it last, at least. Let's go drag her away from Aradia over there-" He gestures to where he can see Aradia and Feferi spinning together now, "- and get started on number five."

And he begins to push his way through the crowd with a new determination because he knows, at the end of all this, there's a kiss from Dave with his name on it.

Dave is close behind him.
Cassette Ten: Side A

Chapter Summary

Everybody is gay??? Whoops.

(I'm not sorry. Not even a little)

Terezi is the first to get off the bus, stopping at Dave and Rose's apartment to check up on her girlfriend, who is apparently there now. Karkat has no idea what he missed but time seems to have passed quicker than usual in the time that he spent with Dirk. Because nothing is the way he remembers it before he went in there. Now, he's sat on a bus with Aradia and Feferi behind him, Dave to his left, and a pair of sickles stashed in Terezi's backpack on his lap.

Promising that she'll meet them in time for task six, Terezi grins at them all and steps off the bus. Karkat watches out of the window as she heads up the street, tapping her cane to find her way. He hopes that she comes back soon because she was making the majority of the conversation and without Terezi, nobody has anything to say. At least, Karkat has nothing to say. He's been trying to think of something he could ask Dave but everything sounds too stupid or too personal and he wants to ask the perfect question.

"So..." Dave says, eventually, after the long silence that follows Terezi leaving, "What's your favourite colour?"

"Seriously, that's what you're going with?" Karkat doesn't know whether to laugh or not, "That's the most cliché thing that you could have asked me. I expected fucking better from you, Dave Strider, after all this mystery you've built up around yourself. Put some imagination into your questions."

Dave thinks, falling silent as he stares at the empty seat in front of them.

He's so beautiful. Karkat thinks.

He tells himself firmly to shut up. Just because the way that Dave's teeth dig into his bottom lip is adorable; just because the way that Dave's fingers drum against his knees is impossible to stop watching; just because the way that Dave tries so desperately to keep cool but doesn't realise how much his body language is giving away is sweet; none of it means that he should be thinking about Dave like this. He should... Karkat should think about something else. He scratches the back of his neck, hating how strange Dave makes him feel.

"If you were going to master an element, which one would you master?" Dave says, finally.

"That's such a stupid question. What does that even mean?" Karkat huffs, his gaze still fixed straight ahead, "But if that's really what you want to know, I think..." He considers for a long moment, "Blood. Because blood is family and friends and protecting them. I'd really like to be able to protect everybody."

He can't believe he's saying this out loud and to a Dave Strider, nonetheless.

"I said, element." Dave says, "First of all, how is blood an element? The elements are air, fire, water, and earth, Karkles. Everybody knows that. Second of all, there was really no need to put so
much thought into it. This isn't an English paper, I don't need a reason."

"What would you choose?" Karkat glances sideways at him, annoyed that his answer apparently wasn't satisfactory enough. He'd thought it good.

"Time." Dave says, and doesn't explain further.

"Why?" Karkat asks, when he doesn't continue.

"Time be bitchin'." Dave is an idiot.

"I thought you said that we had to choose an element." Karkat says, pointedly. If he's not allowed to count blood as an element, then Dave certainly isn't allowed to count time. Time definitely isn't a substance that makes up the world like the usual elements. And it definitely isn't one of the four elements that Dave listed.

"I changed my mind about what counts as an element because I want to be able to control time." Dave says, "Seriously, man, imagine controlling time. I could go back in time and kick Hitler's ass. How sick would that be? I could go get a pet dinosaur to ride around on. I would roll into every room on a dinosaur's back, looking hot as shit, and get all the bitches. I could go into the future, steal their advanced sex robots, come back in time, and sell them here."

Karkat doesn't even know how he's supposed to respond to that. He clears his throat.

"Well, I want blood." He reiterates, for lack of something better to say, "If you can have time as your element, can I have blood as mine? Time is even further from being an element, anyway; at least blood is a substance like the other elements. My reason was better than yours too. So, can I have blood?"

"Yes." Dave pauses, before he (Dave Strider, the usually emotionless bastard) actually grins at him, "Even though blood isn't an element."

"You're frustrating." Karkat wants to yell at him but instead, he just looks away so that Dave doesn't see him grinning. Oh, shit, his crush must be worse than he thought. It must be reaching critical levels, if he's finding crap like that actually funny.

"It's your turn to ask him a question." Dave says, "We've got time before our stop."

Karkat thinks, trying to come up with something good.

"If I'm remembering correctly, the Serket bitch told me that the tradition of the tapes was started by your older brother. Dirk. Apparently, you're meant to send them to strangers." Karkat recounts, looking to Dave to see if that's right.

Dave nods. "Yeah, man. So, what is your favourite colour?"

"No, I'm not letting you change the fucking subject." Karkat says, "I-"

"Please?"

"Grey. Can we get back to my question already?"

"Your favourite colour is grey? Dude, that's literally the worst colour."

"Says the guy that favours the same colour as the blind girl. There's a reason that only you and a girl that can't see like that hideous shade of red and the answer is: red fucking sucks." Karkat says,
"Anyway, my question is: why, Dave Strider, do you insist on breaking every single rule that has been laid out for you?"

Dave looks like he's thinking. Whether he's actually thinking, it's hard to know.

"That is a great question, Karkles." Dave says, "Do you want the honest answer or the pretty one?"

"Honest." Karkat says, obviously.

"The honest answer is..." Dave pauses, dramatically, "I just don't give a shit."

There's that conflicting feeling building in Karkat's chest again, something that could be a "word vomit" waiting to happen or a fit of laughter. He breathes in, unsure of which is going to happen. Then, he looks at the way Dave's lip is curling and he starts laughing. It's hard to stop once he starts and Karkat forgets how to breathe. He doesn't even realise that he's leaning towards Dave until his head is resting on his shoulder. Fuck. Shit. He stops laughing and sits up abruptly, hating himself. That wasn't even that funny and now he looks like a dumbass.

"A dumbass that's hopelessly in love." Aradia pipes up from behind him, (is she fucking psychic or something?), "You don't have to be psychic to tell that you're stupidly in love, Karkat. Even Feferi took a bet that you and Dave would kiss by the end of the day. How's that going by the way? I'm trying to win ten bucks here."

"Oh my god." Karkat facepalms. He facepalms hard. "We aren't going to kiss."

"We are totally going to kiss, we already shook on it." Dave puts in, helpfully, kneeling up in his seat and turning around to face the girls, "But... I don't think we've met, Feferi. I'm Dave, Dave Strider. Before you drop your panties for me, I'm otherwise engaged and can't hook up with you today."

Feferi giggles. "Don't worry, Dave, I'm otherwise inclined."

"Ohh..." Dave's eyes flick between Aradia and Feferi, "Can I watch?"

Aradia hits him over the head with her messenger bag for the next ten minutes until they reach their stop, much to Karkat's amusement, and doesn't say a word about why. She doesn't need to. By the time the bus pulls to a stop, Dave is practically grovelling. Karkat can't stop grinning.

"That's what you get for being an asshole, you know." Karkat says, as he gets to his feet and clammers off the bus, thanking the driver.

"I was kidding."

"Do you want to go another round with my bag?" Aradia asks, as she shoulders it.

"No, ma'am." Dave says.

Karkat doesn't know the city too well but as he looks around, he's fairly sure that he's hasn't been here before. He's confused, since he thought that they were heading back to wherever Feferi had left her car, but apparently not. Dave and Aradia, who are chatting easily about Doctor Who and time travel up ahead, lead the way into a shitty arcade. Seriously shitty- one of the windows has been knocked clean out of the frame and glass is still laying around. Karkat steps carefully around it. As they head into the arcade, it becomes evident that Dave knows where he's going.

Karkat asks Feferi for the list and runs his finger down it, until he finds number five. It simply says
three letters: DDR. That sounds familiar? But Karkat can't place where he's seen that abbreviation before. He asks Feferi what it stands for and her mouth drops open. She shakes her head, shocked, and gestures to where Dave has come to a stop. Oh, shit, DDR. He does know DDR but he didn't know these dance-machine-things actually existed.

"These things actually exist outside of movies?" Karkat blinks, in confusion, "Are you serious?"

"I'm serious as Kanye West's love for himself." Dave looks surprised, "You've never played Dance Dance Revolution? I knew you came from out of town but I wasn't aware that you'd crawled out from under a rock. What's it like living under there? Doesn't your back start hurting after ten years underneath a rock?"

"You don't have one of these where you're from?" Aradia asks, "Do you know how they work?"

"I'm not stupid, I've seen movies." Karkat steps up onto the... Dance-machine-thing-platform-bit. Fuck him if he knows the technical term for these things.

"Anybody got change?" Dave asks, looking pointedly at Feferi.

As the resident- and only- rich person of the group, she's quick to rummage in her pockets. Karkat sees her pull out twenty dollars, five hair grips, eight pieces of bubblegum, and a lipstick before she finds the coins lurking in the bottom of her pocket. Feferi quickly counts out the coins and hands them to Dave.

"Thanks, Princess Feferi." Dave tells her, "Your sacrifice won't be forgotten."

Feferi rolls her eyes. "Don't be silly, it's no bother! And I'm not a princess, Dave, I'm just like you guys."

Nobody has the heart to inform her that it was sarcasm. Feferi is too naïve for her own good.

"Ready to get your ass kicked, Vantas?" Dave asks, as he pushes the coins in and begins to flick through the list of songs. Most of them are pretty terrible, in all honesty, and Karkat is starting to think this is a bad idea. "Not to intimidate you but I did place second in the Strider tournament of '15."

"How many people participated in that?" Aradia asks, curiously, "Wait, let me guess. Four?"

"Five, we managed to convince Kanaya." Dave says, "And I wish we hadn't because she's the reason that I only came second. Who knew that Kanaya could break it down on the dance floor?" He looks down at the platform, "Or the dance platform. Whatever. She is really good at tapping arrows with her feet in time to music. Anyways-" He looks at Karkat, "Ready to cross off number five?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." Karkat confidently stares down the machine. He is sure that he can do this. He is coordinated, he is confident, he is ready.

Thirty seconds pass and he's already dying, both his legs hurting and his lungs are squeezing tightly. Yet, Dave hasn't even broken a sweat and he's winning. How is he doing that? Karkat glares at the screen that he had been staring down a few seconds ago. Why does this game hate him? Actually, fuck that, why do all games hate him? Why do video games like making him rage before eventually giving up and letting someone else play for him? Seriously, Kankri is better than him at video games, and Kankri hates video games. Karkat's getting distracted. No wonder he's losing.

"Dude." Dave says, "Dude, dude, dude, dude!"
"Kind of busy here!" Karkat wheezes, "The fuck do you want?"

"Dude!" Dave looks at him, "I love you, man, but you suck at this. Love in a platonic sense, obviously, not that I don't love you but I don't love you, you know? Let me rephrase. While I do admit to having a strong platonic relationship with you, you suck at DDR."

"Fuck you, douchebag!" Even Karkat knows he sucks at this but he's not ready to admit that to Dave yet, "What was your point?"

"My point was let's team up." Dave stops, staring at him, "Come over here, you can take the forwards arrow and the left arrow. I'll take back and right. C'mon, we'll beat the crap out of the girls. Get your ass over here, quick."

Karkat steps to the other side of the platform, awkwardly smushed up against Dave, catching him by the arm when he nearly loses his balance. Dave mutters something about "movie and a dinner first", before shuffling around so that they can both see the screen.

"Like shell you will." Feferi leaps onto the other side of the platform, Aradia following quickly.

Karkat starts furiously yelling. "LEFT, RIGHT, BACK, BACK AGAIN, LEFT, BACK, BACK-" Dave laughs.

When Terezi kicks the door in, meaning the door was either unlocked or she just broke the lock, she strides in too eagerly- yelling "WHERE IS MY GIRLFRIEND, LALONDE?- and promptly falls over the doormat. She couldn't have made a worse entrance if she was drunk off her butt. Quickly, she scrambles to her feet and fumbles for her cane. Instead, she bumps her hand against the fuzzy glove covering Nepeta's. She must be pretty determined with her roleplay to keep those things on during summer. Then again, Terezi normally wears a dragon cape in place of her jacket.

Regardless, it's not difficult to recognise Nepeta's hand. "Nepeta?"

"Purrezi." She can feel the warmth of her girlfriend's voice, "Here, your cane got away from you. Let me get that for you."

Her cane is pushed into her hand and she curls her fingers around it.

"Thanks." Terezi says, straightening up and facing in Nepeta's direction, "Hey, I'm sorry I should have been here sooner. It was really crappy of me to ditch you like that but the others wouldn't have known where to go without me."

"It's okay." Nepeta says, but then she suddenly changes her tone, "Well, um, actually, it's not. I'm pissed? Yeah, I'm pissed that you didn't come get me first. No? Hold on, Rose, I can't lipread that well." She pauses, "Rose thinks you should have come to me first."

"I was merely suggesting that you should prioritise." Rose says, from behind, "I apologise if that wasn't my place to say so." She closes the door, rattling the door handle to make sure that it stays shut, "Unfortunately, I think we're going to have to have Dirk fix that lock again."

"I'm really sorry." Terezi repeats, reaching for Nepeta's hand and squeezing it tightly.

"It's okay, I'm not mad." Nepeta shrugs, "Well, I'm not mad at you. I'm purrettty mad at Ampurra." She sighs, "He purrebably told you some diffurent reason fur me getting upset. But here's the thing: he-"
“Eridan was trying to drive the two of you apart.” Rose puts in, eagerly, "He suggested that you "didn't take anythin' seriously" and that Nepeta "falls in lovvve wwith anyone that looks her wway". She impersonates his voice flawlessly, maybe emphasising the funny wobble slightly, "Nepeta got upset and ran away. We picked her up and brought her home. Do sit down, Terezi."

Nepeta leads Terezi to the couch and she sits there, Nepeta pressed up against her side. She's warm and her curls tickle Terezi's neck. The cat girl's stays firmly wrapped around her shoulders and Terezi can't help smiling at that. But then, she fully registers what Rose said.

"Wait, so Eridouche called Nepeta stupid? And he called me a whore? Well, in the abridged version at least." She frowns, "Why the hell would he do that?"

Kanaya crosses the room, holding a teapot of swishing liquid. "We believe he was concerned that Nepeta would intrude on your friendship with him. Would you care for some tea, Terezi? Nepeta?"

"Yeah, okay, hit me." Terezi says, "But he really said those things to you?"

She directs her question at Nepeta but Rose answers. "You know how Eridan is."

Yeah, Eridan is kind of a dick. But Terezi thought they had a mutual friendship. They weren't great friends but they were on a neutral level with each other.

Carefully, Kanaya pours the tea into four different teacups and places the teapot on the coffee table. Then, she hovers by the side of the couch, as if she's unsure of where she's supposed to sit. Rose plops herself down on the floor and pats her lap, which is where Kanaya decides to sit. Terezi has to bite her lip to stop herself remarking. Those two are too cute.

"I should have let those jerks drown his stupid head in the toilet." Terezi picks up her tea and knocks it back in on. If the panicked noises that Rose and Kanaya make are anything to go by, that isn't how you're meant to drink tea. No wonder it burnt her mouth. Terezi puts the teacup back down, wincing. "Seriously, fuck Eridan."

"I considered going afurter him and kicking his ass. But then, I reconsidered and decided that would me immature of me.” Nepeta sips her tea and adds smugly, "So, I decided that we should TP his house instead."

"I'd suggest that you just talk to him about what he said... But it's Ampora." Rose obviously pulls an exasperated face because everybody else muffles their laughs, "He has tried to flirt with me in the past, despite my refusals. So... I'm not saying that I approve of Nepeta's plan but I won't try and stop you."

"I'll show him that nobody messes with Nepeta Leijon." The cat girl says, firmly, "Plus, you probably don't remember, but TP'ing a house is number six on the list."

"Hey, Karkat and Dave are completing number five right now." Terezi realises, "We could get started on number six for them and they could meet us when they're done. I'll message Dave." She pulls her phone out of her pocket and taps out a quick message.

Nepeta takes a long sip of her tea so that she can spit it out. "Karkat and Dave?"

"I completely forgot you missed that. Yeah, they made out a little after the dance mob, I think." Terezi says, as if it's nothing.

Her girlfriend squeaks, banging her hands against her knees in excitement, bouncing up and down. "Holy crap, I missed all the best bits! A dance mob and Davekat kisses?"
"I told you Davekat would stick. Kardave was never going to work." Rose mutters to Kanaya.

"I'm not sure whether or not they kissed." Terezi admits, "But they definitely snuck off somewhere and came back all flushed and embarrassed."

Nepeta is much too excited by this news, yelling "I KNEW IT, I KNEW IT" for a good minute or so, before pulling eagerly on Terezi's arm. Jeez, what a fangirl. Still, Terezi can't help grinning widely at how excited Nepeta is about the entire thing. It's completely adorable. Not to mention, Nepeta seems to forget in her excitement that they're in front of Rose and Kanaya, because she climbs onto Terezi's lap to kiss her eagerly. Terezi is surprised but pleased, laughing. Rose mutters something to Kanaya that Terezi can't quite hear but it makes Kanaya laugh softly. Then, Nepeta sits back.

"Rose, Kanaya, thank you very much for your company." Nepeta says, "But we're going to go and redecorate Eridan's house so that it's more fitting of his purrsonality. Before we leave, though, I don't suppose you have any toilet paper that we can borrow?"

It's only when they're outside, clutching several rolls of toilet paper, that Nepeta turns to Terezi. And she tells her, quietly, that she's really glad to see her again because Rose and Kanaya are nice, really nice, but they're nowhere near as cool as Terezi. That makes Terezi grin widely and (remembering what Nepeta said on the phone) tell her that her new earrings probably look really pretty.

Nepeta kisses her again, nearly tackling her to the ground. She tastes like peppermint tea.

"-RIGHT, BACK, BACK, LEFT, LEFT, LEFT, FUCKING LEFT; FUCKING FINALLY, WE ARE DONE WITH THIS SHIT." When the song comes to an end, Karkat is still tightly clutching Dave around the neck. At first, he had grabbed tightly hold of him just to keep himself up right and steady, crushed on one side of the platform. Now, he's just holding onto Dave for as long as he can get away with. Feferi keeps giggling at them but Karkat could not give a shit.

Because he's busy being fucking attached to Dave like a parasite.

Dave doesn't seem to mind. When they win the third round- so, maybe they didn't win the first or second round, so they've still lost to the girls overall. But it's still a victory- Dave picks Karkat up and spins him around. He's stronger than he looks.

"Dude, yes!" Dave holds out his hand for a high five.

Karkat obliges, finally letting go of him and taking a step back, because they're just... Friends. Bros, Dave would say. For now. Until Karkat has completed the list and they get to know each other better, they can't kiss or anything. Though, during that agreement, they said nothing about hugging. Or hand-holding. God, Karkat can't remember the last time he wanted to hug someone other than Kanaya.

"What was number five again? 'Get totally thrashed at DDR'?' Feferi pulls the list out of her pocket, "Check! You did that one!"

"Oh, look, number six is "be unnecessarily intimate with the person you like"." Aradia pretends to peer at the list, "I guess we got that one too!"

They exchange smiles.

"We did or you did?" Dave lowers his shades to wink at her, "Nice going, Megido."
For the first time, Aradia's cheeks flush a little pink. Finally, proof that she's as mortal as the rest of them. Oh, thank fuck, she's not a ghost or a robot or whatever! Because Karkat was seriously beginning to worry that she wasn't human. He still has her suspicions, when he notes that she's the only person that isn't breathless and sweaty. Fitness... Or witchcraft? Karkat guesses they will never know the answer.

"It's not witchcraft." Aradia says, quickly.

"What is wrong with you people?" Karkat groans, "This isn't a shitty ass TV show where I discover that I'm surrounded by lesbian mind-reading witches, is it? I'm not sure how well I'd be able to handle that."

"Sounds like something that CW network would be interested in." Dave says, "And me. Man, imagine me swimming through a bunch of lesbian witches."

Aradia raises her messenger bag as a threat.

"Or don't imagine that. That would be stupid. Imagine me swimming naked in chocolate or something instead."

NO. Karkat certainly does not imagine that.

"How do you swim through witches? Why are you naked in the chocolate?" Feferi has a lot of questions, "Why do you want me to picture you naked?"

Dave's phone pings in his pocket and he withdraws it, unlocking it and scrolling through his messages. "Oh, hey, I just got a message from TZ. A few messages actually. Anyway, she's got Nepeta and cat girl is okay now. Great news. Also, they're working on number six on the list and we should meet them at... Ampora's?"

"Didn't Ampora go home?" Karkat raises an eyebrow, "What's number six on the list? Is it something we'd need Eridouche for?"

"Don't call him that." Feferi looks hurt. Karkat forgot that she actually liked that hipster douchebag. "He's not as bad as you guys think, really. He's just a little... Insecure in himself. And he likes attention. That's all. He's a sweetie underneath."

"Apparently, he tried to break TZ and Nepeta up." Dave says, "Little fucker."

"Basshole!" Feferi proclaims, changing her tone abruptly, "He swore he'd stop trying to break people up. He promised me! He must have said something to Nepeta while they were alone; I knew we shouldn't have let them go alone! Ugh!" She looks frustrated, as if this is something she's seen a million times before, "I'll talk to him later!"

"Task six involves toilet-papering somebody's house." Aradia has snatched the list without any of them noticing, "If Terezi and Nepeta are at Eridan's house..." Slowly, her face breaks into a grin, "Are you guys thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I'm thinking that Mr Ampora will kill them if he catches them." Karkat says, thinking of the large, terrifying man that he's only ever seen from a distance. Kankri isn't allowed to visit Cronus if his father is home.

"I was thinking it sounds fun." Aradia's grin stays in place, making her look like the Cheshire cat, "We should go meet them."
"We should pick up my car first so that we have a getaway vehicle." Feferi says.

So, one short bus ride and one car drive later, they join Terezi and Nepeta outside the Ampora mansion. They've been stopped by the gate, though it looks like Nepeta is trying her best to tackle it with her bare hands, attempting to scramble up it. Terezi is standing underneath, cheering her on. For a moment, the others hang back and watch them in amusement.

Dave cups his hands around his mouth. "Do it for her!"

Feferi rolls her eyes and taps the intercom, clearing her throat. "Eri, it's me. Fef. I thought maybe we could hang out this afternoon."

The gates swing open, (accompanied by a grumpy huff from Eridan over the intercom), and lucky for Nepeta, cats always land on their feet.

"I'll distract Erifin." Feferi smiles, "Aradia? Do you want to come with me?"

"Of course." Aradia takes her by the hand.
Everything goes smoothly at the Ampora house, (when Cronus spots them out of the window, he just comes outside to help them, muttering something about his father under his breath), until Eridan chases them off his lawn. Karkat was willing to continue but Eridan yells something about guns. Karkat and Dave laugh.

"Guys, he's not kidding." Terezi says, "His father owns a lot of guns."

They scarper. Eridan chases after them, still yelling furiously.

Karkat's expecting to just be chased out of the gate but Eridan is quick on their heels, hipster scarf flying behind him as he runs. So, Karkat being pulled along by Terezi, who's being pulled along by Dave, who's being pulled along by Nepeta, they race down the road until they finally collapse in Terezi's front yard.

"Private property!" The blind girl yells, waving her cane and narrowly avoiding hitting Karkat in the face, "You take another step onto my land and I'll sue your ass back to the hell you crawled out of, Asspora!"

Eridan steps forward.

Yelling something that sounds vaguely like a battle cry, Terezi leaps on him. She tackles him to the ground, wrestling him until she's got him pinned in her Mom's dying flowerbed. She's got him trapped there. Eridan squirms underneath her, whimpering.

"Get outta here." Terezi slides off him, cane at the ready in case he doesn't scram.

To his credit, Eridan scrambles to his feet and runs back down the street to his house. Wow, it looks like he really is scared of Terezi after all. But who can blame him? She just proved that she's more than capable of pinning him down. Speaking of which, she just rolls over and lies in the grass beside them. The ground is damp and muddy but Karkat doesn't make any attempt to get up, stretching his arms out and trying to ignore the remnants of rain trickling down. When he does attempt to get back to his feet, he just falls back down. Terezi laughs.

"That's the universe telling you that you must stay." Dave informs him.

"That's the universe telling me that it rained shitstorms earlier today." Karkat corrects, "And that, thanks to my own stupidity of following a blind girl, I'm going to have to crawl through the mud to reach the safety of Terezi's driveway like I'm at some fucking army training camp."

"What a horrible mishmash of half-assed metaphors." Terezi laughs.

"Yo, TZ." Dave sits up, adjusting his stupid shades, "Doesn't it bother you when people refer to you as blind girl? Like it's your defining characteristic or some shit. I mean, we don't call Karkat "asthmatic boy" or Nepeta "Tourette's girl". It's the same thing, right?"

"We don't call you "insufferable douchebag boy"." Karkat points out.

Dave laughs. "For reals though, don't you mind, Rezi?"
Terezi sits up too, looking as if she's considering it. "Well... I never really thought 'bout it like that. I am blind, I am a girl, so I am blind girl. Blind Girl: the newest superhero movie! Coming this summer to cinemas near you!"

"Speaking of which." Nepeta pulls the list out of her pocket with a flourish, "Number seven involves going to see Batman vs. Superman. Number eight involves laser tag. I suggest that we split up." She glances around, as if she hasn't already decided the groups, "How about I take Terezi to the movies and you guys go play laser tag?"

"I wanted to play laser-" Nepeta grabs Terezi's hand and she grins, changing her mind abruptly, "Movies with my girlfriend sound great! We can sit in the back and throw popcorn at people. Or not because that would be stupid and immature. We can sit in the back though, right? That's where the coolkids sit. Right, Dave?"

"I'm a coolkid and I approve this message." Dave gives them a thumbs up.

Nepeta wipes the mud off her face and gets to her feet. "Let's go!"

They split into two different groups- Karkat wants to use the word "couples" but he thinks that might be pushing it- and head in two different directions. The boys walk. The girls talk Latula, who they find lying on the couch, to give them a ride. When they drive past, Terezi and Nepeta wave enthusiastically out of the window. Karkat gripes about the fact that they weren't offered a ride for at least ten minutes before he runs out of steam. Then, it falls quiet and if he's learnt anything over the past few days, it's that neither him or Dave can handle quiet for very long.

He searches for something to say. "Do you play laser tag a lot?"

What kind of conversation opening is that?

Dave looks at him like he's stupid. "Karkles, Karkles, Karkles; is the Internet stupid?"

"Wha-" Where the hell did that come from? He finds himself nodding.

"Is Kanye West our future president of the United States?"

Karkat catches on a little slower than usual but he gets there eventually. "Is Will Smith the greatest actor to ever live?"

"Is Karkat Vantas afraid of crabs?"

"That was fucking uncalled for." Karkat glares at him.

"Your face was uncalled for." Dave replies, without a moment of hesitation, "Suck on that, Vantas."

"I'm starting to think that your insults are limited by your small vocabulary." Karkat says, "I mean, of course, how are you supposed to call me out on my shit when you talk like a twelve year old in the comment section of a Minecraft video?"

"First of all, I rule the Youtube comment section and you can take a step back to take in all the glory of Youtube user turntechGodhead69." Dave pauses for a moment, holding his arms out and posing like an idiot until Karkat starts grinning, "Second of all, my vocabulary isn't limited. I just talk like a normal person and don't make up dumb words. What the hell even is a nooksucker anyway? Forget it, I don't want to know. Third, I'm great at throwing shade, that's why I'm current reigning rap champion at Damara's."
"You rap? You seriously rap, not just as a joke?" Karkat can't take that seriously, "I would pay good money to see you rap- and that's saying something because I'm broke as shit. Please tell me that rapping is on the stupid bucket list."

"If I recall correctly, it's right after laser tag." Dave says, "Suck it, Vantas, I told you I could extend my vocab. I just don't feel like being a smartass most of the time. That's Rose's job. Don't wanna steal her thunder or anything, that wouldn't be cool."

"You don't want people to know that you're smarter than you let on." Karkat decides.

Dave shrugs at him and doesn't dignify him with a reply.

A lot of familiar faces show up in time for their laser tag game, which leads Karkat to think that Dave orchestrated this whole thing behind his back. Of course he did. First of all, Dirk shows up and offers Dave a fistbump as a way of greeting. Roxy is right behind him, apparently nursing a hangover from this morning if the hideous pink sunglasses she's wearing and bottle of water (?) in her hand is anything to go by.

She flings her arms around Karkat and Dave, pulling them into an awkward three-way hug. "There are my babies! How you guys doing?"

"Is that vodka?" Dave nods to her water bottle.

Roxy is suddenly distracted. "Oh, look, there's Janey! I should go say hiyyyyyyy!"

Aradia shows up, though Dave says he didn't tell her they were coming here, which means it was probably psychic bullshit again. When Karkat asks what she's doing here, she just smiles and says that this is where she was told to be. Creepy. Feferi is at her side.

"I've never played this before." She whispers to Karkat, while they're being given the safety talk, "But Erifin comes out here all the time. He's trying to keep his top score alive."

She gestures to the leader board, where "Dualscar" is apparently holding the top score, quickly followed by "turntechGodhead69". Dave catches him looking at the scoreboard and gives him a thumbs up. Karkat decides right there and then that he's going to knock Dave out of second place. Sure, he's never played before, but him and Feferi can team up. Beginner's luck, right?

"I'll be on your team, Feferi. Us n00bs together." He tells her, (he really needs to stop talking to Captor. Forever. That guy is a terrible influence on Karkat).

Feferi agrees, eagerly, and they shake on it.

As it happens, Dave approaches him just before they go in and asks if they can team up. When Karkat tells him that he's already got a teammate, Dave seems kind of disappointed and trails over to his older brother. He slips away before Karkat can grab him by the sleeve.

"If it means that much to you, Strider, we can come back some other time." Karkat calls after him, feeling like an idiot because everybody in the room probably heard that. Dirk certainly did, if the smug "I told you so" look he gives Dave is anything to go by.

Dave nods to him.

What was supposed to be a friendly game of laser tag quickly turns into a brutal battleground. Karkat swears he can hear people screaming as they're shot, falling to their knees in defeat. He passes one kid much younger than him, who Karkat takes out, who acts as if he's actually been
shot, collapsing to the ground and weeping.

Who knew that kids took this shit so seriously?

("Kids" might be an unfair, since Karkat sees Dirk firing like he's actually fighting for his life. Seriously, the expression on his face is hard as rocks and it certifies for Karkat the fact that Dirk definitely needs to make some friends)

Karkat didn't realise that the game would be so harsh- at one point, he spots Roxy shooting the hell out of a twelve year old relentlessly and has to run before she can spot him- but he's got his inner gamer rage and pure determination to fuel him. Poor Feferi isn't so good, apologising every time she hits somebody. But they stay together, stay low, and avoid most of the fire. Karkat isn't great at shooting but he's far from the worst. Mainly because his teammate is the worst- no offence to her, she's just too kind to be good at this.

Karkat is pretty sure that he's winning, actually, until he turns to find himself face-to-face with Dave. Where the fuck did he come from? Karkat doesn't know but he nearly yells in surprise.

"I'm sorry I have to do this, Karkles." Dave deadpans, "You'll forever be remembered for your sacrifice on the battlefield. Live long and prosper, Vantas."

"That doesn't even making any fucking sense."

Dave's fucking laugh. It's so contagious that Karkat grins. That laugh gives him butterflies.

Any hopes Karkat had of winning are literally shot to shit in the next five minutes by the Strider-Lalonde team.

"Don't worry, man, you did well for your first time." Dave tells him afterwards, when they stop by a fast food place to grab something to eat, "I'm proud of you."

It's just the two of them, since everybody else had places to be and their own significant others to hang out with, but Karkat wasn't going to argue when Dave offered to pay for him. He's hungry after laser tag anyway and this way, he gets the chance to sit at a table with Dave. They keep bumping knees under the table.

"Wow, thanks, Mom." Karkat rolls his eyes, "I'm not proud of you, you suck."

"Even though I finally beat Ampora out of the highest score?" Dave had taken the top spot on the leaderboard, something he claimed he'd been waiting for years to do, "He's gonna kill us if he ever finds out."

"Us? This is all on you. You're on your own." Karkat laughs, "I'm not taking any credit for any of the dumb shit that you've pulled today. If we get arrested for anything on the list, I'm throwing you straight under the bus."

"I meant "us" as in me and Aradia. She took second, remember? But she still beat Ampora's score." That was true and Aradia had looked so pleased that Karkat couldn't be mad at her for beating him, "Anyway, TZ will bust me out of jail." Dave flicks a fry at him and it hits Karkat square in the face, much to his annoyance, "She's my lawyer, she already agreed to it."

"Congratulations, you've got the only bat-shit insane lawyer out there." Karkat throws the fry back at him and misses completely, "Shit."

"You have a terrible throw." Dave ducks the next three fries aimed at his head like some kind of
ninja. This continues for a while, back and forth bickering, accompanied with plenty of fries being thrown until Dave is all out of them. He tries to grab Karkat's but Karkat refuses, stuffing as many as he can in his mouth before Dave can get them.

Dave leans across the table and eats the few remaining fries, smirking.

Karkat rolls his eyes at him.

Then, he takes a long sip of his soda. "Does this count as our first date? I mean, you took me to laser tag and then to dinner afterwards. Granted, McDonalds doesn't count as real food and this is a pretty greasy, disgusting place for a first date. And you have turned everything into a competition so far, so it's not really romantic. But it counts, right?"

"It totally counts." Dave agrees, quickly, "This is totally a date, man."

"You said 'totally' twice. That is two times more than is acceptable." Karkat rolls his eyes, "Can you take your sunglasses off while we're eating at least? Nobody's going to call you out on your weird ass anime eye colour in here- not even the staff here give a shit about the customers. It's really difficult to talk to you when I'm staring at my own reflection in those pretentious shades."

Dave, after considering it for a long moment, slips his sunglasses off and folds them. He places them on the table in front of him, on top of a stack of napkins so that they don't get grease on them. Silently, Karkat watches and ignores how suddenly flustered he feels now that Dave's eyes are entirely focused on him, nothing obstructing them. Dave has to blink a few times until his eyes start adjusting to the light, his pupils shrinking a little so that the red is more obvious. His eyes really are burnt the prettiest red colour- the same colour as his sneakers.

"You are seeing Dave Strider at his very realest, ladies and gentlemen." Dave says, to fill the silence, "Bask in the awe because as soon as we get up to leave, the shades are going straight back on."

Karkat speaks without thinking. "We'll just have to sit here for a long time so I can take in how stupidly pretty your eyes are then."

_Oh, shit, I said that out loud._ Karkat realises.

"I, uh, well, uh-" Karkat tries to correct himself, "I think they look stupid."

Dave looks like he's trying to hide a smile. "Yeah. Well, if that's how we're going to describe things we like, I think you're pretty stupid looking too."

Karkat can't breathe. "You look like a pretentious dickwad."

Dave laughs and the tension shatters. "You look like I remember you from when we were kids."

He does? Karkat shrinks back into himself automatically, slumping over as if it will cause his chest to vanish from existence. It doesn't but it helps hide it a little, though he wishes he had a sweater or something. Just a shirt really isn't hiding enough. How could Dave say something like that anyway? He can't look the same as he did all those years ago. Karkat has put so much work into trying to look more masculine, more tough, and it's all for nothing. He still looks like the girl people used to accuse him of being? He fidgets with the strap of his binder and wonders why his eyes are stinging like he's about to cry. He's not going to cry.

"Karkat?" Dave's hand catches him on the wrist.
He slaps him away. "How could you say something like that, you bulgeslap?"

"What? You're the same short, angry guy, I remember."

_Dave doesn't know_, Karkat realises suddenly, and tears stop threatening to fall. He wipes his eyes furiously on the back of his hand and looks back up, meeting Dave's eyes. At least Kanaya and Jade didn't tell Dave about _that_. Thank God.

"Why are you upset?" Dave's voice softens, "Dude, what did I say?"

"It's nothing. Just... Fucking forget about it." Karkat says, "Where were we?"

Dave frowns. "I know we just met and all, Karkat. Like literally just met today for the first time in years and we barely know anything about each other. I mean, I could be a crazy axe murder for all you know. Or worse, a Nicholas Cage fan--"

Karkat lets out a small laugh at that.

"But you looked like you were going to have a meltdown, dude." Dave keeps trying to grab his hand; why is that? "You gotta tell me what I did wrong so I don't do it again. Otherwise, I could fuck up an infinite number of times because I have no idea what I'm saying wrong. And if I fuck up--"

"I'm trans." Karkat says, quickly, so that nobody else within earshot will catch what he said, "Okay? That's all. I just felt weird when you said I looked the same as I used to. Because I've worked really hard and spent money to look like this. I hated how I looked as a kid, okay? And I don't want to talk about it. Just act like I never said anything."

For a moment, Dave stares at him and Karkat is terrified of what he's going to say. What if Dave gets up and leaves him just like Gamzee did? Karkat can't afford to have anybody else leave him like that, not after he just recovered. Or worse, what if Dave tries to be understanding and overdoes it? Patronise him? So many people don't understand. He just hopes Dave's different.

Eventually, Dave says. "So, how about those Yankees?"

"That's a... Sports thing?" Karkat guesses, relieved that they've moved on.

"You don't follow baseball?"

"No?" Karkat frowns. Is he meant to?

"Good. Baseball sucks. I don't understand the big deal with it but my family watch so many sports games on the TV in our apartment that I have to pretend like I think it's cool." Dave rolls his eyes, "Why watch sports when you can watch quality TV?"

Karkat raises an eyebrow. "You're talking about Doctor Who, aren't you?"

He's not forgotten what Rose said on the tapes about Dave being a huge Doctor Who fan. Honestly, Karkat has never understood that show in the slightest but he knows for a fact that Nepeta and Captor enjoy it on occasion. Maybe he should try watching it sometime. If it's that important to Dave... He saw how avidly Dave was discussing it with Aradia earlier. And if his boyfriend- no, damnit, not his boyfriend- likes it, maybe Karkat should try it.

"Damn straight, please tell me you watch it." Dave pleads, "Please, Karkat. I can't go on living in a world where nobody other than me and that creepy psychic girl watch Doctor Who. Rose only
watches it to pick it apart and Roxy says Harry Potter is better. Who chooses wizards over aliens? I need you to like this show, man, so that I have somebody to watch with."

Karkat shakes his head.

"You, me, tonight after dinner." Dave says, firmly, "You're gonna stay at my apartment and we'll make up some excuse to tell your dad for why you can't come home. And damn it, you will sit on my couch and we'll watch Doctor Who together. I have every episode ever on DVD. And I mean, every episode that the BBC hasn't lost. You'll love it, I swear."

He's babbling enthusiasmcally about nerd shit. It's the most adorable thing in the universe.

"It's a date." Karkat says, before realising what he's saying.

They avoid eye contact for the next ten minutes.

"So, let's go and rap battle at Damara's." Dave says, suddenly, "We need to finish this list."

*Are you that eager to kiss me, Dave?* Karkat thinks, butterflies stirring in his stomach again.

"We need to finish the list." He agrees.

Chapter End Notes

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I really wish I could have written the Terezi/Nepeta movie scene but I couldn't find anywhere to fit it in >:(

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Dave Strider confirmed as memelord.

It is two in the morning and I'm going to regret not proofreading.

Dave can't rap to save his life. Or rather, he can rap but his rap is terrible and it's blatantly obvious that he's saying whatever comes into his head- Karkat knows that's what freestyling is, he's not stupid, but whatever comes into Dave's head doesn't even make sense. He's just rambling metaphors at a pace so fast that it's kind of confusing and incredibly difficult to follow. He spends at least five minutes rapping about presidential candidates and why they suck, (except Bernie Sanders, who Dave refers to as "my main bro" at least three times). None of it flows very well or is very coherent but Karkat finds it very entertaining anyway.

Who knew that *Damara's* was open to holding amateur rap battles anyway? (Karkat thought this was the kind of place that would have very different entertainment indeed.) Apparently, a handful of people were aware though because enough people have gathered to watch Dave talk-rapping into a microphone that he stole from somewhere that there's a small crowd standing around. Karkat is just watching from the edge of the crowd, not daring to stand too close in case Dave pulls him on stage with him, when somebody taps him on the shoulder and he turns to face Latula Pyrope.

"Surprised you ain't up there, Karkat." Latula grins at him, standing there with her hands on her hips and stupid glow-in-the-dark bracelets hanging off her wrists, "You should be good at this kind of thing with that big mouth that you've got on you."

Isn't she meant to be with Terezi and Nepeta? Latula better not have ditched them again. If she's ditched them again, Karkat is going to sickle her ass- only he's not because that sounds disgusting and makes no sense.

"You think that because I have a way with words, I should be good at spitting bullshit into a microphone for the amusement of drunkards hanging around a dodgy nightclub?" Karkat raises an eyebrow, "Where's your sister?"

"I think you'd be great up there." Latula nods to the stage, "TZ and her girlfriend said something about a scavenger hunt? They were heading back to the Noir Statue to take pictures or something. Heck if I know. Terezi said something about running out of time?"

"That sounds about right." Karkat glances back at Dave, "We really need to finish the list."

"Oh, yeah, that's actually why I came over here." Latula grins and looks eerily similar to her younger sister, (maybe it's just the lighting in here?), "TZ gave me the list and said you'd want it." She pushes a crumpled piece of paper into his hand, "Good luck, Karkles."

"Hold on-" But she's already gone.

With the list delivered, Latula pushes her way back through the crowd until she reaches the edge of the stage and leaps onto it. She takes the mic from Dave and- dear god, Dave suddenly isn't the
worst rapper in the entire world. She's painfully funny, though, and Karkat struggles to tear his eyes away. Latula Pyrope might be a shitty older sister and a terrible rapper but fuck, she's funny as hell. Probably unintentionally.

Karkat sticks it out for a while longer, watching Dave and Latula fighting for the microphone, laughing quietly to himself. Then, he makes eye contact with Dave by mistake and he doesn't so much as blink, staring at him pointedly. Dave seems to get the message instantly and signs off, referring to himself as D-Strides and telling people to watch out for his upcoming mixtape, before jumping down from the stage. Karkat waits patiently until Dave manages to catch up to him, wriggling free of the crowd, and holds up the list to show him that he's he got it. Dave gives him a thumbs-up. They can't talk over the music.

Together, they squirm their way through the crowd, Karkat holding onto Dave tightly so that he doesn't slip away. He only lets go when they're safely outside and the cold air is crisp in comparison to the heat of Damara's. Autumn is creeping in around them. Karkat shivers and wishes that he'd brought a jacket. He crosses his arms tightly, missing his sweater, and opens his mouth to talk. Dave beats him to the post.

"Dude, did you see me rocking the mic in there?" Dave says, "I was killing until Pyrope got in my way. That girl's got style, I'll admit, but she's got nothing on me." He taps Karkat on the arm to get his attention, "Karkles, you should have got up there with me. We could be a duo. We could be fucking partners in crime. And by crime, I mean the crime of throwing down sick beats that are too hot to handle."

"My beats would definitely be "sicker" than yours." Karkat says, quickly, "My beats would be so sick that people would be puking their lunch all over the dance floor. That's how fucking sick I am at rapping, Dave- it's contagious. When I drop beats, I send people home with the flu, that's just how sick my skills are."

Karkat has never rapped before in his life.

"Yeah, well, my beats are so raw that I give people food poisoning. In their ears." Dave says, "They go home and they're like: "Yo, that D-Strides kid was so fucking awesome that I think I'm gonna have to sleep it off. I gotta take time off work to recover from this". That's how motherfucking raw my jams are."

"Well, your rapping did make me feel like I was going to throw up." Karkat says, sarcastically.

"Screw you, man." Dave laughs.

Karkat's heart flutters a little.

"Fuck you too." Karkat says, smoothing out the list so that it's easier to make the words out and frowning, "I can't read Pyrope's handwriting, so you're going to have to help me out here. I know she's blind but jeez, her words are wobbly as shit. This list is all over the place. Can you read what we have to do next?"

"Yeah, man, that says some shit about pillow forts."

"Pillow forts?"

"Yeah, pillow forts, AKA that dumb plot device that Roxy uses in her slash fanfiction as a crappy excuse to have pointless fluff in the middle of the story." Dave says, as if it should be obvious, "Haven't you ever built one, Kitkat?"
"... No?" Karkat looks up at him.

"A pillow fort is a bitching castle made out of your bedsheets and blankets that you stole from your sister. Normally, they're built by best bros who platonically snuggle inside them and have bro sleepovers. Let's call it a bro-over. A completely heterosexual bro-over which takes place inside a pillow fort as soft and familiar as Shia LaBeouf's ass."

What does that even mean?

"I know what a pillow fort is, I'm not an idiot." Karkat scowls, "But I've never built one. Nepeta is always on my back about building one with her but... I didn't want to get under any kind of blanket with her, honestly. She used to harbour some huge fucking crush on me for some reason. Obviously, it's a different fucking story now, but whatever. I'm trying to say that there's something incredibly intimate about building a pillow fort together. Are you sure about this?"

"You've never built a pillow fort." Dave looks genuinely surprised, "Dude, I swear, you haven't lived yet. I have no idea how you have survived up until this point without building one. You're going to fucking love it."

"Does this mean I get to come to your apartment?" Karkat asks, curiously, "Not that I want to step foot inside your probably ridiculously shitty apartment full of ironic crap."

"I'll have you know that Rose makes me keep the ironic crap to a minimum. If I didn't live with her, however, there would be ironic crap spilling out of every orifice, ironic crap filling every single possible space. I would be drowning in ironic crap." Dave says, "I can see the headlines now: Dave Strider, rising rap star, drowns in Kanye West For President merchandise. Thousands mourn the death of their hero."

"Dave Strider, complete idiot, is smothered to death by his collection of twenty 'ironically bought' anime body pillows that he sleeps with to fill the hole in his heart." Karkat says, sarcastically, "The dumbass was found this morning desperately clutching a Nagisa pillow to his chest. Thousands mourn the death of the biggest asshole to ever live."

"Yeah, that's perfect." Dave says, his mouth twitching upwards, "Dude, that's what you gotta get printed as my obituary if I die before I can get my brain implanted into a immortal and eternally sexy robot."

Karkat rolls his eyes.

But, much to his surprise and excitement, he realises that they actually are headed back to a Dave's apartment and his stomach does a barrel roll. As they step onto the bus, he's feeling a little excited to see the place. Because seeing somebody's apartment is like peering through a tiny window into their brains and Karkat wants to see the kind of stuff that Dave has lying around his apartment. Probably porn. Probably ironic porn- no, ironic Doctor Who porn. Karkat honestly would not be surprised. Either way, stepping into this apartment is crossing a boundary into the grey area into "ridiculously close bros snuggling in a fort" located directly between "best bros" and "gay boyfriend shit".

It's on the bus that Karkat nearly has a heart attack when he spots a familiar face nearby. His brother. His older fucking brother is on the bus, a few seats back and across from him, and Karkat could not be more horrified. Kankri has probably come out here to drag Karkat home and give him a lecture about something or other- their dad probably sent him. There's no other reason Kankri would be on a bus, he despises them. Either way, Kankri is the last person Karkat wants to see right now. Quickly, he ducks behind Dave and lowers his head, trying to remain inconspicuous.
Dave notices. "Karkles, what the actual shit are you doing?"

"Shut up." Karkat says, fast, "And don't look now, but my older brother is back there. Dad probably sent him here to take me back home or something equally as unfair. And trust me, you don't want to meet my brother. He's the only thing between you and The Biggest Asshole In Karkat's Life Award."

Of course, Dave turns to look and Karkat yanks hard on his arm.

"I said not to look, dumbass!" He hisses, "Kankri will notice."

"Holy crap, I remember that guy." Dave turns back to Karkat, "He's the one that found us in the closet that day and was a complete ass about it."

"Yeah, Kankri doesn't get along too well with other people." They're alike that way. "He acts nice but underneath, he's a complete and utter dick."

When the bus reaches their stop and Dave stands up to get off, Karkat can't help rushing him towards the exit. He doesn't want his brother to spot them, keeping his gaze fixed firmly on the ground so he doesn't accidentally make eye contact. He's about to relax as the bus moves on, when he's tapped on the shoulder and turns to find his older brother standing behind him. Karkat yells in surprise, backing up. Kankri followed them off the bus? His older brother looks between Karkat and Dave, smug expression on his face, before he clears his throat.

"I couldn't help overhearing your abuse of crude language on the bus and recognised it was you instantly, Karkat." Kankri says, "I was on my way to see Cronus— Karkat smirks, "- when I overheard you and thought that I should check you're still okay. I sent you a few messages on Pesterchum that you didn't return. I was worried about you."

"I've been very busy." Karkat states, "Nice of you to check up on me like I'm still a little kid but as you can see, I'm fine, so you can fuck off now." He doesn't hate Kankri- most of the time- but he doesn't want him hanging around all afternoon, "I'll see you tomorrow at home."

Kankri catches him by the arm. "Don't you dare try and slip away without introducing me to your... I'm presuming friend? Correct me if I'm wrong, of course, and I apologise if my assumption of the nature of your relationship offends you."

"Right." Karkat says, flatly, "Kankri, this is Dave. He's the douchenozzle that sent me the tapes and has sent me trekking around the city for the past two days. Dave, this is my older brother, Kankri Vantas. He's a pompous asshole."

"Yo, Kanny." Dave raises a hand in greeting, "What's up?"

"Dave." Kankri studies him, curiously, "I trust you're treating my brother well?"

"Taking great care of him." Dave replies, "I swear I'll get him home in one piece if you keep your dad off his back for another night."

"I'll keep Father occupied." Kankri says, before turning to Karkat, "Dad found out that you were out here in the city alone and he wasn't happy that I'd left you here. But Porrim and I managed to assure him that you were in good hands. But you best be back first thing on Monday or else we're both in trouble."

"I will be back on Monday." Karkat says, "I'm not making any promises about how early I'll be home. It might be morning, it might be night. And I guess Dad is just going to have to deal with
that. I'm happy for the first time since Gamzee and he should be glad of that."

Kankri nods. "My point exactly. Whilst I think your behaviour is reckless and problematic, I'm willing to make an exception for you on the account of your reasonably recent period of depression. I think being out here is good for you."

"Problematic." Dave repeats, barely hiding a smile, "Looks like I found my first real life Social Justice Warrior."

"Why were you taking the bus anyway?" Karkat asks, "You can drive. Why the hell would you, the clean freak, step foot onto a bus full of strangers and germs? Did you hit your head recently, Kankri? You're acting like a fucking opposite of yourself. You're okay with lying to Dad and me hanging around strangers and buses suddenly. What's going on?"

"I took the bus because Dad isn't letting me drive until I can prove I'm responsible again." Kankri says, calmly, though he looks flustered, "And I told you why I'm okay with covering for you at home. There's no need to blow things out of proportion."

"Somebody told you to chill out." Dave guesses, "And you're trying to prove yourself to be the cool dude you've always wanted to be."

"No." Kankri says, too quickly.

"But- ugh, whatever. We need to get going. I'll see you tomorrow." Karkat is about to walk away when his brother pulls him back.

"Karkat, wait." And Kankri- Kankri, who refuses to let anybody come within a foot of him usually because he doesn't like his personal space being invaded- pulls him in close and hugs him. Karkat is in shock, not used to this at all, so he doesn't protest. Kankri talks quietly so that Dave can't overhear. "When you get home, I'd like to talk more to you about your problems. I've been thinking a lot the last day or so and I feel as if I'm not here for you enough. I want to change that."

Weird. Karkat steps back as soon as the hug is over. He hopes that hugging isn't going to become a regular thing between them because he's not sure that he could handle that.

"Stay safe." Kankri tells him.

"Yeah..." Karkat is too stunned to come up with a snappy remark, "Yeah, I will. Thanks."

And Dave has to steer him away because Karkat is still standing there, completely dumbfounded. His brother hasn't hugged him in years, especially not since he started binding, because Kankri doesn't like to touch people and he was probably worried about offending Karkat somehow. Karkat's used to his brother keeping his distance from him, so that kind of intimacy out of nowhere was surprising, and he wonders what happened. He shakes his head, putting it out of his mind, and fiddles with the straps of Terezi's backpack. The straps are covered in badges from TV shows, movies, and comics, which clink together and produce metallic noises.

Dave doesn't ask him any questions about Kankri or his family and Karkat is grateful. In comparison to a Dave's family, his own seems pretty boring. As distant and weird as Dirk is, he's still way cooler than Kankri. Karkat follows him into an apartment building and upon finding out the elevator isn't working, up the stairs.

At one point he stumbles and Dave grins at him. "I warned you about the stairs, man."

"What?" Karkat blinks.
"It's from this shitty webcomic that I write." Dave explains, "You don't read Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff? I thought everybody in the English speaking world read it." Karkat raises an eyebrow and he corrects himself, "Okay, so maybe I'm exaggerating. But it's a popular webcomic, okay? Almost as popular as that weird one about the aliens with the candy corn horns. And there's this whole meme about stairs in the comic. I warned you about the stairs, man."

Karkat must still look completely blank.

"Dude, let me show you it later. It's a total masterpiece, a real work of art. You'll love it. It's the shittiest, most ironic thing you'll ever see." Dave assures him, contradicting himself completely.

"Not surprising, since you seem to be a walking shitpost." Karkat rolls his eyes.

After staggering up another flight of stairs, he adds. "How come the elevator in your building doesn't fucking work? I mean, in a building with so many floors, why the fuck wouldn't the elevator work? You should get that shit fixed. For my sake, if nothing else."

"Are you planning to come here a lot?" Dave says, waggling his eyebrows suggestively; before adding, "I don't know when the elevator got broken. Because when I was here earlier today, it was working perfectly fine. Somebody probably just slapped an Out of Order sign on as a joke. Or somebody's having hot elevator sex and don't want to be found out."

"You mean... The elevator is probably working?" Karkat stops where he is, "So, I'm walking up these stairs when I could be taking the elevator?"

"I'm just saying that the elevator wasn't broken a few hours ago and somebody might just be trolling us into thinking it's out of order." Dave shrugs, "I don't know, man. People pull weird pranks around here."

"'People' meaning you and your family."

Dave grins. "We're a ironically strange bunch. But you can't talk about family shit... Karkat, your brother. Holy fucking shit. You guys look so alike but he talks sorta like a more annoying Rose."

"I can't believe he just showed up to talk to us. He's got a bad habit of doing that." Karkat says, "The other day I had to wait forty five minutes to use the bathroom because he wouldn't let me pass until he finished his lecture on classism in modern politics." He crosses his arms.

Dave thinks. "He doesn't seem too bad though."

"He's just a prick sometimes." Karkat concludes.

The apartment turns out to be a lot nicer than Karkat imagined- Rose keeps it pretty neat, despite the sheer amount of stuff that the twins seem to own, and it's obvious that she decorated the apartment before Dave moved in. Nearly everything is a light shade of purple or a shiny black to match the weird aesthetic that Rose has going on. But if you look closely- and Karkat does- it's not hard to spot Dave's things crammed in between the rest of the furniture. The stash of swords that are sticking out of the umbrella stand, for instance.

The air is thick with the sweet scent of floral perfumes mixed with the spicy scent of somebody cooking something delicious in the kitchen. He recognises the soft, flowing tones of Kanaya and the sharper, quicker voice belonging to Rose Lalonde drifting from the open door of the kitchen. He stops in the front room, expecting Dave to ask him to wait there- who invites somebody into their bedroom straight away?—but Dave gestures for him to follow. Down the corridor, through the door on the left, and suddenly he's standing in Dave's bedroom.
There's a poster of Kanye West with Pepe's face stuck up on the wall and that says pretty much all that needs to be said about the style of the room. Dave apparently lives in somebody's hellish, clashing, brightly coloured meme nightmare. It makes Karkat's eyes hurt.

"Rose doesn't let me build forts in the front room." Dave explains, dragging the covers off the bed and onto the floor, "We'll have to do it here. Build the fort, I mean. Not do it. I should be more careful when I talk. Jesus."

Karkat ignores the last part completely.

"You build pillow forts a lot?" He says, instead, trying to hide the fact that he's flushed a bright shade of red, "Jesus Christ, how old are you? Five? I thought pillow forts were for little kids."

"Forts are for everybody." Dave tells him, fumbling with the covers, "Help me with this for a second; hold this corner for me." He pushes the edge of a blanket into Karkat's hand so that he can hook the other side off a nail hanging on the wall. It's never going to hold up.

There's a concentration behind Dave's shades that Karkat doesn't think he's seen before. Dave is normally so carefree and easygoing that seeing him thinking logically and trying to figure things out looks alien on his face. His eyebrows pull together as he wraps the edge of a blanket around his desk chair. Karkat helps him with the fort by holding the blankets and passing him the pillows, bumping hands with him and sending shivers of electricity down his spine. Eventually, something that could be a fort begins to form in the middle of the room.

Dave is knotting a pink blanket he stole from Rose around the leg of his desk when he speaks. "Growing up, I never really had anybody to hang out with. I guess because I moved around a lot I never had time to get to know anybody. And I didn't really want to make friends. I was a lonely little shit, I'll tell you that. So I never got to do things like this with anybody else."

"I understand how you felt." Karkat says, as he ducks down to help Dave fix the knot properly; his hands slip over his, carefully twisting the sheets so that they won't come undone, "I mean... I always had friends, like Nepeta and Kanaya, and I always messed around with the kids on our street. We played a lot of street hockey and shit. But... I never really felt that close to anybody. I had friends but they didn't feel special. And I guess, the whole gender thing made me feel distant from everybody else."

Dave nods. "You were my first real friend and I only knew you for about ten minutes... Which is really stupid when you think about it. I spent the rest of that vacation looking for you to see if you wanted to hang out with me but I couldn't find you anywhere."

"We had to go home early." Karkat remembers, finishing the knot and throwing the remaining pillows into the fort, "My mother... She started getting sick around then."

"Oh." Dave frowns, apparently realising the seriousness, "Oh. That sucks." He clears his throat, quick to get onto a less depressing subject, "Karkat Vantas. As my first friend and best bro, I'd like to formally invite you into my pillow fort." He lifts the blanket blocking the entrance, "After you."

"After you." Karkat pushes Dave into the fort and tumbles in after him.

The fort collapses on them within seconds and they end up fighting to escape.
Cassette Eleven: Side B

Chapter Summary

My headcanons are dumb.

Understandably, Karkat is reluctant to leave the safety of their pillow fort- or what remains of it at least- where he's pressed up close with Dave, their shoulders pressed together and the sound of Dave rambling filling his ears. He enjoys the warmth of Dave's hand on his and watching his chest rise and fall as he breathes, content for once. The blankets are wrapped around them now, instead of sheltering them. Karkat could stay here for the rest of his life. He wishes he could stay here like this for the rest of his life.

But Dave reminds him that they've got a scavenger hunt to complete and grabs Karkat by the hand to pull him to his feet. Karkat isn't willing to leave but Dave promises that they can come back later, offers him a jacket, and they're running out of the door.

"Do we have to run?" Karkat yells, breathlessly, though he's unable to stop grinning; Dave's hand is still tightly gripped in his, "Can't we just check if the elevator is working?"

"We're running out of time, Karkles, and I promised we'd meet the girls at the theme park out of town as soon as possible. Terezi will get pissed if we don't turn up. C'mon, I'll carry you if I have to, but we have to complete the list before midnight."

"I thought the deadline was this evening?" Karkat asks, "God fucking damn it, Dave, you can't just change the rules to make things easier for yourself. You can't just change the rules of the game so that you can win."

"We already broke the game, there are no rules to play by anymore. So I'm pushing the deadline back a little to make sure we meet it. There ain't nothing wrong with a little cheating, Vantas." They fly out of the doors of the building like they've got wings, gasping for breath helplessly, and clutching each other like idiots. Why can't Dave live on the ground floor?

They have to run round the back of the building to find the car that Dave unlocks- it must belong to Rose, it's entirely black, even the windows- and they clamber inside. Before Karkat has even buckled his seatbelt, they're moving. Dave is spinning the wheel, backing out of the parking lot, and turning onto the street. He drives too fast, too smooth, and Karkat is impressed.

"I had no idea that you could drive." He says.

"I've got a permit." Dave says, "I mean, technically, I need somebody over the age of twenty one in the passenger's seat with me but this is Skaia, dude. Who's going to give a shit in Skaia? There are gangs roaming the streets, nobody's gonna give a fuck about me driving."

"Terezi was talking about that." Karkat can't help being curious, "And my dad always said the city was a dangerous place but is it really that bad? I haven't seen anything illegal in the last two days. Unless we're counting the fact that Damara's let Rose buy drinks."

"We know the owner of that place, that's why. Pal of Roxy's." Dave says, "But yeah, the city is
pretty dangerous, especially at night. But you're in safe hands, Karkles, don't worry 'bout it."

"You're in safe hands." Karkat corrects, "I'm the one with the sickles, so you can keep your smug trap shut about safety."

"Thank god, my brave and valiant knight is here to keep me safe." Dave is steering with one hand, using the other hand to rummage through the selection of CDs, "Jeez, Roxy really doesn't have any taste and I didn't bring any of the mixes with me... Wait, do you know Hamilton?" Karkat shakes his head, having only heard of it. "Oh my god, man, you have got to hear this. Seriously, do you live under a rock?"

"No, I live in a sleepy town with my father, who is strict but fair." Karkat peers at the parental warning on the CD, "I'm not allowed to listen to explicit shit."

"You aren't? You could have convinced me otherwise. You have the mouth of a sailor." Dave pushes the disc in, "Allow me, Karkat, to introduce you to the only hip hop musical about the founding fathers. You are going to be singing about Alexander Hamilton for the next three months at the very least~"

As it turns out, there's a theme park a little out of town. And by a little, Karkat means a lot. They're halfway through Jefferson and Hamilton debating whether to assist France when it comes into view and honestly, like most things in Skaia, the place looks a little shitty. And miserable. The grey sky probably doesn't help the atmosphere, even if the sun is beginning to peek through the clouds again. Dave parks up and Karkat climbs out of the car, looking over a list to see what the hell they're doing here.

**NUMB3R TW3LV3: R1D3 TH3 COLOSS4L DR4GON!**

"What the fuck does that even mean?" Karkat frowns, "Is that Pyrope's attempt at a filthy joke? Because it's not funny. It doesn't even make sense."

"It's a ride." Dave plucks the list from his hands and stuffs it in his back pocket, "To be specific, it's the scariest ride here at Skaia Adventure- and due to how unsafe it is, it's probably one of the most dangerous rides in the states. People walk out of here with things broken that I didn't even know were possible to break. My brother knows a guy who knows a guy that can't have hot sexy times anymore because he went on this ride for a bet."

"You're fucking with me." Karkat says, flatly.

"What makes you think that?" Dave replies, obviously fighting a grin. He's nowhere near as stoic as he thinks he is.

They find the girls waiting beside the rollercoaster- which Karkat will admit does actually look terrifying- looking impatient about it. Terezi has popcorn caught in the tight curls of her hair, though she seems unaware, and her shirt has a tear in the shoulder that looks blade inflicted. Nepeta has what looks like pink paint on her pants and is clutching a cat. So, looks like nothing uneventful happened then. *Except she's holding a fucking cat.* She's holding it in her arms, nuzzling it, and murmuring to it quietly.

"Where the fuck did you get a cat?" Dave asks, staring just as blankly as Karkat is.

"They were being sold on the street and she was the only one left!" Nepeta looks at them sadly, "Nobody seemed to want her, so we got her for ten dollars. Her name is Pounce de Leon and I love her and no, I'm not returning her."
The cat looks comfortable in Nepeta's arms, purring softly, and rubbing her head against Nepeta's shirt.

"Pounce de Leon." Dave repeats, looking amused.

"Isn't it purrfect?" Nepeta strokes behind her cat's ear, "Pounce fur short, of course."

Karkat elbows Terezi, who protests. "Hey, she was about to cry. I had to let her have the cat, I didn't want my girlfriend to cry."

"God fucking damn it, Pyrope." Karkat mumbles, "What are you going to do with that thing until we get home?"

"Carry her around?" Nepeta suggests.

Dave clears his throat, to make it very clear that he's going to make a point. "Listen up, 'Peta. My sisters used to own a cat when we were really young and they've always been talking about getting Jaspers the Second. I'm sure they'll be willing to look after Pounce for a while if you drop her by after this." He crumbles, "Besides, the cat is adorable. Who could say no?"

Nepeta grins.

Karkat rolls his eyes.

"Count your lucky stars, Karkitty." Nepeta says, "Terezi wanted to name the cat after you."

"Nepeta said the cat wasn't pissy enough to be named after you."

Karkat chases the blind girl around the park.

When they finally approach to buy tickets for the ride- Karkat exhausted from chasing an overexcited Pyrope down and Nepeta still clutching her cat- they have to check their height against the measuring stick. Karkat is barely tall enough, even when he's standing up straight as a ruler, but he manages to just about touch the mark. Nepeta has to ask the unamused man sat behind the booth to look after her cat- he reluctantly agrees- and they're on their way. Karkat's eyes catch on the warning signs and he wonders if the way his heart is fluttering counts as "irregular" enough to get him out of this.

The theme park is all but abandoned so they get the ride to themselves. It looks as if nobody's ridden it since the eighties. It also looks like nobody has repaired since the eighties because that shit does not look safe. Also, who the fuck named this ride? Every time somebody mentions riding the dragon, Karkat wants to punch something. Or cry. Maybe both at once would be the appropriate reaction.

Still, he climbs up into the car of the ride, wriggling into the backseat at Dave's request. The hipster squeezes in beside him, sitting right next to him, and pulls the safety bar over their heads. Up ahead, in the very front, Terezi and Nepeta are talking avidly. They exchange kisses briefly and Karkat feels a little jealous but he glances at Dave beside him and the jealousy subsides pretty quickly. Sure, Pyrope and Nepeta might be alright with jumping the gun and kissing like that but Karkat is willing to wait for it. They've only got this to do and eight other tasks before he can kiss Dave like there's no tomorrow.

"Dude, how the fuck do you look so calm?" Dave asks, prodding him to get his attention, "We could die right now- we could die as virgins- and I have never seen you so chill. Considering how you flip your shit over everything, I can't believe your shit is currently just lying there unflipped. 
"What's the secret?"

"You're freaking out." Karkat studies the crease between his eyes and his fingers tapping on the safety bar, "I can't believe the great Dave Strider is freaking out. What happened to the emotionless prick you were trying so hard to be?" He drops his voice so the girls won't hear, "What are you scared of? Heights?"

"No, it ain't nothing like that." It's totally heights, Dave's eyes are flicking downwards nervously behind his glasses, 'I just think dying on this ride would suck. I'd much rather be eaten by a dragon than die riding a dragon. I'm the coolest guy alive, I can't die in such a lame way."

Karkat wonders what he can do. "Dave, you can just admit you're scared of heights. Considering my completely rational fear of crabs, I'm really not in a position to judge you for it. Dear god, I'm starting to sound like Kankri." He places his hand on Dave's hand to stop it tapping insistently, "It's going to be okay and shit. Don't freak out."

"You're really new to this "being reassuring" thing, aren't you?" Dave laughs shakily.

"I just don't understand." Karkat says, "What happened to the fearless Dave Strider that strifed on rooftops and lived without fear?"

"That Dave Strider's still here. He's just having a mini panic attack right now, he thinks, and possibly losing his mind because he's started referring to himself in the third person. But that's okay because he's going to take deep breaths and not look down and- oh, shit!" That's the jolt of the ride beginning to move; Dave looks at Karkat intensely, "You can't tell anybody that I got scared about this. Pyrope will mock me forever."

"Dave, I'm not going to tell Pyrope about this." The ride is climbing upwards, "Just like you're never going to tell her about my thing about crabs."

Dave looks away. "Yeah, sure, whatever."

"Oh my god, you already told her?!!" The ride is reaching the first peak and Karkat is scowling, "Why the fuck would you do that?"

"Hey, girl asked what I knew about you and it came up. It's one very unique thing about you that I've remembered for the last decade or so." Dave shrugs, "Dude, I didn't mean anything bad by it. She barely laughed."

Karkat clears his throat and cups his hands around his mouth. "Pyrope, guess what? Dave's scared of heights."

Terezi turns around in her seat. "Are you serious?"

Then, the ride drops abruptly and they all scream. Karkat can't hear anything over the sound of his own yelling with the exception of Dave's scream in his ear and the emotionless facade is broken forever. There's no way he's going to be able to hide anything anymore. Dave clutches at Karkat, holding onto him tightly, and Karkat doesn't protest. Partially because he's enjoying the intimacy and partially because he's trying not to shit his pants as the entire world turns upside down around him. And all he can think is God, please don't let us get stuck upside down on the loop.

He's pretty sure that he can hear Terezi whooping up ahead, her hands waving in the air, and Nepeta is yelling enough curse words to make Karkat proud. Her mother would probably make her wash her mouth out if she heard. Karkat can't even process what's happening; they're moving fast enough to make him dizzy and spinning suddenly enough to make his stomach leap into his mouth.
He's going to puke, he just knows it. As they reach the top of another drop, he glances at Dave and he is pale and shaking. He looks like Karkat feels. Karkat squeezes his hand tightly to remind Dave that he's here and Dave just nods.

Dropping is like falling through the air faster than light and Karkat is pretty sure that the skin on his face almost peels off. He's still yelling, cussing out anything he can think of, but there's a strange feeling creeping over him. His chest feels light, airy. His head is empty for once, making him feel a million miles away. He's pretty sure he left his stomach behind a few turns ago. And he's... Enjoying this? Underneath the nausea, he's actually having fun. The same can't be said for Dave, who- when the ride finally comes to a stop- crawls out on his hands and knees and lies facedown on the ground.

Terezi is elated. "That was so much fun!"

Nepeta grins. "We should do that again!"

Then, she rushes off to rescue Pounce de Leon from the disgruntled ride operator.

"Ughghhuhhh, Krrkktthhh." Dave moans, or something along those lines.

"I thought you'd be on this ride before." Terezi says.

"That was a lie. I was a dragon virgin." Dave doesn't seem to be getting up anytime soon, still lying face down on the floor, "And now, you might have well as strip me naked and give me a pole to dance on because that ride just rammed it's dick right in my mouth. I am officially a dragon riding whore."

"Did he hit his head?" Terezi asks Karkat.

"I don't think so." Karkat replies.

"He's probably just dazed." Terezi decides, "I had no idea that he was scared of heights. But now that I think of it... He did always seem pretty nervous when we strifed. I thought he was scared of getting his ass kicked but maybe... I don't know. Weird, huh? That you can know a person and yet not know their biggest fear." She picks up her cane, "Looks like Dave managed to keep a secret for once in his life."

"He should have told us that heights bothered him." Karkat huffs, "His pride is going to be the death of him one day."

"You're worried about him." Terezi grins, "D'awww, Karkles."

He ducks out of the way of her attempted hug.

Eventually, between the two of them, (Nepeta refuses to put her cat down), they manage to haul Dave back to his feet and guide him towards the car. Nepeta shows him a video of a cat trying to climb into a paper bag on Terezi's cell phone and some of the colour returns to Dave's face. When Terezi tells him the next task involves mattress surfing down the stairs, (and makes the same joke about the stairs), Dave brightens up enough to be able to drive. Since the girls hitched their way here, they come with them and much to Karkat's annoyance, Terezi calls shotgun and gets control over the music. Again.

He sits in the back with Nepeta and Pounce de Leon.

"I'm having the best time." Nepeta tells him, her fingers trailing the cat's spine.
Karkat is inclined to agree.

Needless to say, Rose loves the cat like Dave loves apple juice—that being with serious devotion and no sign of giving it up any time soon. She takes the cat from Nepeta at the door and clutches it to her chest, mumbling something about Jaspers under her breath. Dave explains that when they had been taken away from their parents, Rose had to leave the cat behind and how she had been devastated. And how she's been talking about getting a cat ever since but she says it just won't be the same. No cat will ever match up to Jaspers, apparently. Not even Pounce de Leon with her wonky mouth and big, soft eyes.

Roxy will like the cat even more, Dave says, but she's probably still at the bar getting wasted. Which means that they'll probably get to witness a drunk woman embracing an adorable cat at some point during the course of the evening. Then, he heads to the room to drag the mattress out to the stairs, because they haven't wrecked his room enough yet. Meanwhile, the others occupy themselves in the front room. Rose is pouring champagne into pretty patterned glasses to prepare for dinner later, still holding the cat in her arms, and smiling all the while. Nepeta is following her, making sure she's careful with Pounce de Leon, (yes, Karkat is going to continue referring to the cat by its full name and no, he does not give a fuck).

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Terezi is standing by the window, seemingly staring outside. Except... Uh, well, she's blind. So she's evidently not looking at anything and she's acting oddly quiet, so Karkat approaches her to see what's up. He nudges her so she knows he's standing there.

"You've been strangely quiet since we got back from the theme park." Karkat remarks, "What are you getting your dragon-patterned panties in a twist about, Pyrope?"

Terezi chuckles. "It's nothing, I've just been thinking about things. Y'know, about Nepeta. About us and what she said earlier. About how I'm going to prove that I really feel something for her by the end of the day. Nobody's ever set me a challenge like that before."

"Nobody's ever fallen in love with Nepeta before, you can't blame her for being cautious. Not to mention, we've watched a fuck ton of romcoms over the years and quite frankly, if you can't pull off some Scott Pilgrim level shit, she's not going to be satisfied." Karkat stares at the passing cars out in the street, "Nepeta's a romantic, her standards are pretty high."

"So, what you're saying, is that I should do something ridiculous to impress her?" Terezi pretends to think, "Hey, what if I made her fourteen tapes that sent her on a trail around the city? And then proceed to break the rules to engage in a scavenger hunt with her, where there's a ridiculous amount of romantic tension that neither of us are willing to break?"

"Get your own stupid romcom plot, Pyrope, that one's taken." Karkat can't help smiling, (maybe he is in a shitty coming of age romantic comedy after all- the last two days have certainly been ridiculous enough), "Do you need help coming up with ideas?"

"Nah, I've got this one." Terezi says, "Nice talk, Vantas." And she grins widely at him, mischievously, before turning just in time to "see" Dave return, "Hey, Strider, are you ready to go mattress surfing? Because we haven't risked our lives enough yet."
Chapter Summary

It's four in the morning here.
I am in no way encouraging people to get kicked out of Target. Don't dick around in stores, it's not fair on the people that work there.

Dave is dragging his mattress with him as he traipses back into the front room, using both hands, and Nepeta moves to help him. She lifts the other end of the mattress, pushing a lock of hair back behind her ear, and between them, they head out of the door. Terezi and Karkat follow them, exchanging "isn't my boyfriend/girlfriend awesome?" looks with each other. Well, Terezi doesn't see him looking but he likes to think that she's aware of it.

"Oh, shit." Dave is staring down the stairs.

There's one problem with the stairs in this apartment block and that's they don't go straight down. There's more than a few corners and brief snatches of corridor, so that it's more difficult than they think to figure out how they're going to do this.

Nepeta suggests they do it like a bobsled team with them pushing the mattress round the awkward snatches of corridor before jumping back on. And they practice pushing the mattress along the floor as fast as they can and Karkat falls on his face and Terezi runs facefirst into the wall. Dave says they just need to find a better staircase and rips the Out of Order sign off the elevator doors, hitting the button to summon the elevator.

The elevator does actually turn out to work and they push the mattress inside, barely fitting it, and squish in around it. It's a pretty small elevator and they barely fit, Nepeta pressed up against Karkat's back and Terezi stepping on his foot every five seconds. Dave has his back to the door and his front to the edge of the mattress. It's a tense ten minutes- this elevator is moving incredibly slowly- filled with awkward elevator music to match the fact that they are all incredibly uncomfortable. Though, Dave keeps wiggling his eyebrows and making jokes about how he's getting to third base with the mattress in the elevator of all places.

"This is one of the stupidest things I've ever done." Terezi says, "And that's saying something because I have pulled a lot of dumb shit over the years." She could have stopped there but again, she continues, "Vriska and I used to play this game where we would lie down on the road and you had to roll out of the way when you heard a car coming. It was pretty dangerous shit but I always felt safe when I was with her." She pauses, "Vriska lost an arm playing that game."

"Terezi, that's really fucking stupid." Karkat tells her, glad the silence is broken.

"Yeah..." She sighs, "I know. But Vriska was so good at it and I just wanted to prove that I was as good as her. Prove I was good enough for her, I guess. I don't know; looking back on it now, it seems idiotic but it felt right at the time."

"It sounds pawful." Nepeta crosses her arms and bumps into Karkat, "Whoops, sorry. But anyway, it was really shitty of Vriskers to make you play games like that."
Terezi scuffs her sneaker against the filthy floor of the elevator. "She didn't make me... I just wanted to look cool in front of her."

"I know what you mean." Dave says.

"Oh my god, what the fuck did you do, Strider?" Karkat demands.

"Last year, when I was living in a different city a couple of states away, me and John used to dare each other to jump from the roof of my apartment to the roof of the building next to us. The buildings were pretty close together there. And it became this dumb game, where we tried to travel the city just climbing the rooftops." Dave runs a hand through his hair, "That was dumb of us too, I guess. But I always wanted to prove to him how cool I was. I really wanted to impress him."

"That's because you've got some kind of pretentious asshole complex." Karkat shakes his head, "You want everybody to worship you all the time like you're better than us."

"Well, a little worship would be nice." Dave admits, looking smug, "And I won't deny that I'm just generally cooler than everybody else. But jumping roofs was stupid, I'll say that much about it. I didn't need to impress John."

"I guess people will do a lot of dumb shit for the people they like." Nepeta says, stringing together the thread connecting both the stories, "Even when they know it won't end well." She turns to her girlfriend, taking her hand gently, "Well, I'm not going to make you risk your life, Purrezi. I would never ask you to do anything that would put you in danger like that."

"I'm going to take good care of you too." Terezi looks embarrassed to say it out loud in front of everybody, her cheeks a little flushed, "Because I like you a lot, Nepeta."

Nepeta flings her arms around her.

Dave raises an eyebrow at Karkat, who shakes his head. They are not going to have a sappy heart-to-heart in the elevator. Karkat is fucking tired of talking about his feelings instead of fixing things. He wants to be out there, doing things, not just talking. He has wasted far too much of his life sitting around and talking and thinking.

The elevator doors ding and slide open. Each of them take a corner of the mattress and between them, manage to hoist it up so it doesn't drag along the floor. Dave and Nepeta lead the way, walking backwards quickly, with Karkat and Terezi bringing up the rear. They make their way quickly through the lobby and out onto the street. In Skaia, four teens carrying a mattress down the streets is nothing to worry about apparently because not one single person glances in their direction. Karkat would comment but he's more concerned with not dropping Dave's mattress in the shit of the streets.

"Okay, turning left." Dave says, as they reach the corner, "There's no way we're going to be able to fit this in the car, so we're gonna have to take the subway. Karkat, can you make sure I'm not going to walk into a lamppost like a doofus?" He nearly trips over a mailbox, "Dude, I said warn me!"

"You didn't give me enough fucking time to warn you, asshat, slow down!"

Reluctantly, Dave walks a little slower.

They only manage to fit the mattress onto the subway because they turn it on its side. Only now, once they have a moment to breathe, does Karkat ask where the hell they're going. Dave tells him they're going to find the mightiest staircase in Skaia City. Terezi frowns for a moment before realisation dawns on her face and she yells "TO DERSE TOWER!" loud enough to turn a few
heads. Nepeta just looks glad they're not going back to Prospit where the spideritch might be lurking. Now that's a strife Karkat would like to see.

It's hard to fit the mattress back out through the door but they manage it, Karkat and Terezi leading the way up the stairs carefully so that nobody trips up. Though, Terezi nearly trips at least three times without a free hand to feel her way with her cane. Karkat is just a klutz and he falls on his ass once they reach the top of the stairs. He scrambles to his feet quickly, feeling like an idiot, and they continue on their way.

The staircase in Derse tower is magnificent but that only makes it harder to negotiate with a blind girl and Karkat leading.

Dave stops about halfway up the stairs and insists they swap sides.
"Okay, Terezi walk to your left." He instructs, "Yes, just like that."

They swap sides carefully, turning so that Dave can lead.

"Onwards!" Nepeta commands, as they continue up the stairs quicker than ever.

Once they reach the top, Karkat is ready to just lie down and stay there for the next ten years. His arms hurt from lifting the mattress, his legs hurt from the sheer amount of speed walking, and he really needs to take a break. The others don't understand the meaning of the word "break". They're already shifting the mattress to make sure it will slide all the way down the circular staircase to the bottom of the stairs. Dave's still not sure it will work.

"When have we ever let physics get us down?" Terezi asks, "I thought we were gravity defying badass coolkids. That's what you said the other day before you started singing that Idina Menzel song at me."

Dave nods. "Let's fucking shred some waves, squad."

"Did mew just refur to us collectively as "squad"?" Nepeta raises an eyebrow.

"Damn right, I did. We are the sickest squad in Skaia City." Dave takes a seat on the front of the mattress, on his knees to steady himself, "Congratulations, everybody, you are in the squad."

Karkat rolls his eyes and sits beside him on the mattress, digging his nails into it and clinging on tightly. "Shut your hipster trap, Dave, and quit with the squad bullshit."

"You love it really."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't."

"No, you don't."

"Damn it, Dave, yes I do!" Karkat realises what he said and huffs, realising that he's been totally trolled, "You're the worst."

He punches him lightly on the arm and Dave smirks at him.

Carefully, Nepeta sits on the mattress, pulling her girlfriend down with her. And then, they're all sat
there and holding on as tight as they can to the mattress. Karkat stares at the neverending staircase in front of them, wondering for the second time if they're going to finish this scavenger hunt alive. If he dies, he doesn't get to kiss Dave. If he dies, he doesn't get to see Nepeta and Terezi get their happily ever after. If he dies, he won't get to read Dave's stupid webcomic. He closes his eyes tightly, takes a deep breath, and opens them again. He'll just have to make sure he doesn't fall off the mattress then. He wishes these things came with seatbelts.

"Ready?" Terezi asks, having been put in charge of starting them off, "Nobody freaking out?"

"No." Dave says, too quickly.

"Not at all." Karkat says, just as fast.

"Let's just do it." Nepeta says, "Like Shia LaBeouf told us to."

Terezi pushes the mattress towards the stairs, somehow managing to shift it forwards enough that the mattress begins to tilt. That's when Karkat feels sick, knowing this was a mistake. For the longest time- probably about five seconds- they're just sat at the top of the stairs, tilting towards it and he hears Terezi breathing right behind him. He can feel her breath on his neck, fast and nervous. Then, they slide forward. It happens so fast that Karkat is surprised and all he can do is cling to the mattress for his life as they go flying down the staircase at Derse.

The staircase curls like a ribbon down the tower and they smack into walls a few times, bumping off them and yelling. Karkat is on his knees, leaning forward, gripping the fabric of mattress so tightly that his knuckles turn white. They're halfway down, maybe, when Dave starts to cheer. The others are quick to follow suit, yelling enthusiastically, and Terezi punches the air, nearly sacrificing her place on the mattress as she almost goes flying. Luckily, Nepeta grabs her by the back of her shirt and holds onto her firmly.

As the mattress hurtles towards the bottom of the stairs, it doesn't slow down. This time, Terezi really does lose her grip and falls down the last fifteen or twenty stairs independently. Nepeta slips off as they reach the ground floor, sent sliding across the smooth floor on her stomach. The mattress comes to a stop in the middle of the floor, Dave lying on his back and mumbling something that sounds like "we fucking did it, man. We made it happen". Karkat feels a sudden rush of adrenaline for the second time today and he suddenly understands people that take risks all the time for the thrill of it. Then, he flops onto his back beside Dave.

"Dude, we fucking nailed those stairs." Dave says, "Did you see that shit? We came sailing down those stairs like God came sailing down to Adam and Eve. And we said to the people of Derse, "yo, what's up", and bestowed upon them the ancient knowledge of mattress surfing. And they were "dude... That's totally fucking awesome"." "None of that makes any sense." Karkat smiles anyway, honest to God smiles, up at the dark purple ceiling and feels the rush slowly dying down. His heartbeat slows down until it keeps time with his body again and the tingly feeling that spread over his skin recedes dramatically.

"Karkat..." Dave sits up, "Can I tell you something while Pyrope and Nepeta are busy pawing at each other over there?"

The girls are sitting across the room, beside the stairs; Nepeta is carefully checking to see whether her girlfriend is hurt or not, which seems to involve exchanging an awful lot of soft kisses. Terezi is talking, loudly and brightly as ever, making Nepeta laugh. They seem occupied. Karkat looks away from them and looks back to Dave.
'That was a terrible cat pun and I hate you for it but go on.'

"Since we're breaking all the rules now..." Dave clears his throat, "Would it maybe be okay if I kissed you?"

Karkat sits up abruptly, feeling suddenly quite hot under his skin. "What?"

"I want to kiss you." Dave says, "And I'm asking whether it would be okay."

Karkat turns to him. "Strider, we have an agreement. I'm not breaking the agreement because you can't keep it in your pants for more than five fucking minutes. I'm not letting you molest my lips right now in public just because we couldn't wait until the end. That's not how love stories work. You have to wait for it."

"Yeah, I know." Dave gets to his feet, "But you're so good looking when you're all flushed and excited..." Karkat scowls at him, "I'll just shut up now? Before this gets freaky and weird. I'll just... Yeah. We're going to have to carry my mattress all the way back home before we can complete the next thing on the list by the way. I'm starting to think I didn't plan this very well."

"No fucking shit. We went to your apartment, to a theme park, and back to your apartment. Then, to Derse tower, then back to your apartment. Were you and Terezi even thinking practically when you wrote this list or were you just talking out of your waste chutes?"

"We were talking out of our waste chutes." Dave agrees, "Number fourteen: get kicked out of Target." He reads the task in a raspy impression of Terezi, "What were we even thinking when we wrote that? I'm starting to think that we wrote this list at four in the morning. That's when I make all my worst decisions."

"No way is a store going to be open at this time of night." Karkat states, defeated.

"Dude, Target is open till midnight here." Dave pulls Karkat to his feet and slings an arm around him; the arm wrapped around Karkat's shoulders is oddly comfortable and familiar, fitting perfectly around him, "C'mon, dude, we gotta go get kicked out of Target."

As it turns out, the mattress is useful during the next task, since they drag it all the way to Target— which is no easy feat— and end up using it to slide down the aisles. Well, at least, Dave and Karkat do. Whipping up and down the aisles on top of a mattress turns out to be surprisingly fun, even though Karkat ends up falling headfirst onto the floor. When Nepeta slid across the floor earlier, she jumped up like it was nothing and Karkat assumed she was fine. He suddenly feels waves of pity for her as he rubs his sore side.

Dave pulls him back onto the mattress and asks quietly if he's okay. Karkat nods.

"Not that death by mattress wouldn't be amazingly tragic." Dave deadpans, "The death fitting of a hero such as yourself, Karkat."

"Death by guy beating you over the head seems to be the way you're going if you keep mocking me like that." Karkat mumbles, sarcastically.

"I'm not mocking, I'm teasing. There's a difference." Dave grins, "The difference is that teasing is actually sexy as fuck."

"It's really not."

A couple of employees half-heartedly chase them around the store for a while, as they continue
Meanwhile Terezi climbs on top of the shelf stocking cleaning products and engages in a sword/mop strife with her girlfriend. The battle seems pretty even between them, Terezi managing to keep her balance whilst swinging neat hits. Both of them are using their roleplaying names and talking in third person, which somehow makes the whole situation funnier. Nepeta seems to be winning, spinning her mop like something straight out of a samurai movie, until Terezi slices the mop in half with her sword. The broken parts of the mop fall to floor and Nepeta loses her balance. She wobbles, precariously balanced.

For a brief second, Karkat really does think she's going to fall and he catches his breath. Terezi grabs her by the hand and Nepeta hangs there, in the air, tilted back so far that it's miraculous she doesn't fall. She straightens up, looking a little dazed, before she laughs it off. She climbs down from the shelf shortly afterwards, Terezi jumping down after her to chase her around the store. Honestly, it doesn't take long to get themselves kicked out. Though, technically, they don't get kicked out.

They're told to get out and Karkat apologises profusely and Terezi hands over fifty bucks to cover any damage they caused and Nepeta and Dave offer to help clean up the mess. So, they spend at least twenty minutes cleaning up the mess they made in Target before leaving.

"So, technically, we didn't get kicked out." Terezi says, afterwards, as they're lugging the mattress back to Dave's apartment.

"Technically, my ass." Karkat says, "I'm crossing number fourteen off the list regardless of what you think, Pyrope, and moving quickly onto fifteen. Which is..."

He looks pointedly at Dave, who checks the list. "I think it says something about strip poker."

"Strip poker." Karkat repeats. They aren't two words that he likes to see together. Or separately.

"I can't play strip poker, my mom would kill me." Nepeta says.

"What's the point in me playing? I can't even see." Terezi looks disappointed.

"Okay, okay, no strip poker." Dave says, "I was screwing with you anyway." He digs in his back pocket for a marker and corrects the list accordingly, "It actually says that one of us should try and take shots upside down."

"We're underage." Karkat points out.

"That ain't gonna stop any of us." Terezi shrugs, "If you guys aren't willing to do it, I guess I'll have to."
Cassette Twelve: Side B

Chapter Summary

I am not happy with this chapter at all.

Also, last mention of trans issues in the fic probably? I've outlined the last few chapters and I don't think the subject comes up again.

I'd also like to say that prior to reading this chapter, regardless of how happy or unhappy you are in your own skin, your identity is still entirely valid. Karkat and Terezi both feel comfortable enough around their friends for this chapter to happen. Not everybody is as comfortable as they are- I'm definitely not- and that's okay.

I don't know, man, I'm worried this chapter will raise controversy for some reason or another >:/

(Sorry for irregular updates)

Damara, the bartender who apparently owns this place despite looking barely twenty let alone the twenty five she claims, smirks when she sees them approaching the bar. She asks them for ID, teases Dave for at least ten minutes about his 'little harem', before telling them that if they mind the bar, they can take whatever they want from behind it. She digs in her purse for a lighter and heads outside to join the other stoners outside- Terezi's sister is probably among them- leaving four teenagers in charge of a bar. It's not late enough for the bar to be really busy, though Dave does mix a couple of drinks and break three glasses in the process.

"Damara might actually kill you." Terezi informs him and he looks terrified, kicking the remnants of the glass underneath the bar.

"Do you have a shred of responsibility in you?" Karkat asks, "Or do you just screw around regardless of who it affects?"

"The second one, I guess." Dave shrugs, "Responsibility ain't exactly a Strider gene. We're flawed like that." He's pouring Cola into a glass, "But we can make a mean soda. Karkat?"

He pushes the drink towards him and Karkat barely catches it before it can plummet onto the ground with the others. "You're an irresponsible idiot."

"You're not the first person to tell me that." Dave says, "You probably aren't the last either. Remind me again why you like me."

Karkat takes a sip of his stupid soda. "I don't."

"Damn, and to think I thought I was going to finally have a cute boyfriend to take home."

"Shut your face, Strider." Karkat glowers at him, hoping the flashing neon lights in this place make it impossible for Dave to see how red he's probably turned.

"Also, I spiked your drink."
Karkat rolls his eyes and puts his drink down on the counter with a thump. "I just watched you pour this, I know you didn't spike it. Don't joke about stupid things like that, it's not funny."

"Lovers tiff?" comes a familiar voice from their left and Karkat flinches, a stream of swear words escaping his mouth so fast that he's surprised they don't come out garbled. Suddenly aware of how close he's standing to Dave- their arms are touching- he takes a step back and scowls at Eridan Ampora, as his douchey ass approaches the bar. He's dressed up a little since earlier but he's still wearing that stupid scarf around his neck.

"Not that it's any of your business, bitchits, but me and Kitkat aren't dating." Dave is still leaning against the counter, casual, but his tone is surprisingly sharp all of sudden, "I'll have you know that we're best bros that hang out a lot. But now that we've got here, want to explain why you tried to break up my second favourite lesbian power couple?"

"Second favourite?" Terezi sounds offended.

"How the fuck could you bring yourself to screw with Nepeta?" Karkat adds, hoping Ampora can feel his eyes burning holes into him, "Not only is she the nicest person alive, this is her first relationship. She didn't deserve your ass in the way."

Nepeta is sat on the counter, legs crossed. "You guys know I've been here the whole time, right? As adorable as the valiant knight act is, I can kick Eridan's ass myself. Stand down, Karkitty."

Reluctantly, Karkat steps a little away from the counter and crosses his arms.

"Jeez." Eridan Ampora rolls his eyes, "All of ya are so quick to jump on me. Sure, Kar flips his shit every five seconds an' Davve is a complete asshole an' Tez used to give me Chinese burns when we're kids but I'm the one in the wrong?"

"Yes." Karkat says and everybody else murmurs in agreement, nodding.

"Yeah, you are, dude." Dave scoffs, "Ampora, man, c'mon. You fed Nepeta here bullshit to try and ruin her relationship because you were jealous. That makes you a complete and utter dick, according to literally every movie ever. Like, this is Mean Girls and you're Regina George. And Nepeta is Aaron Samuels and Terezi is Cady Heron. And I'm obviously Janis and-"

"Guys, I am handling this!" Nepeta insists, "Just shut up." She slides over to the other side of the bar, landing on her feet beside Eridan and staring him definitively in the eye, "Ampurra, what exactly are you jealous of? Do you like Purrezi or something?"

Eridan looks away. "Not anymore." Then, he looks back at Nepeta. "We used to hate-date."

"Being partners on a group project doesn't constitute a relationship." Terezi says, "And me kicking your ass doesn't count as hate-dating, you idiot."

"Wwell, yeah, I figured that noww." Eridan shrugs, "That's wwhy I came ovver to apologise wwhen I saww you guys standin' around ovver here." He changes the subject quickly, "So, wwhat are wwe doin'?"

"No." Nepeta says, firmly, shaking her head.

"... Wwwhat?"

"Eridan, you really hurt me. You don't just get to apologise and make friends again, this isn't elementary school. I'll think about forgiving you but tonight, I think you should leave. I'm trying to
have a nice night with my girlfriend and you've already tried to ruin it once. I can't risk having you here." Nepeta gestures in the direction of the door, "Get lost."

"That's fair, I guess." Eridan looks puzzled, like he was expecting such a polite response, "I'll just get goin' then, get outta your hair."

"See you around, dickmunch," Karkat says.

"You have such a way with words." Dave tells him, "Dude, I'm serious. You're like the William Shakespeare of throwing shade and telling people to suck their own dicks. Though I guess Shakespeare was technically the Shakespeare of throwing shade. That dude was hardcore. Whatever. If I pay you ten bucks an hour, will you follow me around and slay people that I don't like?"

"I have better things to do." Karkat rolls his eyes, "Eridan, are you going to fuck off or what?"

The hipster is still hovering by the bar. "Are you sure I can't make it up to you, Nep?"

Nepeta frowns. "No, Eridan, I-"

Dave cuts in. "Actually, there is something you can do, Ampora. We've got shit to do, right? So somebody's gonna have to tend the bar 'til Damara finishes up her joint outside. Get back here and serve drunk assholes for us." Before Eridan can answer, he's already turning away, "Let's go and see if Terezi can take upside down shots."

"But Davve-" Eridan slips behind the bar with them, "I've nevver- I don't knoww howw to tend a bar!"

Dave shrugs like *what am I gonna do?* and begins pouring shots carefully, as Terezi heads towards the wall behind the bar, running her hands over it to make sure she knows exactly where it is. Nepeta is talking to her in low tones, probably either trying to encourage her or talk her out of this. But when she pulls away, she's grinning like an idiot and Karkat can't help but wonder how things fell into place so quickly between the two girls. How did they close together so easily when he couldn't even get up the courage to kiss Dave before finishing the list? Just the thought of kissing him made Karkat's heart flutter- either he's excited or he's suffering heart palpitations.

He could kiss him right now if he wanted. The thought sends excited shivers down his spine.

He buries the feeling, somewhere he can still summon it up to regret not acting on it later, and picks up some of the shots on the counter. He briefly wonders if they should leave the bar under Eridan's panicked watch in a place like this but what is he supposed to do? He doesn't want to miss watching Terezi inhale shots whilst balancing on her hands. Speaking of which, she's already upside down with the soles of her shoes pressed against the wall. Her shirt has fallen, showing off her stomach, and the blood is probably already rushing to her head.

They leave Eridan in charge- which Karkat should feel guilty about but come on, it's Eridan. Still, he makes a note to check back on him later.

"I'll give you a dollar for every shot you take, Pyrope." Dave is still pouring- there must be twenty shots lined up by now and fuck, Karkat doesn't want to be arrested by association.

"Get ready to pay up, Coolkid!" Terezi grins, apparently effortlessly being able to support her own body weight in her hands, (Karkat has no idea how she's doing that).

"Are we sure this is a good idea?" Karkat asks, as he walks over, "I'm not going to be hauling your
drunk ass home, Pyrope. And whatever you damage or puke on, you are replacing. I'm taking no responsibility for this shit." He knows full well that he'll clear up any mess she makes and gripe about it, "When you tell this story later, I had no part in it."

"Okay, okay. Whatever you say, Karkles." Terezi doesn't seem worried, "Gimme a shot."

"Don't worry, Terezi isn't a lightweight." Dave tells him, "She's not going to puke."

Flash forward to an hour later and they're in the girls' bathroom, listening to Terezi retching in one of the bathroom stalls and Karkat is flashing Dave I told you so looks. The two of them are waiting outside the stall, while Nepeta worries by her girlfriend's side and rubs her back reassuringly. Karkat looks around the place that he doesn't belong in and pulls his jacket tighter around him, like he's trying to keep the cold out. But instead of the cold, he's trying to keep the rest of the world out. The sound of Terezi hurling again makes him wince.

She inhaled several shots over the course of the ten minutes- Karkat hated how impressed he was- though she had to take a break midway through because she was worried she was going to pass out from all the blood rushing to her brain. She made it through ten shots before she fell onto the floor and laid there, mumbling something about feeling sick. To her credit, she made it nearly a full hour without puking. She seemed fine once they got her off the floor and into a booth instead. When she caught sight of Eridan still behind the bar, she started laughing. Terezi insisted they wait to start the next task until she felt less dizzy, so they had waited in the booth for a while, talking.

When Damara came back, she kicked Eridan out and yelled across the bar at Dave. He went over to talk to her, to explain, and he must have said something smart because she calmed down abruptly and Dave came back with a beer for each of them. Nepeta and Karkat exchanged slightly anxious looks at the idea of drinking- they've seen enough coming of age movies to know it won't end well- and Terezi just groaned. But they all sipped their drinks, Nepeta's hand slipping under the table to squeeze Karkat's wrist with secret excitement, so that their more experienced partners wouldn't see.

On the hour mark, Terezi bolted from her seat. Nepeta was quick on her heels, racing after her, and Dave leapt up. Karkat asked if they were really going to follow and Dave grabbed him by the hand, pulling him after him. They ducked into the bathroom and found Terezi bent over a bathroom stall with Nepeta holding back her hair.

And now, they're waiting outside while Karkat shuffles uncomfortably from foot to foot.

Dave takes this opportunity to jump down from the window sill he was perched on and approach Karkat. An arm creeps around Karkat's shoulders, a hand coming to rest on the top of his arm. And Dave pulls him close.

"Are you cold?" He asks, "You look cold. You can say if you are and... I'll figure out something. I already leant you a jacket so I guess that romantic gesture of me wrapping it around you has been thrown out the window. Shit, I should have waited and done that. That would have been so fucking romantic, you would have had some kind of romance-orgasm. Your inner romcom nerd would have done a million backflips with excitement. Your pants would have dropped immediately."

"As stupid as all of that sounds-" Karkat is not going to admit that yes, that would have been incredibly romantic, "- I'm not cold. I'm just uncomfortable standing in here and listening to Pyrope spit up more than a newborn baby." He crosses his arms, "This is gross. And you said she wasn't going to puke, so fuck you, Dave."

"I said that before I knew that she was going to take so many." Dave shakes his head, "Guess I
forgot that when you line up a challenge, Rezi gets competitive as hell. But I'm the one that should be upset here- I lost ten dollars to her tonight because of this. Do you think I still have to pay up even though she couldn't stomach the shots?"

"Of course you have to pay up, you can't just go back on your word." He pauses, "You're not allowed to go back on your word, Dave, that would make you a really shitty friend. Or future boyfriend or whatever. Not to Terezi, to me. You can't go back on your word."

Dave looks surprised. "I was never going to go back on our deal, Karkat."

"You have to swear." Karkat looks up at him, "On your life. I can't take another heartbreak, I'm not equipped to deal with that shit a second time around."

"I swear on my life, I am not going to go back on our deal." Dave crosses his heart with his hand before letting it drop back to his side; then, he leans in and says quickly, "If you want, we can go wait outside. Get some fresh air, see if the stars are out yet-"

"Dave!" Terezi whines from inside the bathroom stall, releasing her grip on the toilet so that she can kneel up and turn to stare at where she thinks he is, "Dave, don't leave me. I know you want to make out with your boyfriend but I'm your best friend. Sit your ass down and stroke my hair until I feel better."

"Right." Dave goes to her side, squeezing past Nepeta so that he can crouch beside her, "You're okay, Rezi. It's gonna be okay." He actually does stroke her hair, "You still got a decent buzz going on?"

"I puked." Terezi says, sounding disappointed, "Dave, puking sucks."

Nepeta joins Karkat's side. "I think the alcohol got to her brain before she could puke it up. Or something like that. Honestly, I'm not entirely sure how ethanol works but she seems a little... I don't want to say drunk. She's a little different than usual. Just a little."

Skip forward another hour and Dave is back in the driving seat, whistling as he steers, and they're heading out of town to cross the next item off the list. Skinny dipping is a thing that Karkat thought existed purely in movies but apparently, it's real and Terezi put it on the list. He asks her why and she says something about body confidence and gestures to herself. Now that he's observed her a while, he thinks Nepeta is correct. Terezi is drunk; drunk enough to take her pants off and refuse to put them back on, but she's far from being incoherent. He just prays she doesn't do anything stupid.

"You really want me to strip for you, don't you?" Karkat turns to his boyfriend- fuck, he means Dave. He meant to say Dave. Dave is not his boyfriend. "First, strip poker's on the list. Now, skinny dipping?"

"Hey, you heard Pyrope, she put it on the list." Dave focuses his gaze on the road, "And I thought she was joking. I didn't know she'd seriously put it on there. You..." He glances at Karkat, "If the idea makes you uncomfortable, man, you don't have to do it. It's not mandatory you do it. Just as long as somebody does it and I think Drunkrezi back there will be more than willing to jump into a lake butt naked. She has no shame whatsoever."

"This might be the beer talking." Karkat says.

"Dude, you cannot seriously be drunk from half a beer." Dave interjects, "Don't make excuses."

"- but I think I'm going to do it." Karkat says; he explains when he sees the look of surprise on Dave's face, "I mean, I'm not going to pretend that I like my body and shit. I don't hate it though.
And for most of my life, I've strived to do stuff that other kids can do. I don't want to stick out as different. And if everybody else is going to do it, then I'm going to do it too. When will I get a chance to do this all again?

"Didn't anybody ever tell you not to give into peer pressure?" Dave teases, "Just because all your friends jump into a river butt naked doesn't mean that you should follow."

"Didn't anybody ever tell you not to drink and drive underage without a licensed driver in the car?" Karkat retorts.

Dave laughs. "Not in those exact words."

"Your family seem like they'd be cool with it though." Karkat says, "Rose, whilst being a complete smug bitch, actually might be an actual genius. Dirk was a little... Off but he seems like a cool older brother. Roxy... Is every drunk girl in a high school movie."

"Yeah... We're different." One of Dave hands falls from the steering wheel so he can prod Karkat in the shoulder, steering with just his left hand, "We're cool as fuck. But I'd rather have parents that didn't give us up to the care system and never bother to contact us again. Y'know? You're really lucky to have your family, Karkat."

He snorts. "Right."

"I'm not kidding." Dave glances sideways at him.

"Oh, shit." Karkat says, "You're actually serious? You actually want to live with a bunch of nookwhiffers that insist on sticking their faces into your personal business every five seconds of the day? Be my guest, Dave. You would not last a week."

"You underestimate chill I am. I don't break my chill, not for nobody."


"Well, I'm going to have to get used to your family if I'm going to be your boyfriend, aren't I?" Dave seems to realise he's gone too far but he's on a roll now, "Yeah, I said it. I want to be your boyfriend. And I know that's stupid and impulsive- but stupid and impulsive decisions are my forte, if you haven't figured that out by now- but I said it. After all this is over, I'm going to ask you out. And I'm not saying you have to say yes but I might shed some very manly tears if you say no."

"Are you asking me out?" Karkat is dumbfounded.

"No, I'm asking if I can ask you out later. Duh."

Karkat half-shrugs and stares at the road flowing in front of them, snippets of it captured under sporadically placed street lamps, wondering what he's supposed to say. Well... Obviously, he's supposed to say yes. But he's not going to, not right away. After Gamzee, he doesn't want to rush into something he's not sure about.

He shakes his head. "Can you ask me again a few weeks from now?"

"What?" Dave doesn't seem to have been anticipating a 'no'.

"I'm not ready to date you that soon. Let me spend time with you first, dickwad. Don't just jump on my bulge immediately and expect me to say yes. I need time to think it over. You're going to have to wait until I'm ready." Karkat accidentally meets his eye, through the shades, and looks away,
"Ask me out a few weeks from now. Today is too soon."

"That makes sense." Dave's teeth dig into his bottom lip, "Wow... I wasn't expecting- uh, that."

"You're so self-absorbed that you thought I'd start making out with you right here and agree to be your boyfriend instantly?" Karkat raises an eyebrow, "Dave. You know I like you. But you're trying to rush everything." He nudges his hand with his, "I'm not going to disappear into thin air. I'm going to stick around- and when I'm ready, we can date. Officially. Now, shut up and drive, doofus. I have a list to finish and a jackass to make out with later."

Dave nudges his hand back. "I'll wait for you if you hang around for me, Karkles."

"I really didn't want that nickname to stick." Karkat grumbles.

"But Karkles is adorable!" Dave says, in his best imitation of Terezi, his voice crackling in all the right places.

In the backseat, Terezi howls with laughter.

The river that borders the town, the water that looks surprisingly soft in the light of the sun dipping below the horizon, is cold. Or at least, that's what Terezi screams as she trips on the slope and tumbles into the river. Luckily, even Drunkrezi seems to be able to kick her way out of the water and rejoins them at the edge. She's dripping wet already, her shirt clinging to her skin, and she begins to peel her clothes off carefully. Karkat is just wondering how naked you have to be to skinny dip when Terezi unhooks her bra and kicks her boxers off. She's back in the water in seconds flat, squealing.

"Oh my god." Nepeta is staring, scratching her neck consciously, "Oh my god..."

"What?" Dave looks at her funny, "You got something to say, Nepeta?"

"Purrezi is so purretty!" Nepeta says, taken aback.

Dave laughs. "Yeah. Yeah, she is. Should we join her? Make sure she doesn't drown?"

Karkat shifts from foot to foot, unsure.

On the other hand, Nepeta is kicking her sneakers off, wriggling out of her pants. She takes her socks off last, even after she's removed her underwear. Karkat knows this because he's staring anywhere but at her chest. Eventually, he has to turn and face the other way because he's worried that his curiosity will be mistaken as interest. He's not interested in what Nepeta looks like naked, not one bit.

"This is insane." He mutters to himself, dropping down onto his ass and slowly untying his left shoe.

"If you're not comfortable, dude, you don't have to do it." Dave reminds him, pulling his shirt off over his head and nearly getting tangled in it, "I totally respect whatever you decide to do but I'm gonna remind you that we're all friends here. Or some shit like that. Ain't nobody gonna be judging you for what you got going on under the shirt."

"I already decided I'm going to do it." Karkat lines his shoes up neatly, unbuttoning his pants and folds them up to place in a pile. "I'm not going to change my mind."

He purposely doesn't make eye contact with anybody as he slowly removes his sweater, pulling his
binder with it. The cold wrapping around his body surprises him, making him shiver, and he can't break his gaze from the ground. He... He's never done this before.

"Dude, you're shaking." Dave comments from behind him.

Karkat pulls his underwear off, stripping his last layer of dignity. "That's because it's cold as fucking Frosty the Snowman out here."

Slowly, he stands, ignoring his legs shaking, and turns to Dave.

For a long moment, they seize each other up, looking each other up and down. Dave is the most attractive human being Karkat has ever seen—though he might be a little biased—and he swears, crossing his arms consciously over his chest. God, Karkat must look like complete garbage to him. After a long moment, Dave removes his sunglasses and leaves them with his clothes.

"We're a vulnerable pair of shits." Dave says, his eyes narrowed as they adjust.

"Yeah. Yeah, we really are." Karkat can't believe that he's made himself so stupidly vulnerable in front of a guy he barely knows, "So?"

"So?" Dave frowns.

Karkat inhales and speaks as steadily as he can. "Are you going to revoke your interest in me?"

"Fuck no, what kind of dumbass do you take me for?"

Karkat smiles, making sure to keep his eyes up. If he looks down at himself, he might freak out. Dave is looking at him— but he's really looking at him, looking him hard in the eye and saying more than his stupid metaphors ever could.

_Dave._

There's a splash that startles them back to the present. It's the sound of Nepeta leaping into the river, falling in facefirst and coming back up for air so that she can giggle. Terezi is laughing at her side, splashing her with water. Dave and Karkat share another long look before Dave slopes his way down the river bank and slips into the water. Which just leaves Karkat to stand on the riverbank, staring at his friends and wondering if he should join them. What's that old saying? _When in Rome._ He scrambles into the water after Dave, thankful that he can just about touch the bottom with the tips of his toes.

Honestly, he can't believe he's doing this. After years of retreating back into himself and doing everything he could to hide what he was born into, Karkat didn't think he was ever going to get to step foot in a pool again. And now, here he is. Naked. Completely fucking naked, freezing his ass off in a river with a bunch of idiots. He can't help laughing a little as his skin begins to grow used for the water and he sinks into it a little further. Dave is drifting by lazily, offering him a half-smile that looks like it wants to be a full smile.

"Hey, Karkat." Nepeta says, to get his attention. She splashes him in the face with water.

"Wha-?! What the fuck, Leijon?" Karkat scowls through his dripping hair, "What the fuck?"

Nepeta laughs. He stares at her. Then, he laughs too.

Karkat splashes her back. "Consider this war, Leijon!"
Though he knows dysphoria will likely roll back in waves soon enough, for now he isn't any different from any other guy. Nobody's staring, nobody's judging, and not for the first time, he thinks that things might be different after tonight. Nepeta splashes him and Terezi and Dave yell encouragement from the sidelines, urging the splashing-war on. Soon, they'll have to move onto the next task. But right now he takes advantage of the moment; and he lives in it.
"You don't have to hold my hand, Strider." Karkat insists, clinging to the edge of the ice skating rink and determined to stay clinging to it for the rest of his life if he has to. He knows that if he lets go for even a second, he's definitely going to fall over and he is not going to risk his dignity like that- especially not when he insisted that he'd done this a million times before.

"I'm not holding your hand, I'm trying to convince you to stop holding onto the side like a newborn baby clings to its mother for food and nurturing. Stop trying to siphon milk off the edge of the rink, bro. You're a big kid now, you gotta start eating your lunchables instead." Dave has been standing beside him the whole time, apparently balancing on the ice with ease, and waiting patiently for him to be ready.

"What the fuck does that even mean?" Karkat yells, in exasperation, as his left foot slips a little and he nearly falls flat on his face, "You're spewing bullshit again, Dave, be careful that you don't slip in it and land on your stupid ass."

"I think you're the one in danger of slipping, Karkles." Dave moves closer, his hand falling on Karkat's wrist. "Don't worry, dude, I'll catch you if you fall. I'm pretty sure that's the number one rule of bro-code or "brode": bros don't let best bros make idiots of themselves on ice." He takes Karkat's other wrist, holding him steady, "I know that's an oddly specific rule to be number one but just roll with it, okay?"

"You're just making this shit up, aren't you?" Karkat says, as he reluctantly releases his grip on the side and grips onto Dave tightly, "You're really bad at lying."

"And you're really bad at this. C'mon, let's go slowly away from the edge." Dave guides him, holding him by the wrists, stopping every time Karkat squeaks in a completely manly way and stumbles on the ice, "Yeah, man, you're doing great."

"Dave, I am not doing great, I can't even- FUCK." Karkat really does fall that time and Dave really does catch him, "Holy crap on a shitstick, please don't let me land on my ass." He starts clinging to him like he was previously clinging to the edge of the rink, "Dave."

"What happened to Mr "I go ice skating every day, I'm basically an Olympian"?" Dave looks down at him and they bump foreheads, "Shit, man, is your skull made of pure diamonds? That hurt like hell." He chuckles, "You haven't been ice skating before, have you?"

"I was trying to impress you, dumbass." Karkat mumbles, "Now, stop clinging."

"I'm clinging? You're clinging."

"How come your fingers are digging into my ribs then?"

"I don't know, the same reason that you're basically strangling me."
There's a giggle as Nepeta slides past on the ice and comes to a stop in front of them, casual as ever. Of course, somebody as athletic and nimble as her would pick up ice skating within seconds of stepping onto the ice. She's lapped them about twenty times, whizzing past with a smile on her face, and waves to Terezi, who is sat at a booth, each time. Despite the fact Terezi can't see. It's a sweet enough gesture, Karkat guesses.

"You guys just can't keep your hands off each other, can you?" Nepeta raises her eyebrows suggestively.

"Fuck!" Karkat shoves Dave away and slips, landing with a thump on the ice, "SHIT." Nepeta flashes them a smug my ship is canon look before racing away again.

"Screw you, Leijon." Karkat mutters, even though she's gone. He tries to push himself back onto his feet, shivering at how cold the ice is against the palms of his hands, but his skates just scrape across the ice and he lands on his hip hard enough to curse again. If he breaks anything, he swears he's going to get Terezi to sue this place.

Dave looks concerned, chewing his his bottom lip. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Karkat insists, giving up and crossing his arms, "Freezing my ass off but I'm fine."

"C'mon." Dave pulls him back to his feet and he doesn't stop there. He holds Karkat tightly by the hands to make sure he doesn't lose his grip on him and he moves backwards, pulling Karkat with him. Karkat has to swallow his fear hard to stop himself from yelling every expletive he knows, as he's pulled away from the edge of the rink and directly into danger.

"This is bullshit." He manages, eventually, keeping his voice steady somehow.

"You gotta move your feet to skate y'know." Dave tells him, as they weave through the small clump of people that are skating at this time of night, "Just follow my lead, you'll be fine. I'm not gonna let you fall on your ass, I promise. Bro-code?"

He holds out his fist.

"Bro-code." Karkat agrees, bumping fists with him before returning to holding on.

Slowly, he figures out how to move his skates across the ice without slipping up. He's ashamed to admit how long it takes him, especially when Nepeta laps them again and again and again, but when he catches Dave smiling at him- and then pretending he's not because it wouldn't be cool- it makes him feel warm inside. Even though, on the outside, he's pretty sure that he's freezing. The irony of wearing a sweater yesterday in the sweltering heat but not today when he's been cold as shit occurs to him. At least he has Dave's jacket- which is somehow nicer than any jacket Karkat owns, even though it's falling apart. It's just... Well... It's Dave's jacket and that makes it infinitely better than any other jacket.

He's not going to pretend that he doesn't fall over again because he does a dozen different times, pulling Dave over with him more often than not. But once he realises that nobody's staring at him like he's an idiot, he loosens up. He swears and he laughs and pushes Dave's shoulder lightly whenever he makes a joke about Karkat "falling for him". But he masters skating enough that he spins easily with Dave, spinning around and around and around until all the lights blur into something like a million suns and everybody else disappears. Dave gets dizzy before he does and Karkat holds him up until he can see straight again.

"I told you you'd be fine if you followed my lead." Dave says, as they're standing there.
"I can't believe that you were actually right about something. That's a first for you." Karkat teases and Dave rolls his eyes, bumping him with his shoulder, "Hey."

"Hey." Dave repeats, "Has anybody ever told you that you have a really nice smile?"

Karkat realises he's smiling. "Has anybody ever told you that you're really soft for a coolkid?"

"Oh, yeah." Dave says, "I guess I shoulda said hot or smokin' or something. But your smile is really... Uh, I guess I'd say beautiful if I wasn't tough as shit and completely awesome. Instead, I'm gonna saying banging."

"You're ridiculous." Karkat tells him, "The most fucking ridiculous person I've ever met. And that is saying something because my best friend speaks mostly in cat puns."

Nepeta zooms past again. "Karkitty!"

"I've told you I think it's stupid!" Karkat calls after her.

"Anyway, we haven't got long 'til midnight." Dave drops his hand abruptly, "We should go."

"No!" Karkat says, too fast, "Can't we just... Enjoy being here? Five more minutes?"

Dave stares at him for a moment in confusion before his grin returns. "Sure. Sure we can."

All good things come to an end and finally, Karkat realises that if they have any hope of finishing the list, they're going to have to leave soon. He grabs Nepeta by the arm and they slide off the ice, sitting in the booth Terezi nabbed to remove their skates. The blind (slightly drunk) girl seems delighted to have them back, since she had nobody to talk to while they were gone. It must have been boring, only being able to listen but not being able to watch. She chats avidly to Nepeta, apparently at what Dave describes as "the peak".

"The height of of her happy drunkenness." He tells Karkat, as he kicks one of his skates off, "After this, she's probably going to crash down into unhappy-drunkenness. Now, I've seen Rezi drunk before and it's not a pretty sight after she comes down. We just gotta be there for her when it happens, okay? All the things she keeps buried bubble to the surface like some fucked up champagne of emotion."

Karkat frowns.

"Let's go." Nepeta says, brightly, helping her girlfriend to her feet, "We have to go break into..." She pulls the list from her back pocket and scans it, "Skaia City High School?"

"What?" Karkat splutters, "Break into-"

"My high school!" Terezi looks delighted.

"- a high school?" Karkat finishes, horrified, "We aren't doing that!"

Five minutes later and he's sat in the passenger seat with his arms crossed. As much as he argued with Dave, and then Nepeta, and then Terezi, he was shot down every single time. And reluctantly, he called shotgun and climbed into the car after the others.

"I can't believe I seriously agreed to do this. Stupid list." He grumbles.

"Guess you're just eager to finish, huh?" Dave looks smug and Karkat rolls his eyes, "Or we're running out of time. Maybe a little of both reasons? Don't pretend you can't wait to kiss me. I'm a
great kisser. Though the one guy I have kissed turned out to be straight... That had nothing to do with my kissing. I'm great, I-"

"Dave." Karkat holds up a hand to shut him up, "Don't worry. My standards are low."

"Don't worry, I'll bend over and limbo under your standards." Dave says, "I'll fucking dive under your standards somehow, sliding into the hopefully future boyfriend zone."

"That makes no sense. What the fuck does that even mean?"

"I honestly have no idea." Dave starts laughing; then, after a quick glance at the girls in the backseat, he clears his throat, "I'm stupid for you, you know."

"Are you sure? You seem to just be stupid in general." Karkat says, "Everything that comes out of your mouth is stupid and scarcely any of it makes any sense. It's like you invent these stupid metaphors out of nowhere to impress people. Spoiler alert: it doesn't work."

Dave shrugs. "I don't know, dude, I am pretty dumb. But I mean I'm stupid for you. I'm normally even smoother than this, which might surprise you but it's true."

"Dave Strider, are you implying that you like me so much it renders you incoherent?" Karkat raises an eyebrow, "Because that would be the stupidest thing I ever heard come out of your mouth. And that is saying something."

"Fuck you, I'm trying to share my feelings with you." Dave puts a hand to his chest, feigning hurt, "I can't believe that you don't want to hear about my internal emotional struggles. What kind of bro are you? Everybody knows that your best bro always has a shoulder for you to soak with very manly tears."

Karkat sighs. "Fine. Tell me about your deep emotional struggles."

Dave takes a deep breath, exhales, and puts on a serious face. "Well, I guess it all goes back to when I was a little kid and Rose drew all over my Sailor Moon DVDs to get back at me for trying to drown her cat. And I've just never been the same. I mean, she drew a moustache on Usagi. I think that's really where all the emotional trauma stems from, y'know?"

Karkat rolls his eyes.

"Guys." Nepeta interrupts, tapping Karkat on the shoulder.

She's sat in the backseat, buckled in, with a sleepy Terezi draped across her. Nepeta had to half-carry Terezi into the car from the skating rink, where the older girl promptly passed out on her lap. Terezi has been in a drowsy "mostly asleep but still awake enough to make fun of Dave every few minutes" state ever since, her head on Nepeta's shoulder.

"What's up, 'Peta?" Dave glances back at her in the mirror.

"Should we call our parents?" Nepeta is frowning, "Mom might be worried that we just disappeared. Crap, she might have called the cops by now and reported us as missing."

"You didn't get somebody to cover for you?" Karkat facepalms, "Oh my god. Call her. Or call your sister and tell her that you'll be back tomorrow. If your Mom grounds you for the rest of your life, you brought it on yourself. I'm not taking the fucking fall for you, you're the one that insisted on coming with me."
"Terezi, I'm borrowing your cell, okay?" Nepeta presses the phone to her ear.

Meanwhile, Dave turns to Karkat. "I had no idea that you guys were related."

"We are not related."

"Jeez, Karkles, don't shit yourself. I just assumed-"

"It's fine." Karkat crosses his arms, "Our parents flirting is just... Weird, I guess. We don't really talk about it. But dad keeps asking me how I'd feel about having sisters, so I get the idea that he's going to make a move soon."

"Weird." Dave agrees.

Nepeta is talking avidly in the backseat, quickly enough that she's not letting her mom get a word in, and she only pauses when she's finished. And she nods for a while, mumbles a little, before hanging up and shrugging at them. There's a strange look on her face- something like annoyance but nowhere near as harsh.

"What's wrong?" Terezi wonders, her hands crawling onto Nepeta's leg, "Something's wrong, I just know it. Is your mom mad? Doesn't she like me? She must like me, I'm the best."

"It's nothing to do with you, Rezi." Nepeta says, "She just wants me to come home. But I told her tomorrow. She's not happy about it but what's she gonna do?"

"Send a search party?" Karkat suggests.

"Call the cops?" Dave guesses.

"Ground you forever?" Terezi opens one eye, "I don't want you to be grounded forever."

"Let's just finish this list." Nepeta keeps her eyes forward, trying not to smile.

They pull up outside Terezi's home first, which makes Karkat frown until Dave explains that there's more to number eighteen than meets the eye. And he explains that it's more of a... Get revenge on Vriska based thing that Terezi added to the list yesterday.

Karkat follows Terezi to the front door, where she fumbles with her key for about ten minutes before Dave gently removes it from her hand and unlocks the door himself. The lights downstairs are turned off but Terezi flicks them on, a look of concern on her face, and she stumbles to her Mom's study quickly, her hand pressed against the door to keep herself upright. The door is open and Terezi pushes it.

Karkat doesn't listen to their conversation- he doesn't have the right to- but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what's going on. Terezi's Mom is obviously overworking herself and Terezi clearly isn't happy about it. Whether she's more emotional because she's tipsy, Karkat can't tell, but when Terezi reappears, he thinks he spots tears in her eyes. She rubs them away with her thumb before gesturing for them to follow and racing up the stairs. Karkat and Nepeta exchange looks before they rush after her. Something like- concern? Worry? Friendship?- pounds in Karkat's chest as he reaches the top of the stairs.

Terezi is already dragging a heavy wooden chest out of her closet, throwing it open and digging through the contents of it. Within moments, lonely pieces of costumes are strewn across the floor.
She's tossing things over her shoulder and she nearly smacks Dave in the face with a sword. He ducks out of the way just in time or things could have ended badly. Karkat stares at Nepeta until she looks at him and he holds steady eye-contact with her until she looks away again. Then, Nepeta steps towards her girlfriend.

"Terezi." She says, unsure, "Terezi, stop."

Her girlfriend freezes.

"You're drunk." Nepeta tells her, "Everything looks worse when you're drunk."

"My family looks pretty bad when I'm sober too." Terezi's throat makes an odd noise like a swallowed sob, "Can we just finish this stupid list already? I'm tired."

"Terezi, you can take a break." Dave says, "You don't have to come with us."

"I do. I added this extra thing to the list as soon as I got with Nepeta because I wanted to show her that I was over Vriska. This is my thing." Terezi sniffs, "Nepeta, I just want to prove how much I love you by pranking my bitchy ex-girlfriend. I thought it would be romantic. Or fun. Whatever."

"In what world is that romantic?" Karkat whispers.

Dave steps on his foot. "Dude. Not the time."

Karkat steps on his foot in return. "She took the Scott Pilgrim thing too literally."
Cassette Thirteen: Side B

Chapter Summary

I drew some neprezi for this fic... Which can be found on my tumblr (http://h3y-d4v3-1s-th1s-you.tumblr.com). I also- even though it's way too late in the story for this-decided to track the tag 13&/12 mixtapes on tumblr in case anybody wants to contact me that way.

Chapter twenty eight will be posted directly after this one.

"Do you really think we should have let them go on their own?" Dave asks, pulling his knees up to his chest and slinging one arm around them. He's colder than he wants to let on, that's for sure, but every time Karkat offers him his jacket back, he vehemently refuses. They're sat on the hood of the car, parked outside Skaia City High School, and it's dark outside. It's not a bad kind of dark because Karkat has found that if he squints through the pollution, he can just about make out the stars glittering overhead. It's like being watched over.

"This is Terezi's big revenge plot, not ours. I just hope she doesn't do something stupid." Karkat is laying on his back, fears about falling to his death having vanished twenty minutes ago, "But she seems to be a pretty smart, if emotional, drunk."

"Rezi's the best." Dave replies, simply.

When it falls silent and they don't have to say anything more, Karkat just listens. He can hear the sound of cars passing, hopefully not cops because they must look pretty suspicious sat out here, and he can hear the sound of Dave breathing softly beside him. Everything smells like it's hot like cider and burnt with flames, like everything is slowly burning to the ground. This shouldn't be in any way soothing but it is somehow. It feels... Right, somehow.

Skaia City. Maybe this is where he was supposed to be after all, the place that he was always supposed to belong. He never really thought he'd like the city much- his dad always described it as being a pretty awful place and he wasn't completely wrong- but while he doesn't feel completely at ease, he feels for the first time like he is somebody. Which is weird because far more people know him back home than they do here. But the city... Comes with a sense of recognition, he guesses. And he wonders, if he had grown up here, what would his life be like now? Would he be different, more confident? Would he and Dave have already been dating for years now? Could today have been their anniversary?

"This is my favourite time of year." Dave says, tracing a finger up and down Karkat's arm lazily, completely unaware of the million fireworks he sets off inside his chest, "Y'know? Fall. Fall is pretty. Fall in the city is nice, Karkat, I think you'll like it. If you come back and see me after all this is over, I mean. Your dad might ground you forever but I reckon we could sneak you out a few times. I really want you to see the leaves change colour."

"Slow down, Wordsworth." Karkat turns his gaze towards him, "What makes you think that I'm going to want to see you again?"

He stares long enough for Dave to think he's serious. Then, he breaks character and laughs.
"Of course I'll come and see you, you bulgejumper." Karkat rolls his eyes, "I'm going to tell our grandchildren the story of how we met and they're going to think it's so romantic."

"And I'm the one moving too fast?" Dave leans in, like he wants to kiss him and Karkat's mouth catches fire, but then he leans back again; he remembers their agreement, "I take a lotta photos during fall. You could come with, help me scout out some cool shit to look at."

"It's not like I have any other plans," Karkat shrugs, "Wait, shouldn't you be going to college in the fall? Didn't you graduate?" A sudden panic fills him and he sits up, as if Dave's going to disappear to college right then and there, "What if you go out of town?"

"Dude, chill." Dave seems to be looking at the sky, "I ain't gonna go rushing off to college. I just got out of high school, man, I ain't keen to go rushing back right away. I'm maybe gonna screw around, jam a little, work on a portfolio. I don't know. College seems like it would crush my creative spirit or some shit."

"The words of a true loser that couldn't get into community college."

"My track record disappointed them." Dave shrugs, "You've still got a year of high school left, right? You were a junior, you're gonna be a senior?" Karkat nods, "Cool, so we can chill sometime. I'll be your college boyfriend. Everybody will wish they were as cool as us."

"You just said you're not going to college, dumbass." Karkat rolls his eyes, "There's no point spewing contradictory shit every five minutes at me like I'm going to be impressed by your inconsistency and stupidity." He pauses, "On the tapes, you call yourself a senior. You must have recorded them before summer vacation started."

"Yep."

Slowly, Karkat feels rage bubbling up inside him. "So, why in fuck's name did you wait until the end of summer to send them to me? Did you really have to plan everything that far in advance? Why would you make me wait until now?"

"The same reason you're making me wait to kiss you, I guess." Dave says, "It builds romance and tension. You want rom-com level shit, you're going to have to let me work out some of the creative aspects by myself. I want my romance plot to be the firework ending to your summer."

The anger fades as quickly as it reared its head. "That's dumb."

"You're dumb."

"Dave, I'm not twelve, I'm not going to engage in petty arguments with you over stupid bullshit like how dumb you are." Karkat lasts about three seconds, "But just for the record, your face is dumb."

Dave laughs and it lights up the sky.

They fall back into quiet. There are small bumps creeping over Dave's arms slowly; that combined with the odd shiver and the closely crossed arms are enough to break his "not cold" façade into a million pieces. Still, he tries to keep up a poker face as he hunches over himself. Karkat offers him the jacket back. Dave declines. He shivers again. Karkat insists. Dave refuses. Eventually, Karkat shrugs the jacket off completely and slides it around Dave's shoulders. He tries to push Karkat's helping hands away but Karkat persists until he gives in and accepts the stupid jacket. Dave mumbles something like a thanks and slips the jacket on properly.

Karkat tells him that they'll take turns and the smile that Dave offers him is bright enough that
Karkat forgets where he is for a moment. He pulls it back, scowling and shuffling closer to Dave, suddenly aware- without the jacket- of just how cold it is. Fall really is beginning to creep up on them, one burnt leaf at a time, and Karkat lets his head come to rest on Dave's shoulders. For the first time all day, Karkat doesn't abruptly pull away after realising what he's doing. He stays. And Dave slings an arm around his shoulders, his hand ice cold.

"You look exhausted." Dave tells him, "Sexy as hell, of course, but exhausted. If you wanna take a quick power nap, I'll make sure you don't fall off the hood and break your face on the ground of the parking lot."

"How fucking gentlemanly of you." Karkat snorts but he doesn't make any attempt to lift his head, "If I'm not awake in five minutes, smack me over the head or something." He barely stifles a yawn- he thinks the stars fluttering overhead are making him feel it's later than it is, "I don't want to miss anything important."

"I won't let you miss anything." Dave seems to playing with his hair because Karkat can feel his fingers tangled in it.

Karkat sits there, silently, his eyes closed and his body curled towards Dave. Sleep should be easy, since he got very little sleep last night and so much has happened since then. If he were a normal person, he'd probably feel asleep immediately. If he were normal, he'd close his eyes and everything would fall away from him. Karkat wishes he were normal. Instead, he just rests there and sucks the taste of autumn into his lungs, waiting.

Eventually, he concedes. "Dave?"

"Yeah?"

"Talk to me." Karkat doesn't move, "Talk about something dumb until I fall asleep."

"Okay." Dave's still running his fingers through Karkat's hair, "What do you want to do? After college, I mean. I wanna go into music myself or photography. Something cool like that. I already make a couple of mixes, which you heard, but I need better equipment to make something real good. Might hafta get a job on the side."

"You made those mixes?" Karkat is impressed, "They actually... Weren't completely terrible."

They were great.

"I only made a couple of them." Dave shrugs, (his whole body shifts and Karkat grumbles), "Most of them were just songs I thought you'd like, which is really dumb since we hadn't even met yet. But when it comes to music, I'm pretty good at figuring people out. You did like the tapes, right?"

"Yeah, I did." Karkat admits, "I don't listen to a lot of music at home so it was nice to hear something good. Even if some of it was pretty miserable."

"That's music, man, full of raw emotion." Dave says, "And you didn't answer my question. What do you want to do one day? Yell insults at people full-time? You'd be great at that."

"Fuck, I don't know." Karkat mumbles, "I always wanted to look into... Something where I can help people. Some important job. But I'll probably get stuck in some shitty dead-end job somewhere anyway." It sounds dumb out loud, "And it looks like the four of us are embarking on a life of crime now. This is just the start of our lives on the run. Looks like I don't have to worry about going back to school after all."
Dave's breath hitches. "You're worried about that? Is it really that bad, Karkles?"

"That fucking nickname." Karkat grumbles.

There's a pause.

"Ditch school, we'll go travel the world or something." Dave says.

"Ugh, you never take anything seriously." Karkat yawns.

That's the last thing he can remember before he's suddenly aware of himself again. Sleeping... Karkat has never found sleep to be easy, not since his mom died. When he does fall asleep, nowadays, it's a lot more like losing consciousness. One moment he is drowsy but awake and the next moment, he is suddenly waking up with no idea that he had fallen asleep. Now, he becomes aware of the resounding soreness in his neck for sleeping at such an angle and of the arm belonging to Dave that now cups his back. Dave's pressed against him, closely, and Karkat can smell whatever Dave styles his hair with. Slowly, he sits up.

As soon as he's sure that he doesn't need it, he wriggles free of Dave's arm and lets out a yawn as he stretches. Something in his back clicks back into place and he groans, wiping drool from the corner of his mouth. Gross. He can't believe that he drooled on Dave's shoulder like that. Dave nudges him in the ribs so that Karkat looks at him.

Dave's smile makes his skin tingle. "Hey, sleeping beauty."

"Fuck off and die, Dave." Karkat replies but there's no anger behind it; looking around, he notices that the girls still aren't back, "How long has it been? Aren't Terezi and Nepeta back yet? God, what are they doing in there?"

"I highly suspect they're enjoying seven minutes in heaven in broom closet somewhere." Dave smirks, "If y'know what I mean. And no, I haven't seen either of them. Unless they snuck past us somehow, they're still inside. As for your first question, I wasn't counting the minutes but it was long enough for you to start snoring."

"I don't snore, you asshat." Karkat smacks him on the arm lightly.

"Au contraire."

"Go shove your French up your ass and let's go find the girls. I'm going to pissed if we miss the deadline because they were too busy making out somewhere." Karkat is about to slide off the hood of the car, when he catches sight of them.

Even from here, it's not difficult to recognise the two silhouettes as they wriggle out of the small window in the girls' bathroom and drop down against the wall outside. Nepeta lands nimbly on her feet before straightening up, picking up the backpack that she threw down first. Terezi quickly follows, stumbling on the landing a little, and nearly falling. She recovers herself in time and the two shadows move back towards the parking lot at a hurried pace. Karkat slides off the hood, walking to meet them, and he's aware of Dave following him. At the edge of the parking lot, on the sidewalk, the two groups meet and Karkat catches sight of the panic on Nepeta's face.

He doesn't even ask why her hands are covered in cracking blue paint. He's beyond the point of questioning the endless stupid pranks Terezi and Vriska play on each other.

"We think we heard somebody in there." She says, quickly, in a voice barely louder than a whisper, "Purrezi thought it might be a cop or something."
"Or a ghost! I thought it could be a ghost." Terezi says, brightly, apparently having perked up again, though there are shadows running underneath her eyes.

"It was probably just my ghost because we died of boredom waiting for you two to get your asses back here. Who the hell takes that long to set up a stupid prank?" Karkat crosses his arms, though he casts his eyes around nervously to make sure that they aren't being watched. "Let's just go already."

"Somebody's in a rush." Nepeta looks smug, "Karkat and Dave, sitting in a tree-"

"This isn't kindergarten!" Karkat yells.

Terezi covers his mouth with her hand. "Keep your voice down, the ghost might hear us!"

"There is no ghost." Dave and Nepeta both say and Karkat mumbles against Terezi's hand.

"There is no ghost." echoes a hollow voice that sounds far away and close simultaneously. There's a shuffle of movement as somebody drops down from the same window Nepeta and Terezi climbed from and walks across the grass towards them. Their form is difficult to make out until they grow closer, the dim evening light crossing their face. Terezi takes several steps back, pulling Karkat with her because she still hasn't relaxed her hold on him. Dave, on the other hand, seems frozen to the spot. Nepeta shrieks a little as the figure stumbles onto the sidewalk.

It's a girl, dressed mainly in black and grey, with her dark hair falling in her face.

"Ghost!" Terezi pronounces, immediately. She tries to make a grab for her cane, her hand falling from Karkat's mouth, before remembering that she had left it in car. Instead, her hands clench into fists. Karkat doesn't even bother telling her that you can't punch a ghost. Or that ghosts don't exist.

"I'm not a ghost." The girl pushes her hair back out of her face, "You guys, it's just me!"

It's Aradia.

"Did I spook you?" She grins at them, her teeth very white in the dark.

"Holy shit." Dave's words escape under his breath, "Holy fucking mother of shit."

"What are you guys doing out here so late at night?" Aradia continues, "Wait, let me guess. You decided to prank Vriska. Damn, I wish I could have come with you guys. I really don't like her." A dark look crosses her face momentarily before her grin snaps back into place, "Anyway, what's up?"

Karkat tries to speak but his words crumple in his mouth.

"What's up?" Nepeta repeats, "What on earth are you doing out here in the middle of the night? Were you following us around in there?"

"I wasn't following you, I was looking for you. I must have come close if you heard me." Well, that solves The Ghost Of Skaia City High School Mystery, "I had something important to tell you guys but I couldn't find you in there. I figured you must have left, so I came outside, and here we are right now."

"Fucking-" is all Karkat can manage, confused.

"How did you know we were at the school?" Dave says, "And more importantly, why didn't you
just come and talk to me and Karkat? We were sitting out here in plain view."

"That's the point!" Aradia snaps her fingers, excitedly, "That's what I wanted to tell you."

She waits until Terezi says. "Tell us what?"

"Apparently, Eridan Ampora saw you guys sitting out here "in plain view" and thought it was suspicious. That's what he claims, at least, but I'm pretty sure he just doesn't like you guys. So he called the police and they're on their way here, right now!"

"Damn you, Eridouche!" Terezi waves her fist in the air.

Then, Aradia pauses, "Wait. No, that hasn't happened yet. That's going to happen in the next twenty seconds. Ugh, time is such a difficult concept to grasp."

"Wibbly, wobbly, timey-wimey." Dave says, in agreement (?).

Karkat doesn't even question why she knows all this. "So, Eridan's going to spot us within the next twenty seconds and call the cops?"

"Yep." Aradia says, "Then, they investigate and find Terezi's flashlight inside the bathroom and you all get taken in for questioning. You never finish the tapes, you and Dave don't kiss, and Dave never asks you on a date to the movies two weeks from now."

"Future Dave is motherfucking smooth." Dave says, before suddenly realising the insanity of the situation, "How do you know all this?"

"Well-" Aradia is cut off.

"Duck!" Nepeta yells, pulling her girlfriend down. All of them hit the ground, Karkat grazing his knees in the process. "So, if Eridan never spots us, none of that happens?"

"Nope." Aradia looks happy about all of this.

"We just don't let him spot us then." Terezi says, "We lay low until he's gone and then we get the fuck out of here."

"Aren't you glad I came to warn you?" Aradia smiles.

"Yeah, thanks." Karkat says, 90% sure that this is all bullshit and everybody here is completely insane. But even if that's true, his heart is still set pounding in his chest from the idea of the danger they could be in. There's nothing like danger to bring people together- any avid movie watcher knows that- and he notices Terezi kissing her girlfriend against the side of the car. They stay there for what feels like years, Karkat's legs beginning to ache, before Aradia declares the coast to be clear. Dave bumps fists with her and then, everybody climbs back into the car.

"Since I'm already here..." Aradia says, revealing her true intentions, "Do you guys mind if I help you accomplish the penultimate task? Since Feferi went home and Porrim closed up the store early, I've got nothing better to do with my time."

And that's how Karkat ends up standing on the roof of the nearest apartment block with a psychic, a cat girl, a blind girl, and an insufferable douchebag that he can't help falling for late on Saturday night. He'll admit, when he and Nepeta had torn open the first tape on Friday morning, this is not where he expected to end up. But he's glad that he's here, even if being here means standing at the edge of a building, sizing up the gap between this one and the next one. Dave used to do this with
John, which is perhaps why it's on the list, but Karkat's still not sure that he can live up to John. Dave really seemed to like the guy.

Looking down at the street below, he's wondering if the gap is even possible to jump. It feels like the longer he stares at it, the wider the gap becomes. That's when Dave approaches him, standing beside him, and also begins to survey the gap. He's standing so close that Karkat's not entirely he remembers what it feels like to breathe properly. He feels dizzy staring down so instead, he fixates his gaze on Dave. God, he's so fucking beautiful.

Jumping every rooftop from here to Dave's place seems dangerous and a little crazy but Karkat thinks that they might be doing this because Dave wants some closure. He did this with John, he'll do this with Karkat, and he'll have come full-circle.

Karkat knows that if he waits any longer, he's not going to be able to do this.

That's when Dave takes his hand. "Are you ready?"

"Just fuck me up." Karkat groans.

And together, they leap over the city, and land safely on the next roof.
Standing up here on the roof, Karkat can see the glowing eyes of buildings and the early dim blinking of streetlights staring back at him. The city doesn't look quite as scary as it did before, not when he's standing above it like this.

Using their perhaps time-wasting method of travel, him and his friends had eventually made it back to the apartment that Dave and Rose share. Or the roof of the building at least, where Nepeta had wobbled and nearly fallen but Terezi had caught her in her arms. Aradia seemed to float over the gap, landing neatly on her feet and yelling something excitedly about feeling like a real-life Indiana Jones. Karkat had been last, following Dave, and a sense of sadness had accompanied the feeling of his feet making contact with the roof. A sense of finality.

*Things are never going to be the same after this,* Karkat thinks, staring out at the outline of the city. Because he can't go back to his small, select life with a pair of friends and a computer linking him to everybody else he knows. He can't just bury back inside himself again. Everything is going to be different- and though he thinks that's a good thing- he can't help feeling a little sad about leaving his old life behind.

He didn't tell anybody that, of course, as one by one everybody drifted inside. Aradia first, of course, saying something about helping Rose and Kanaya- has she ever met them before? Probably not- before disappearing down the stairs back into the building. She was followed by Nepeta, who had her left arm slung around her girlfriend. Karkat watched them go, staring at their backs, and wondering how long they'll last. He hoped that they stayed frozen in that moment forever.

Karkat stays on the roof, watching the city. Dave disappeared but he came back, a sword swinging from his left hand. This is the final thing on the list.

"I spend a lotta time up here." Dave's voice drifts from behind him, "It's peaceful and shit. Reminds me of all the places I used to go hide out when I was growing up. Because that's the truth, Karkat, you were right. I'm kind of a coward."

"You're a definitely a coward for avoiding me for so damn long." Karkat can't break his gaze away from the city, "But I hardly think the rooftop is a great place for a one-to-one, especially now." Karkat turns to him and unfolds the list to wave it at him, "Because we've only got one thing left to complete and it doesn't involve small talk."

"Hey." Dave holds up his hands in surrender, "Man, I'm just trying to make this as romantic as possible before we start trying to beat the crap out of each other. I mean, the strifing ain't personal or anything, it's just a way of proving yourself. You ever seen *Karate Kid?*

"Dave, everybody in the English-speaking world has seen that movie." Karkat rolls his eyes, "And I'm referring to the original version, not the remake with Jaden Smith. Because as much as I love Will Smith, his kids are never going to live up to him."

"I know what you mean, man." Dave shakes his head, clearly trying to get back on topic, "Anyway, what was I saying? Oh, yeah, this is the end of the movie. The part where Ralph Macchio has to prove himself." He looks Karkat over, "Hey, can I call you Karkat-san?"

"You can but I might ram a sickle up your ass." Karkat draws his sickles, which Terezi had pressed into his hands before she vanished downstairs, assuming a ready stance, "So, in the words of the meme-loving fucks on Tumblr, I suggest you fucking fight me, Strider."
"That's not how you initiate a strife," Dave holds his sword at the ready anyway, "I'm pretty sure this is the part where you're meant to make some dramatic speech about how much you've learnt on your journey of friendship and self-discovery."

"Fuck that shit, you watch too many animes." Karkat steps towards him but Dave doesn't make any attempt to back away.

Dave grins. "No wonder my fighting technique is so awesome."

Karkat swings his right sickle and it slices through the air like butter, faster than he ever thought it could. Like the asshole he is, Dave just ducks out of the way faster than should be possible and catches the left sickle with the side of his blade. In one move, he knocks Karkat's sickle and sends it clattering across the rooftop. Oh, shit, Dave is good. How is he this good? Dirk hadn't managed to disarm Karkat that fast- and wasn't he meant to be the best?

"Fuck you." Karkat scowls.

Dave grins.

Karkat narrowly avoids a hit aimed at his ribs and rolls out of the way, making a grab for his sickle. His fingers barely scrape the handle of it before his arm is pinned to the ground, Dave towering over him. Karkat kicks him hard in the stomach and Dave falls onto his knees; Karkat barely manages to push him off before he crawls desperately towards his left sickle. He just about fends Dave off with just his right sickle, hitting him on the arm hard enough for it to cut through his skin and lightly slice the skin. Blood bubbles there. Karkat keeps his gaze down and grabs his left sickle, pushing himself back onto his fight.

There's nothing malicious or angry in Dave's technique at all; it's not hard to tell that he does this for fun, for sport, and not to actually hurt anybody. On the other hand, Karkat finds that the only way he can fight is when he thinks about all the times that Dave pissed him off.

That's for not telling me who you were right away. Dave rolls out of the way of his hit.

That's for being a coward and running away from me. Dave dodges his next hit with ease, Karkat ramming his blade into the concrete of the roof. It makes a horrible metal-on-concrete noise.

"You're not too shitty at this, Vantas." Dave says, as his sword brushes Karkat's stomach lightly and barely grazes the skin there, "But you need to drop the attitude. Seriously, man, I'm getting some bad vibes here. This is meant to be fun."

"How the hell do you find this fun?" Karkat demands, as he's pushed up against the edge of the building, (looking down makes him feel dizzy), "Hitting people for sport? Are you psychologically damaged, Dave Strider? This is fucked up."

"Hey, you're enjoying it too." Dave points out as Karkat pushes him hard and they both hit the concrete floor again, "This is a popular sport in Skaia, I didn't invent it. I just happen to be exceptionally good at it."

Dave's next hit is the butt of his sword to Karkat's chest and it actually hurts. "Shit!"

"Are you okay?" Dave pauses, looking him over, "I didn't hurt you too bad?"

"I'm fine." Karkat's sickle smacks Dave hard in the ribs and his other one scratches him across the arm, "Are you okay?"

"Dude, I could go all day." Dave says, and they continue.
The next hit knocks Karkat back a little and again, he's warily close to the edge of the building. Unfortunately, he makes the mistake of looking down and his vertigo gets the better of him. He can't stop staring down at the street down below and he can't stop thinking about how far away it is. He feels weak at the knees and kind of like he's going to puke- the longer he stares, the more sure he is that he's going to puke. Dave grabs him by the front of his shirt and pulls him forward, slamming Karkat down onto the concrete. He scrapes his face and hands badly, which stings like a bitch, but he gets back up.

He pushes Dave hard and for a long moment, weapons aside, they grapple like that. Dave is gripping him tightly by the shoulders, pushing hard, but Dave's a skinny, lean thing and Karkat pushes him down easily. He hits Dave with the back of his sickle, making him grunt.

"How do we even decide who wins this?" Karkat asks, as he holds Dave by the front of his shirt, "Nobody's here to judge just how hard I am kicking your ass right now."

Dave throws him off, rolling over until he's on top of Karkat and incredibly close to him. "I guess we just keep going until one of us gives up."

"We both know you have better stamina than I do." Karkat smacks his head hard against Dave's and both of them recoil, "Fuck, that was a mistake... But we both know that you're going to win if it's a matter of who can take the most crap. You have fully functioning lungs, which is a completely unfair advantage when it comes to stamina."

Dave swings his sword and Karkat blocks it with his sickle. "That's true. But you have the completely unfair advantage of having great influence over me. Seriously, man, how am I supposed to fight somebody that I want to make out with?"

For a long time, there's a power struggle as their blades push against each other; Karkat puts all his strength into pressing Dave back but the asshole twists his blade free at the last minute. Karkat's fist making contact with Dave's face is pretty much the only reason that Karkat isn't scissored down the middle by a sword.

"Well, it's not my fault that you're a hormonal mess." Karkat says, pushing himself up onto his knees and fighting to tackle Dave to the ground. When they're pressed up close like this, it makes him suddenly aware of how few layers of clothing are between them. They are two shirts and one binder from their skin touching. Karkat wonders what Dave looks like without a shirt and the distraction proves to be a downfall.

"Who's a mess now, Vantas?" Dave asks, as he knocks Karkat's sickles away, one at a time. It happens so quickly that Karkat can't manage to hold on. Smack! There goes the right one. Smack! There goes the left one. Dave's sword is pressed up against his throat so that he doesn't see breathe.

"Fuck you, Strider." Karkat struggles but can't quite manage to wriggle free.

"You prepared to surrender?" Dave is sweating, his hair stuck to his forehead and his hands damp against Karkat's arm, "Because I don't see how you're supposed to recover from this."

Karkat knees him in the stomach. "Seriously, fuck you."

Dave swears and drops his sword. Karkat knocks it aside.

Defeated, Dave collapses on top of him and there, this is the closest Karkat has been with anybody ever, aside from that incident yesterday with Terezi. There's a boy lying on top of him, his legs tangled with Karkat's, and his face so very close. Their lips are maybe an inch away from each
other, maybe less, but Dave still doesn't kiss him. He just lies there, grinning like he's proud that he got the shit kicked out of him, and Karkat guesses this is a draw. Finally, Dave releases his grip on Karkat's arm and lets him breathe.

Karkat pushes his newly freed hand through Dave's hair, pushing it back so that he can get a better look at him. And he decides "fuck it" and takes Dave's shades, tossing them aside. He hears them hit the concrete a few feet away.

"Rude." Dave scoffs, "Don't just rip my clothes off, Vantas."

"Your shades aren't clothes, asswipe." Karkat rolls his eyes, "Get the fuck off me."

Dave doesn't move. "Five more minutes."

"I swear to god-"

Reluctantly, Dave rolls off him and lies beside him, using his hand to shield his eyes from the world. Karkat looks over at him and notes how different Dave looks in the starlight- it's like he's glowing in it. Karkat hates how much he wants to kiss him, pulling the list from his pocket and half-heartedly throwing it at Dave.

"I completed your stupid-ass list, Strider." Karkat tells him, finally, "It took forever, I'm pretty sure that we broke a couple of laws, half of it was stupid and pointless, and most of the tapes were stupid exposition. I hope there was nothing good on the ones I didn't hear because I don't give a shit to listen to them now. From now on, you're going to tell me shit about yourself face to face. Like a proper friend."

"Karkat Vantas, are you asking me to be your friend?" Dave pretends to look shocked, "My god, I wasn't expecting this to happen so soon. I didn't even get round to preparing my acceptance speech yet, this all happened so suddenly. Well, I guess I'd like to thank my sister, Rose, for being the smartest person I know and-"

"Save the thanks, Dave." Karkat says, his face on fire, "We had a promise that once the list was finished, you'd finally get to kiss me. And I know you must be dying to get started-"

Dave holds up a hand. "Hold on, Karkles. You didn't finish the list."

He unfolds the list and turns it over, onto the back, where number twenty is listed in Terezi's almost impossible to read handwriting. Karkat sits up, peering at the list.

21. KISS D4V3 STR1D3R

So, the list didn't stop at twenty after all.

Karkat rolls his eyes. "First of all, fuck you for not pointing that out before. How the hell didn't I notice? Second of all, that's a paradox, dumbass. If I can't kiss you until I finish the list but the last thing on the list is kissing you, I can never complete the list and I never get to kiss you. For somebody that likes time travel so much, you really don't think things through."

"Me and TZ wrote this before you and me made our agreement." Dave says, "By the laws of time, that means that the list comes first before our agreement and we should listen to it."

"Why should I listen to a stupid piece of paper that you wrote with a crazy girl?" Karkat raises an eyebrow, "Give me three good reasons."
Dave doesn't hesitate. "Number one: I like you. Number two: I want to kiss you. Number three: number one is a really great fucking reason." He looks at Karkat, almost looking embarrassed about saying that out loud, waiting for consent, "Do I have to write a paper on this or are you willing to kiss me now?"

Karkat pretends to consider. "Shit, let's be impulsive."

And he crawls closer to Dave, straddling his lap so that he can kiss him completely, full-on, in the best possible way. He even forgets to freak out because his brain doesn't have time to process that oh my god, I'm going to kiss Dave until their lips are touching and he's thinking oh my god, I'm kissing Dave right now.

Kissing Dave is every single cliché at once. It's like a thousand fireworks exploding inside of Karkat, a million different tiny explosions inside of him that send his feelings into overdrive. It's like his skin catching on fire, a strange heat spreading from his mouth all over his body and filling him up on the inside. It's like spending an entire lifetime as a piece of a puzzle and finally finding the rest of the pieces that fit into place. It's like he didn't even know that he was looking for somebody until he found Dave and now, he knows this is what he's always been looking for- yes, exactly like Troy and Gabriella sung about in the first movie. Exactly like that. Fucking High School Musical actually got something right for once.

Kissing Dave is the best thing Karkat has ever done.

When their lips slide apart, so that the pair of them can breathe, Karkat is sure that he's about to explode from the inside right here and now. He's never felt so many different things at once- he's never felt so alive. For once in his life, it feels like his usual anger at the world fades into the background and this intense feeling of... Dave washes over him instead. He can't breathe, his head spinning, and his face is still pressed into Dave's. He can still taste him in his mouth.

"Wow..." Karkat mumbles, once he regains the power of speech, still breathless.

"Wow." Dave agrees, eagerly, "Holy freaking shit, man, we just made out. You and me, Karkat. Oh my god, I made out with Karkat Vantas. Holy sh** sticks, dude. I think this is the peak of my entire life. This is the best moment of my entire existence and that is saying something because I have had some good moments over the years. But this makes everything else look shitty in comparison."

Karkat nods, barely able to process what Dave's saying. "This is going to sound incredibly hypocritical coming from me... But, Dave, just fucking shut up and kiss me again." He wants to feel like that again; no, he wants to feel like that forever. "Just one more time."

Dave obliges, though it's difficult to kiss when they're both grinning like complete lovesick idiots at each other. And Karkat wants to yell at the entire city that he's kissing Dave Strider- he's kissing the best idiot in the world- and that everybody else can fucking suck it. The same hot feeling that normally accompanies his volcano-like word vomit explosions creeps over him and he lets the feeling of burning swallow him up from the inside.

"Again." Karkat orders, whenever they draw apart.

"Again." Dave agrees, every single time.

When he can't kiss anymore, (and it takes a long time to reach that point), Karkat spends a long time in Dave's arms. They sit there, staring at each other and at the world settling around them again and at the city glowing, and talk quietly about anything that comes to mind. Dave talks for a
good five minutes about some mixes he's making and Karkat drinks in every word. And when they can't talk anymore, Karkat just smiles down at his hands resting in his lap and reflects about the past two days. He can't believe that any of this is happening, still, and all because of some stupid tape that arrived in the mail yesterday.

"The others are going to be waiting for us in the apartment." Dave says, eventually, "And as much as I would love to waste all fucking night out here with you trying to eat my face off, Rose will actually kill us if we keep her waiting."

"Fine with me, I'm so fucking starving. I swear lunch was years ago." Karkat gets to his feet and takes Dave hand, pulling him to his feet. He doesn't let go of his hand for a second, as they head back over to the door that leads back into the building.

"Don't worry, man, Rose's cooking is sick. And I mean in the good way. Sick like my ill beats."

Karkat laughs. "Your ill beats? Is that what we're calling that phonetic spitting you think of as music?"

"Hell yeah, Karkles." Dave opens the door to the stairs and holds it open, "After you?"

"Such a gentleman." Karkat says, sarcastically.
Chapter Summary

sCREAMS BECAUSE WE HIT THE 100, 000 WORD BARRIER, YOU GUYS >:D

Last chapter and then Dave gets an epilogue because he deserves one. Thanks to everybody who's reading, you are all amazing!

On a side note: here's A Playlist To Accompany This Fic That Literally Nobody Asked For. I had writers block so I made this for reasons?? Yes.

"So?" Nepeta pounces, as soon as Dave opens the apartment door, "Did you guys make out on the roof or what?" There's an eager expression on her face like she's watching two movie characters click into place, "You gotta tell me what happened. Did the ship happen?"

Karkat hasn't even managed to get his foot in the door yet. "Nepeta, has it ever occurred to you that what I do with Dave is none of your fucking business?"

"It has occurred to me..." Nepeta looks thoughtful, "But you of all people should understand the purrsitively amazing feeling of seeing the two people in your OTP come togethfur."

"Your ship isn't even cannon." Karkat sneers, as he finally manages to squeeze past Nepeta into the room and shuts the door behind him. She looks horrified, as if he had drowned her cat right in front of her eyes. Speaking of which, Pounce de Leon is wrapping his way around her ankles and looking at Karkat with the huge brown eyes that don't differ too much from his owners. He resists the urge to strike the cat. He will not give Nepeta the satisfaction of stroking her cat. He'll keep up his cat-hating front until she's not looking. He will not give her the satisfaction.

Dave crosses the room but stops at the kitchen door, turning around to face them.

"It might not be any of your business what me and Karkles got up to on that roof but you should know that it was pretty damn hot." He winks at Nepeta, "If y'know what I mean."

"Dave." Karkat hisses.

Nepeta looks between the two of them and grins. "Sounds romantic."

"Sounds like a crappy yaoi anime." Terezi says, taking a long sip from a glass of champagne; of course, she's appeared behind Nepeta without anybody even noticing, "I like these fancy glasses. Can we have posh grown-up dinners more often?"

"Only if you agree to enjoy the drinks whilst sitting at the table." Kanaya tells her, "Come and sit down at the table so we can begin our meal. Karkat, Nepeta, you should join us. Dave, you should cease looking for apple juice in the refrigerator; Rose already hid it from you."

"Damn it, Rose!" Dave complains, shutting the refrigerator door and retiring to the table instead.

Nepeta and Karkat follow quickly and he finds that he's genuinely impressed at the "fancy" dinner that Kanaya and Rose have set up between them. There's a nice tablecloth spread across their
dining room table with glasses of champagne and dishes of steaming food at regular intervals. He takes a seat between Dave and Aradia, fully aware that they're probably going to talk over him at least once throughout the course of the dinner, and Dave's foot nudges him under the table. Karkat looks at him and he's grinning.

"What?" Karkat demands.

"Nothing. You're just... Y'know, awesome as hell. By that, I mean, pretty fucking awesome."

Rose rolls her eyes. "David, you're making a fool of yourself. I suggest you swallow your nerves and buck up a little. Tell me about your day."

Dave launches into a pretty ad-libbed version of the day's events, entirely recreating all the dialogue for dramatic effect, painting them as some of sort of heroes facing off against the evil Spider8itch and her sidekick, Eridan Ampora. Of course, Terezi jumps in and between them, they manage to weave quite a intricate story of knights and time travel (Aradia puts this in) and prophecies and aliens and quests and battles. Rose just raises an eyebrow and listens in amusement, most likely psychoanalysing their words to the very core.

Terezi tells them about the prank she pulled on Vriska- though, her version of the story seemed to involve her being a mind-reading Seer with a fleet of dragons at her command and Nepeta being some kind of cat-influenced Huntress- and Nepeta interjects with her own ideas. Pounce de Leon (settled on Nepeta's lap) mews her ideas enthusiastically.

Rose waits until they've finished before saying. "Terezi, I must say, your story seems to reflect your insecurities about-"

Kanaya touches her arm gently. "Rose. Might I suggest you don't read too far into these stories? Whilst they may not be completely true and I do not quite understand why they are exaggerating them, they make for an interesting story."

"I suppose you're right." Rose sighs, "May I partake in this fantasy? The powerful "Seer of Light", Roselyn, and her girlfriend, Kanaya-"

"Blood-drinking, glow-in-the-dark, girlfriend." Kanaya adds, helpfully, (she's been obsessed with the Twilight saga as long as Karkat can remember).

"- were there to welcome the weary travellers back home from their adventures across the land of Skaia." Rose continues, "The travellers shed their clocks and retired to drink mead and enjoy a hearty feast."

"The travellers were just recounting their tales when the mighty Marquise Spinneret Mindfang-" Aradia pauses, "That's Vriska- burst through the door, wielding a blade soaked through with the blood of the local commoners. And whilst it may have seemed as if the story were over, it was truly only just beginning."

Maybe she's right.

Aradia goes on to describe the fight scene between Vriska The Evil Pirate and herself, The Ghost Turned Robot, in dramatic and bloody detail. And while Karkat doesn't contribute much to the ongoing fantasy, which quickly turns into a game of D&D after dinner- he's friends with a bunch of fucking nerds- he can't help admiring how well everybody in the group fits together. And he can't stop thinking about Dave, when the asshole holds his gaze steadily and rolls the dice to see if their characters can make out over the corpses of their slain enemies. And he can't stop the feeling of
excitement bubbling like champagne under his skin as Dave leans over and actually does kiss him, right there in front of everyone, and sets his skin blazing.

Nepeta whistles her approval. Terezi says that they both get eaten by a dragon for not paying attention during a battle- who let her be dungeon master?- but by that point, Karkat is already lost in Dave's eyes or something equally as gooey and stupid as that. Oh, God, this really is turning out like a rom-com, isn't it?

Their characters apparently lying dead in the stomach of a dragon, Dave and Karkat excuse themselves to his room and ignore the smirk that spreads across Rose's face. Or Dave ignores her. Karkat calls her a smug know-it-all bitch and that makes her laugh a little, nodding.

Dave shuts the door to his room behind him and slides down to sit on the floor, even though there's perfectly good bed about a foot away from him. He pats the floor beside him and Karkat, rolling his eyes, joins him on the floor. Dave's arm slides around him.

"Wanna rebuild our bitching pillow fort?" Dave asks.

"If it was as bitching as you made it out to be, it wouldn't have collapsed in the first place." Karkat points out.

"Don't knock the fort of Broitude, man."

"Randomly inserting 'bro' into words doesn't make you sound cool, Strider, it makes you sound like a complete and utter douche." Karkat informs him.

"Bro." Dave says, "You're making it sound like you have a hate-broner for me."

"Get out." Karkat groans, "You're just an idiotic parody of yourself."

"Pabrody." Dave corrects; Karkat smacks him over the head with a pillow repeatedly, "Alright, alright, Jesus, I'll stop. Have mercy on me, Karkat! Have mercy!" He puts his hands up to defend himself, laughing, "Karkat, nooooo."

"Karkat, yes." He throws the pillow at Dave.

"I am dead." Dave declares, laying down face-first, "Rip me."

"You're a meme." Karkat tells him.

Dave refuses to get up, insisting he's "dead" and "spoopy", and stays there on the floor, no matter how much apple juice Karkat offers to buy him. Eventually, Karkat gives up on trying to get any sense out of him and lies on his stomach beside him, staring at the carpet in front of him until it blurs before his eyes. He prods Dave in the side to make sure he's still awake- his leg jerks in response- and manages to convince him to open one eye at least. He can just about scowl at Dave through his sunglasses if he squints a little.

They lay on the floor until Dave gives in and tugs the blankets lying on the floor over the pair of them. And for the second night in a row, Karkat falls asleep lying on the floor over the pair of them. And for the second night in a row, Karkat falls asleep on the floor.

He wakes up on something softer than the ground he fell asleep on. When he starts to come round and shifts, he brushes against something warm and it takes his groggy brain about five minutes to realise that another person is pressed up against him. Groaning, he rolls over and nearly swears when he realises that he's in bed with Dave- HOLY SHIT, HE'S IN BED WITH DAVE. He tries to escape the bed as soon as possible and just ends up getting twisted in the blankets. He's halfway
through trying to kick his legs free when Dave mumbles something and a hand touches him on the arm.

"Dude, you think you can get away without saying good morning?" Dave doesn't move- if he wasn't talking, Karkat could believe he was dead- but his voice is just about understandable, though it's thick with sleep, "I wasn't aware this was a one night stand."

"I'm not fucking running away from you, you ass." Karkat huffs, sitting up properly and managing to wriggle his left leg free of the blankets clinging to him, "I just wasn't expecting to wake up in bed with you." He pauses, "How the fuck did we get here anyway? We were on the floor...

"You passed out, Kitkat." Dave informs him, "Kanaya came to check on us and got really pissed that I let you fall asleep with your binder on. So, she took that shit off you and tucked you into bed. And I played Scrabble with Rose for a while, before I got bored and came to chill with you. Did you know that in a sleepy state, you will cling to anything for something to cuddle?"

Karkat can barely process his words. "Wait... You're saying..."

"We spooned, bro." Dave opens his eyes- that's why he looks different, he's not wearing his shades- and looks him in the eye, seriously, "That's what best bros do. They spoon. Though, I was a little surprised that you wanted to be the big spoon. You know, 'cos you're so tiny." He grins, "Tiny but cuddly. I swear, you wouldn't even let me get up to go pee, I had to give you a pillow to hug until I got back."

"Oh, God." Karkat says, "Oh my God."

"It's no big deal." Dave says, holding his hands up in surrender, "I'm not judging you or anything, Vantas. All bros cuddle. And, uh, share beds. And, y'know, stuff."

"You ever share a bed with John Egbert?" Karkat raises an eyebrow.

"No?" Dave props himself up on his elbows, "That's entirely different, I never made out with him for twenty minutes on a rooftop. On a rooftop, Karkat, and that's coming from somebody with pretty crappy vertigo. But I stayed there because I couldn't wait long enough to take it downstairs. I wanted to kiss you from the second I saw you in Damara's."

"You mean, when you were fucking stalking me around the city for no specific reason?" Karkat says, "You really aren't selling yourself very well, Dave. I'd go as far as saying that you're incoherent because you're 'stupid for me'."

"I wasn't stalking, really." Dave insists, "I just really wanted to see you again. You're my bro. No, you were my first bro. Way before John came along. So... Best bros?"

He holds out his fist for Karkat to bump.

"You're an idiot." Karkat leans in and kisses him lightly, "But it's kind of ridiculous that you couldn't manage to stay away from me. Luckily for you, I'm going to take that as romantic instead of fucking insane. But at first sign of you following me again, I will not hesitate to burn your retinas out with pepper spray."

"Okay." Dave laughs.

This time, when Karkat tries to get up, Dave pulls him back down and kisses him hard.

"Come on, Dave, I have to get home." Karkat says, though he's grinning as he presses his lips
against his. He doesn't manage to escape, somehow accidentally falling into Dave's lap with his mouth conveniently landing on Dave's (or at least, that's how he'll tell this story later) and kissing him on and off for while before he gives up on the idea of going home any time soon. Dave's not a bad kisser for somebody that doesn't seem to have kissed much in the past but his mouth doesn't taste great and he keeps saying "no homo" between kisses. Eventually, Karkat just smacks him on the arm and yells "IT'S PRETTY FUCKING HOMO, DAVE" the next time they pause for air.

"You're right, that was pretty fucking gay, man." Dave says, as his hands finally slip away from Karkat's face and he lies back on the bed, "Y'know, I ain't one to use the phrase lightly. But I think we're both pretty motherfucking gay, screw the no homos."

"No shit, Sherlock."

"Fuck you, Watson." Dave says, before continuing, "Man, I just thought that it would take longer than-" He pretends to check the watch that he isn't wearing, "- two days to overcome my internalised homophobia. But I guess it didn't take that long, awesome. Wanna make out some more or should we go investigate if there's any breakfast being served like I serve Pyrope in every single rap battle?"

"You always manage to bring it back to your shitty rap music." Karkat comments, finally managing to slip out of the bed and glancing around the mess of a room. For the first time, he notices that he's wearing a t-shirt that definitely doesn't belong to him. Judging by the rusty red colour of the clockwork symbol on the front, it's most likely Dave's shirt. Great, just great. Thanks, Kanaya. Now, where the fuck did she put his binder?

Turns out that Dave's sense of "breakfast" must be stronger than he claims because they arrive just in time to see Rose sliding pancakes onto assorted plates in the kitchen. She glances at Dave, who's still wearing his clothes from yesterday, and Karkat, who decided it wouldn't be too bad to wear Dave's shirt today, before smirking to herself. He hates that she can see right through him but Karkat refrains from commenting, knowing she'll just spew the psychoanalysis bullshit that she's so good at. Seriously, the hand that isn't dishing out pancakes is clutching a copy of some Freudian book, Karkat is starting to think she's obsessed.

Rose pushes two plate of pancakes towards them. "For the valiant Knights."

"What?" Karkat says, before remembering yesterday, "I'd be a shitty knight."

"Shut up, you're the cutest knight around. Aside from yours truly, of course." Dave says, "In a cute knight competition, we all know I'd rock first place but you're a very close second."

Rose quirks an eyebrow and turns back to Kanaya, who has been silently observing the conversation with interest plastered on her face. The two of them are probably going to exchange notes on the interaction as soon as Dave and Karkat are out of earshot.

On the couch, Karkat haphazardly balances his plate of pancakes on his lap and eats whilst Dave plays a couple of episodes of Doctor Who that he's got on DVD. He doesn't think it's worth starting at the beginning because the original episodes aren't as cool- Aradia, who is sat in the armchair with a mug of coffee, argues otherwise for a good ten minutes before realising that Dave is much too stubborn to give in. She lets him start on Christopher Eccleston, though she mumbles longingly under her breath about William Hartnell the whole time. Karkat can't pretend he understands the show completely but he can follow along well enough.

Honestly, the main reason he likes the show is because he can see the obvious connection between Billie Piper (her character's called Rose- which means that Rose Lalonde keeps responding every
time her name is said on screen) and Christopher Eccleston straight away. He straightens out his ship quickly, though Dave just tells him to wait until Tennant comes along- that's when the ship gets serious apparently. Karkat just nods, a little bewildered.

Sometime around noon, (time passes quickly when the TV plays the next episode automatically and Dave is making dumb jokes, playing with Karkat's hair), everybody else begins to come round. Nepeta plants herself in Karkat's lap, leaning against him, and Terezi seats herself on the floor by the couch, throwing Lucky Charms at Dirk with amazing accuracy. Roxy does not make an appearance- no doubt she's hungover.

Sat between Kanaya and Dave, with Nepeta nearly crushing him to death, Karkat can safely say that he doesn't think he's ever been happier.

All good things come to an end. Unfortunately, that's true of the weekend.

Kankri- who is still in a weirdly good mood, has he been getting laid more often or something?- turns up during the early afternoon to drive Karkat and Nepeta home. Apparently, he came all the way out to the city just to pick them up. Well... That's nice, Karkat guesses? Of course, Cronus is with him but there's still room for Terezi and Dave. Reluctantly, Kankri agrees that they can come and even lets Terezi have the front seat, because she is blind. Karkat is ready to point out how triggering that reason could be but Kankri's helping him out, so he keeps his mouth shut for now.

It's during the drive back to the city that Kankri finally spills the beans.

"Karkat." He clears his throat, "Do you remember when I said that I would help you out with your little mixtape mission in exchange for a small favour?"

"Yeah?" Karkat says, annoyed to have his argument with Terezi (about whether Team Cap or Team Iron Man is better- he's Team Cap) interrupted, "What the fuck do you want, Kankri? If you want me to start using the swear jar again, the answer is hell fucking no."

"No." Kankri says, "It's nothing like that. Though, I would appreciate you keeping the crude language to a minimum whilst riding in my car, please. Actually, it's something a little more important to me than that. As you know, Cronus and I have been dating for a while now. And we're both adults, so we thought we should take a step forward in our relationship."

"If you tell me that one of you is pregnant, I'm going to jump out the window." Karkat says.

"Don't use such triggering phrases." Kankri scolds, "Actually, no. Cronus and I... We have decided that we should get engaged."

Karkat wishes he was drinking something so he could spit it out. "Are you serious?"

"Ew, you're gonna be brothers with Eridan." Terezi wrinkles her nose.

"Dad ain't gonna approwve it." Cronus says, "So, vwe're... Keepin' it on the dovwn lovw, understand? But vwe figured you'd vwanna knowv, Kar."

"Great." Karkat grumbles, "Just fucking great."

"Me and Karkles are engaged too." Dave says, suddenly.

Kankri nearly swerves off the road. "What?!"

"Just fucking with you, bro."
The burning look of rage on Kankri's face is worth nearly dying, Karkat decides.

Once they reach the house, something like nerves and fear begin to turn inside Karkat's stomach like somebody's plunged a dagger in there and is slowly twisting it. He's worried for a minute that he's going to puke and slides down in his seat, trying to put off facing his dad for as long as possible. How do you explain to your father that you ran away for a weekend for a boy that you didn't even know? Is he going to be mad? God, Karkat hopes so. He'd rather his dad was mad than disappointed. If his dad pulls out the "I'm not mad, I'm just disappointed in you" card, Karkat might break down and cry. His eyes prick just thinking about it.

Dave's hand squeezes his tightly. "Hey, Karkitten."

"Don't call me that." A nervous laugh escapes him- oh god, this is it, this is his descent into madness. He's having a breakdown. Oh, shit. Now, he's never going to get into a good college because everybody know him as the kid that came back from the city and cried about his dad being pissed. How lame is that? He has to pull it together. Deep breaths. Inhale, exhale.

"It's gonna be fine, bro." Dave tells him, "If your dad loves you, he'll get over this eventually. Maybe after he grounds you for life and forbids you from seeing me again... But he'll get over it, that's for sure. I mean, Dirk got over me scratching his Norigami DVD eventually and it only took a few weeks of grovelling."

"Your family is fucked up." Karkat pushes open the car door and steps out, leaving it open in case Dave wants to follow. And he walks towards the front door but he doesn't even get there before it's flung open and his dad has his arms around him, saying something about being so glad that he's okay. And Karkat knows then that Dave was right and things are going to be okay.

It takes a while to explain what happened over the last two days- the abridged version, of course, with all illegal activities, drinking, clubbing, make-outs, and boring bits taking out, which shouldn't leave much to explain but it does- but his dad is patient. He invites everybody inside while Karkat talks- Terezi interrupting a few times- and they all stand around in the front room, sipping cups of tea that Kankri made. To his credit, Karkat's dad takes all of it in without yelling at anybody. When the story ends, he sighs.

"Karkat, I'm upset that you lied to me." He says.

Karkat scuffs his sneakers against the wooden floor.

"And I'm hurt that you felt you needed to. I can't say that I approve of you racing off into the city and acting irrationally like this- it's not you at all- but if you'd asked, I might have been okay with you arranging a trip out there." His dad continues, "I'm sure you're not telling me the whole story either but I'm not going to push you for details. After all, you're young. I was quite reckless at your age too, you know, so I understand why you felt the need to escape for a while."

"Thanks?" Karkat blinks.

"I'm going to have to ground you, of course." His dad says, "Two weeks and no video games. Kankri, I'm not happy that you went along with this, but since you're legally an adult, I'm not going to ground you. But remember, the pair of you, that lying to your father is not something that's going to continue."

Kankri stares down at the floor, guiltily. "My apologies."

"As for you-" Karkat's dad turns to Dave and for a moment, Karkat is scared that he's going to yell,
"You must be Dave. It's nice to meet you, even if it's under extraordinary circumstances like these. You seem like a fine young man." He holds out a hand, "It's nice to meet you, I'm Karkat's father."

"Nice to meet you too, Sir." Dave says, his Texan accent slipping through, "I'm sorry about all the shit stuff that we pulled, it wasn't cool. Next time, I'll ask your permission before stealing your son for a weekend."

"There's no need for formalities, you call me-" And yeah, it goes on like that for a while. Karkat's dad grills Dave; asking him about how he knows Karkat and apparently fascinated by the story, asking him about his family, and asking him about how school's going. Dave doesn't tell a single lie and seems to bowl him over anyway, leaving his usual curse words out of his rambles for the sake of politeness. They seem to get along well enough, though Dave seems awkward underneath the small talk. It's just not him.

"You should get home to your mother, Nepeta." Karkat's dad says, eventually, "She's been worrying herself sick for a while now. I suggest you take your... Friend with you."

"Terezi Pyrope, Sir!" Terezi grins, as she's dragged from the room by Nepeta, "Currently holding the position of Miss Leijon's Girlfriend. Have a nice day!"

The front door slams in the distance.

"Well, then." Karkat's dad says, after a pause, "Dave, you're welcome to stay for dinner. Cronus, you too, as always. Now, if you boys don't mind, I need to go to work. I will be back at four. Kankri, I'd like you to make dinner."

And with that, they're free.

Karkat takes Dave up to his room.

"So that was your dad, huh?" Dave says, as he casts his gaze over the admittedly barren room- Karkat likes to keep his things neat- before turning back to Karkat, "He was cool, man."

"This is so fucking weird, it's like worlds colliding." Karkat shakes his head, "Having you here talking to my dad, standing in my room, it's so weird. For the record, if you dare say anything snarky about my room, I will beat the shit out of you with my- oh, crap, Terezi took my sickles with her."

"That's probably for the best; I'm not sure your dad woulda been as happy to let us in if we were wielding weapons." Dave says.

Karkat smiles. And he doesn't fight it.

"As for your room, dude, that's a lot of movies you're hoarding up there." Dave inspects the shelf holding every rom-com Karkat has ever been get his hands on- most of them are borrowed or bought cheap from wherever he can find them, "This is like the holy grail of shitty romantic movies."

"Shut up."

Dave pokes at every thing in his room. He runs his hands over Karkat's movie collection, jumps up and down on his bed, sensually strokes his Will Smith posters for ironic reasons, rolls across the empty floor space, peers out of the window at the neighbours, and climbs into the closet just so he can make a joke about it. He flicks through Karkat's clothes and tells him that he can give his shirt back whenever he wants- Karkat silently vows to never give it back. Then, he collapses on the bed
and stares up at the ceiling.

"Holy crap, you're in my bed." Karkat barely breathes.

"That's right, dude, the prestigious Dave Strider is in your bed. Here's your chance to ravage me mercilessly. Should I spread my legs for you? Ow- don't hit me with the pillow, man, c'mon. That's such a low blow!"

Karkat did not previously know that he was the kind of person that engaged in play fighting but apparently, that's the kind of person he is. He only releases his grip on Dave when they fall off the bed and land hard on the floor and Kankri calls up the stairs for them to keep it down and both of them laugh too hard to screw around anymore. As it turns out, Karkat is also the kind of person that likes to pin his boyfriend down to kiss him. If the fanfics he's read/written over the years are anything to go by, he's pretty sure that makes him the top. Not that he's planning to have sex with Dave anytime soon, wow no, but if he was, he'd definitely top.

"Whatcha thinking about?" Dave asks, as they lie breathless from laughter, "My sexy bod?"

"You always assume I'm thinking about you. I've literally known you two days, Dave."

"At the same time, you've known me for a decade." Dave reminds him, "Time is fucking weird, bro. Like, so fucking weird."

"Are you high or just stupid?" Karkat says, "Oh, no, wait, I just remembered. Answer C: you're Dave Strider and you can't go five minutes without spewing whatever random shit comes into your mind."

"Well, duh, that's what makes me so good at rap."

"Don't quit the day job." Karkat advises.

"Don't skip school, kid." Dave replies, "At least I don't have to go to high school in the fall."

Karkat groans and Dave kisses him on the nose.

"I'll take you out after school." Dave tells him, "We can go places, see shit, take obnoxious selfies, mix some music. Trust me, Karkat, you'll fucking love fall in the city. I'll teach you to love fall. Just call me Senpai, Karkat-san."

"I hate you." Karkat groans.
"Davey, you're coming, right?" Roxy sits on the edge of the couch, pleading with her eyes, "You gotta tell me you're coming. Unlike mean ol' Rosey, who's gotta go to that fancy-pants art exhibition with her gf."

"Sure thing, Roxy." Dave doesn't look up from the shitty webcomic he's editing, "Uh... What did I just agree to come to again? I wasn't really listening."

"You and Rezi-" Roxy gestures to her, "- and your buds, you gotta come to Fallfest this year. Me and Damara got wasted the other night and came up with some pretty awesome lyrics for our band." Oh, yeah, the off-key band that have been practicing in Roxy's basement for a year or so, "We're gonna be playing there and you guys gotta come see."

"You got it, Rolal." Terezi is working on her own hastily scrawled and messy webcomic, lying on her stomach in front of the couch. Her eyebrows are pulled together in focus, her glasses pushed back to rest on top of her head, Dave's feet are resting on her back. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. Should I bring a video camera?"

"We've got better since last time you saw us, I swear." Roxy says, smiling good-naturedly, "We were pretty shit but Damara's got a really unusual voice and Porrim taught me some actual chords to play, so it's gotta be better this time. 'Sides, I'll buy you kids a shit ton of cider if you come. It'll be fun."

"Alright, alright." Dave looks up, "Sounds great, Rox."

The look of pure excitement on her face is enough to get anybody pumped.

That's why Dave drives out of town on Friday at three because unfortunate as it is, Karkat's still stuck in school and unlike Terezi, he hasn't been ditching it every other day- she's been calling them "mental health days" but it's pretty obvious that she's just skipping for the fun of it. Speaking of Terezi, she leaps into the passenger seat and insists that she needs to come to, so that Nepeta doesn't get stuck in a car with two boys. That's just an excuse to see her girlfriend but Dave lets it slide because company is never a bad thing. Terezi somehow calls dibs on the radio and plays some pretty obnoxious '90s hits that Dave knows all the words to for ironic reasons. They have a pretty sick jam session.

They hang around the parking lot until Nepeta and Karkat turn up. They got a lot of strange looks from some of the other high school kids, who have seen them before but can't seem to place where, but Dave plays it casual. When Karkat comes storming over, he can't help smiling. He swears there's some permanent rain cloud over his boyfriend's head.

"Hey, asslicker." Karkat says, "Care to enlighten us as to what the fuck you're doing here?"

"Hi, Purrezi!" Nepeta waves, "Hi, Dave!"

"Hey, Nep." Dave says, before turning to Karkat, "I guess we shoulda called ahead but whatever. We need to steal you for tonight 'coz we said we'd go to Fallfest to see Roxy's band play. They're not terrible and it's gonna be a nice night. You game?"
"How many times have I told you to call ahead?" Karkat glowers as he throws his backpack into
the backseat and climbs in after it, "You know I fucking hate it when you spring these things on
me."

"Karkles, please." Dave says, "We all know that you find it romantic as hell."

Karkat huffs but doesn't object.

First, they have to go to the pretty house belonging to the Leijons so that Nepeta can feed her cat
and explain to her Mom where she's going. Dave glances at Karkat, wondering if he should tell his
dad. But as it turns out, Karkat's dad opens the door. Karkat did mention that his dad is getting
closer with Nepeta's Mom but Dave had no idea they were spending so much time together.

Nepeta rushes off to the kitchen to feed her cat and leaves the rest of them standing in the hall.

"So, you're taking my son out into the city again?" Karkat's dad looks Dave over, "Will he being
staying the night at your place again?"

"I guess so." Dave shrugs, "You up for that, Karkat?"

Karkat shrugs too.

"Make sure you stay safe out in the city." Karkat's dad says, "I'll see you tomorrow, Karkat."

Nepeta comes back, Pounce de Leon in her arms.

"We're not taking the cat with us, Pouncellor." Terezi grins.

Looking disappointed, Nepeta drops the cat onto the floor.

The ride back to the city consists mainly of Terezi and Karkat fighting over the radio. She keeps
turning her shitty music up, yelling along enthusiastically, while Karkat screams at her to turn it the
fuck down before his ears start bleeding. This lasts for a good ten minutes. It ends when Terezi is
laughing too hard to slap Karkat away anymore and he leans forward and slams the OFF button.
Nepeta pats him on the shoulder until he calms down.

They stop at a diner first because they've got time until the evening.

Nepeta and Terezi swap Pokémon cards over the table like it's still 1995.

Karkat kicks Dave in the shin. "Hey, shit for brains."

"Yes, darling Karkat?" Dave says, sarcastically, kicking him back.

"Is this a date or what?" Karkat's foot gets caught on his, "Or is it another one of your entirely
platonic bro-date packages with non-committal makeouts included?"

Technically- and this really is only a technicality- they aren't dating yet. Maybe because every time
Dave tried to suggest a date, he couldn't bring himself to do it and ended up playing every off as
entirely platonic. Now, he's not sure if they're actually boyfriends or what but they definitely hang
out too much for their relationship to remain in the "bro" category much longer.

Plus, Karkat has been sleeping over at Dave's apartment- and in his bed- nearly every weekend
since he got ungrounded and Dave's not sure that's a bro thing. It's definitely... A gay thing. Yeah.
He's trying hard not to rush this for Karkat's sake but maybe he's going too slow? Who the fuck
knows?
"Uh... I was thinking it could actually be a date-date?" Dave says, hesitantly, "If you want. If you don't want, that's totally cool and we can just continue being the best of bros. In fact, don't even worry about it, this isn't a date at all. Whatever. Bros?"

He holds out his fist. Karkat doesn't bump it.

"Dave, there's a difference between not-rushing and being a fucking coward. Just ask me out already." Karkat pauses, "No, wait, fuck that shit. This is me asking you out. Come with me to Fallfest and we'll listen to your sister's dumb band and hang out and you can get me home before midnight like a real date."

"You're asking me out?" Dave is surprised, "Yeah, dude, okay. I kinda thought you wanted me to ask you."

"I thought I wanted that to until I realised approximately five seconds ago that was stupid." Karkat shakes his head, "Are you coming on this date with me or not, idiot?"

"Well, yeah, dude. Duh. Ain't gonna say no to Karkat Vantas coming after my sweet booty, am I?" He's still waiting for Karkat to bump his fist, "Boyfriends?"

Karkat reluctantly fist-bumps him. "Dumbass."

"You love it."

"You can't prove anything." Karkat folds his arms.

Terezi "looks" up from her cards, adjusting her radical pointy shades. "Actually, as Mr Strider's lawyer, I'd say that we can actually prove your attraction to him rather easily. Case in point, you've turned rather red in the face and your foot is still brushing against his under the table. You appear flustered by my accusations, proving my point. You also just asked him on a date. Conclusion: you're head over heels for my best friend here."

"I want a lawyer." Karkat looks to Nepeta.

"Can't help you, she's got you backed into a corner." The cat girl shrugs.

"Case closed!" Terezi bangs her fist on the table.

"You're really looking forward to studying law at college, huh?" Dave glances at her, "Y'know, to study law, you probably gotta get your grades up and get a better attendance record. Or else they won't let you in and I'm gonna be stuck holding your hair while you puke cheap liquor in the dumpster behind the convenience store, listening to you whining about how you should have listened to your awesome friend Dave because he was right all along."

"Okay, Mom." Terezi sticks her tongue out.

"How is your mom?" Nepeta asks, "She still chasing after Mrs Serket?"

"Yep." Terezi nods, "My mom says she's not going to rest until she captures that crook. Unfortunately, I think she meant that literally. Whatever, I'm sure she'll be fine. She's just about to crack this case."

"She's been just about to crack this case for years." Dave points out.

"She's really close now." Terezi slides down in her seat, "Really, really, really close."
Nobody asks any further questions.

Fallfest is a pretty big deal in Skaia City, if Dave hadn't made that clear yet, and it seems like half the city has turned out. It's taking place on the very edge of the city, where there is enough room for people to spread out, and the four of them grab a nice spot on the grass. It's a little out of the way but close enough that they're still within walking distance of everything. More importantly, they can still hear the crappy music played by amateur garage bands that somehow managed to squeeze into one of the slots here. There's never any good music at Skaia's Fallfest but that doesn't matter. Currently, somebody's covering some Nirvana song, not completely horribly, and Dave settles on the grass beside Karkat to listen.

Terezi says something about drinks and slips away into the crowd.

And, of course, as soon as he sees Terezi disappear, Eridan Ampora makes an appearance. It's been a while since Dave saw him last, a couple of months maybe, but he doesn't look so different. As he approaches, he fiddles with his hair, pushing the purple strands back. He looks nervous but eventually, he reaches their group and stands in front of them.

"Hey, Nep. Kar. Davve." The way he pronounces Dave's name will never cease to amuse.

"Hi, Eridan." Nepeta says, brightly, "What's up?"

"Uh..." Ampora looks puzzled, "Nothin' much. Me an' Fef figured do Fallfest evvery year. It's kinda our thing. Ours an' most of the city's, of course. Kinda thought you were mad still so I just came to say hi."

"I'm not mad." Nepeta shakes her head, her curls bouncing, "It was ages ago and... I've been thinking that maybe you were right. Then, at least. I was falling in love all ovfur the place. But I'm happy with Purrezi now." She smiles and pats the ground beside her, "If you purromise not to try and break us up, you're welcome to join us."

"Don't we get a say in if this prat gets to sit with us or not?" Karkat looks disgruntled.

"Nope." Terezi reappears, "So, I got a cider-coffee concoction thing. I'm also pretty sure it's got pumpkin spice in it because it tastes like fall." She kneels down beside her girlfriend and begins handing out warm cups, "Eridouche, I conveniently got enough for you and your BFF. And Aradia too, since she came with you guys."

"How the hell did you know that?!" Karkat demands, "You really are some sort of freaky mind reader, aren't you?"

Terezi winks.

"Actshelly, I bumped into her." Feferi walks over, her arm tightly locked through Aradia's, "I hope you guys don't mind us crashing your party. But I mean, the more the merrier, right?" She smiles brightly and joins them on the ground, "C'mon, Erifin, you can sit on my lap if you don't want to get your derrière dirty."

There's a quick game of musical chairs- minus the chairs- until everybody ends up comfortably sat in their tight-knit group. Dave still gets to sit by Karkat, who's shivering despite his turtleneck, and he's happy about that. He hasn't got a jacket to sacrifice, since he already gave it up for Terezi, but he wraps an arm around him and hopes that's enough.

The coffee turns out to taste pretty good, even though it feels hot and sticky in his mouth, tasting vaguely like someone puked autumn into a cup. And other less disgusting metaphors brought to
you by Dave Strider.

When he kisses Karkat lazily, he finds that he tastes a lot like pumpkin spice mixed with apples, and that's pretty hot. It's probably the closest he'll ever get to making out with a bottle of apple juice, though Karkat rolls his eyes and refuses to kiss him anymore once he says that out loud.

"Wwhat do you see in him, Kar?" Eridan wonders.

"I honestly have no fucking clue." Karkat squeezes Dave's hand, "He's just an attractive and obnoxious bastard."

"If that wwas wwhat you liked, you an' I wwoulda dated long ago."

Eventually, Damara's husky singing voice drifts out on the autumn breeze and Dave elbows his boyfriend in the ribs to get his attention. He makes the obligatory "I'm with the band" joke before asking Karkat if he wants to dance. He doesn't know if it's the cider or the other spiked drinks that Terezi found - where did she find them? Dave doesn't want to know. Hopefully, a stall or somewhere legal - or something else but Karkat actually agrees to dance with him.

Dave pulls him to his feet.

"We look like idiots." Karkat mumbles, just about coherent, as Dave pulls him close, "You're an idiot. I'm an idiot." He stumbles, "Shit."

"Damn straight." Dave hooks his hand around one of Karkat's and slides his other hand down to rest on his side, "We're idiots."

"Dude, I'm not being the girl just because I'm shorter." Karkat says, firmly, "Move your hands."

Dave does. "I'm starting to rub off on you, dude."

"Oh, Jesus." Karkat mutters, as they perform a sort of awkward step-sway together, close together. His face is pressed into Dave's shoulder, his words mumbled against it. He's warmer now.

"Hey, don't look to him, he can't help you now. You're becoming a coolkid, I can just feel it."

"If I ever sink to your level, you have my full permission to kill me."

"How you wound me, Karkitten." Dave attempts a spin as a joke and they end up tangled in each other's grip, laughing, "Dude, help, I'm stuck."

Karkat just shakes his head, laughing, as they both end up sprawled on the ground.

"You're a hot mess, the pair of you." A slightly more sober Nepeta calls, "It's almost as if you were made fur each othfur."

Dave makes no attempt to get up, listening to the rest of Roxy's band's set play out with Karkat lying on top of him. He's not even really sure if Karkat is awake or asleep but he's warm and he's right here on a date with Dave, so Dave couldn't care less. When the next shitty band starts to play, he doesn't shift from his spot, not wanting to bother Karkat if he is sleeping. Instead, he just pokes him in the side to see if it rouses him and Karkat lifts his head, letting out a tired sound. Dave pokes him again. And again. And again. Eventually, Karkat jabs him back in the ribs and slides off him to lie on the ground beside him.

The rest of the evening drifts by lazily as the night gets colder and they all shuffle closer together.
Aradia and Terezi are the only ones that remain brighter than the stars overhead, which Aradia begins to point out for them. She knows a lot of constellations, their stories, and tells them that she can see dead people in them. Dave declares it to be bullshit but Karkat sucks it up, maybe because he's a little wasted. The tipping point is when Aradia tells him that she can see his Mom up there and he swears tears well up in Karkat's eyes.

"Aw, Karkles." Terezi gets there before Dave can, her hand landing on Karkat's shoulder, "Don't cry, you're okay."

Karkat buries his face in his sweater. "Just shut up about it."

"She's looking out for you." Aradia tells him, confidently, "The dead are always guiding us, you know. If it weren't for them, we wouldn't all be here now."

"That sounds like bullshit." Karkat mumbles.

"Shush, Kar. Sounds kinda romantic, doesn't it?" Eridan says.

Nobody argues.

It's clear that nobody- except maybe Aradia, who Dave would never trust to drive- is sober enough to drive them home so everybody leaves their cars in the parking lot and walk home. He leads the way with his arm looped through Terezi's and her pulling Nepeta with her. Eridan and Karkat trail behind, in conversation about this nerd friend they apparently share. The ship that Dave has affectionately dubbed "FishBones" brings up the rear, their excited voices racing up and down the sidewalk.

Eridan and co. split off to head home and the rest of them walk back to Terezi's, simply because her place is the nearest and Nepeta can barely walk in a straight line anymore.

The girls call dibs on the bed- before disappearing into the bathroom to either get ready for bed or make out furiously on the bathroom counter- so Dave and Karkat just make a makeshift pile out of blankets and pillows to sleep in. Honestly, Dave is sure that he could sleep on anything at this point. He's ready to pass out when he realises that Karkat has frozen in place, staring out of the window. Dave assumes that Aradia's words are still floating around his mind.

"You know the ghost girl says some freaky shit." Dave says, "Probably didn't mean anything."

"I was just thinking how well everything fell into place." Karkat says, "As fucking ridiculous as it sounds, isn't it nice to think that there's a reason for that? Like... Everything was guided. Like some shitty fanfiction-"

"Go home, you're drunk." Dave tells him.

Karkat nods. "You're right, of course, this is all going to sound like bullshit tomorrow. I'm just so glad that you and me bumped each other. Twice. It was such a great coincidence. I don't know what I'd do without you, Dave. Probably still be miserable."

"Don't sell yourself short." Dave grins, "Even if you are."

"This is why we don't have deep meaningful talks." Karkat rolls his eyes, "Because you're an idiot."

"You're an idiot." Dave replies.
"I love you." Karkat is definitely drunk, "And I guess that really does makes me the idiot."

"Nah, we're both dumb." Dave says, "I love you too."

Karkat squeezes his hand. "Let's go to bed in our... Stupid pile together."

"Wow, talk dirty to me."

"Shut up, Dave."

Chapter End Notes

I FINISHED A FIC!!!!!!! >:D

Thank you to everybody that read this. You are all wonderful people!!

(I briefly considered writing some supplementary fics for this universe but I don't think I'm going to?? Yeah. Sorry about that. Anybody else is welcome to give it a shot, feel free to contribute to this universe!)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!